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MEAN DIFFERENCE:

POETICS OF MICROSOCIAL ENCOUNTER IN MODERNISM

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The problem of difference can thus be seen both as an uncertainty over separability and as a drifting apart within identity. And the very fact that it is impossible to know whether something constitutes description or disagreement, information or censure, is perhaps ultimately the most problematic and critical difference of all. For it is precisely in the nature of difference that it consist in the engendering of uncertainty not only over its nature but also over the danger or usefulness of its very propagation. What is often most fundamentally disagreed upon is whether a disagreement arises out of the complexities of fact or out of the impulses of power.

— Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference* (1980)

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For over two years now, I have been studying relations inside texts under a microscope, tracking their subtle movements for deeper signs of trouble. Happily, my personal relations withstood this prolonged engagement. A reader of this project might conclude it's better to not pay such close attention to the dynamics of difference in the everyday. The person who notices these things in others, and sits with those things, will inevitably leave everyone the worse off. To that I say: it matters what is noticed, but sometimes more depends on who is there to listen. I'm grateful to my loved ones for valuing the microsocial alongside me and building towards the big picture together.

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Abstract

Mean Difference examines the aesthetics, politics, and sociology of disparities that permeate through and are permeated by everyday encounter in modern and contemporary Anglophone fiction. Through readings of Henry James, Nella Larsen, William Faulkner, Sally Rooney, and Raven Leilani, I demonstrate the workings of what I term "mean difference": the capacity of the minor, the contingent, and the casual to crystallize asymmetrical realities and power exchange; and the challenge of securing fixed meaning to difference's most tacit signs. Looking back from a resurgent cultural interest in the microscopic processes of inequality in everyday encounters, for example in poetry by Claudia Rankine and recent sociology on microaggressions, I approach the role that modernist abstraction plays in not only registering but also revising differences at lower altitudes. Chapters treat high-stakes encounters in apparently modest conversational modes found in Faulkner's depiction of racial opacity in face-to-face interaction; Henry James's device of the imaginary observer; Nella Larsen's representation of tactful female aggression; and millennial fiction by Sally Rooney and Raven Leilani that recognizes, with deep ambivalence, the limits of microsocial analysis in making a difference about difference in one's personal life.

While interested in the same elements that inform aesthetic and sociopolitical discourse on difference at the macro-levels of race, class, gender, and other large categories, the project maintains concentration with the small scale of the microsocial to interrogate the exemplarity of the situated encounter and the fungibility of feeling and framework in contemporary criticism. Asking how we square the phenomenological with the structural, I return to modernist abstraction for a body of work that encapsulates various artistically human problems for mediating identity. I examine this intra-social issue primarily in discursive spaces of feeling that blur what is said and what is meant; produce incongruities between dialogue and narrative; and require devices of observation that

textualize the non-verbal. Taken together, the twentieth and twenty-first-century fiction under study portrays the ebbing eventfulness of non-schismatic encounters of difference.

Introduction

How to perform an excavation on an encounter?

Writing in 2014, Claudia Rankine details a series of tense exchanges that may and may not have been the scene of a racist incident. The lyric poems collected in *Citizen: An American Lyric* narrate variants of the same ambiguous interaction with the stranger who shares, unprompted, their views on affirmative action; with the neighbor who has called the police on one's friend whom they had met and didn't recognize; with the trauma therapist who yells at a new client for standing on her front lawn. The snap judgment, the involuntary reaction, the unguarded facial expression: these microsocial blips swiftly conjugate an encounter and the ontological plane on which it unfolds. What *feels* like something is off becomes indistinguishable from what *actually* is.

As Rankine demonstrates, such micro-incidents introduce a different kind of breach into relations where intimacy is assumed and openness is taken for granted:

> You are rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood of Santa Monica. This friend says, as you walk toward her, You are late, you nappy-headed ho. What did you say? you ask, though have heard every word. This person has never before referred to you like this in your presence, never before code-switched in this manner. What did you say? She doesn't, perhaps physically cannot, repeat what she has just said.[1]

The poem ranges over several explanations for the comment. It could mean nothing more than an ironic act of appropriation: "Maybe the content of her statement is irrelevant and she only means to signal the stereotype of 'black people time' by employing what she perceives to be 'black people language'" (41). Or perhaps it comes from a possessive desire: "Maybe she is jealous of whoever kept you and wants to suggest you are nothing or everything to her" (41). Or maybe the comment is a pretense for expressing hurt feelings over the speaker's tardiness? It might therefore point to

[1] Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014), 41. Further citations are inside the text.

deeper misgivings about the friendship, now partly clarified in a passive-aggressive statement. The lyric's speaker decides it means nothing except the decision to pass over it. However, the call for speculation has left mutual damage: "For all your previous understandings, suddenly incoherence feels violent. You both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, you watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture" (41-42). In its superficialness and depth, the uncertainty of the comment lies finally in whether the "suture" was created or revealed.

Citizen foregrounds the unstable meanings of neutral encounters suddenly flooded with tacit codes. The instability can be phrased in the following terms: was the now-emergent difference present from the beginning, mutually sensed but not seen? Or was the rift created by this innocent gaffe, announcing a new reality for two people who can step over a minor crack that will always require stepping over? And what *is* it that calls for this careful indirection? Phrased in Rankine's words:

> The patience is in the living. Time opens out to you.
>
> The opening, between you and you, occupied,
> zoned for an encounter,
>
> given the histories of you and you—
>
> And always, who is this you? (140)

The enigmatic source and perspectival discrepancies of an offhand comment, a half-meant joke, an unwelcome observation, and the like, prompt further questions as to which scale their propositional content is to be understood. Do we confine these shape-shifting speech acts to a surface-level summary or do they highlight a more chronic condition? Insofar as it limns a buried repository of meaning, should the miscommunication be cleared up on the level of the interpersonal or the political? Consider this dilemma as it appears in another prose poem from *Citizen*:

> A friend argues that Americans battle between the "historical self" and the "self self." By this she means you mostly interact as friends with mutual interest and, for the most part, compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American positioning. Then you are standing face-to-face in seconds that wipe the affable smiles right from your mouths. What did you say? Instantaneously your attachment seems fragile, tenuous, subject to any transgression of your historical self. And though your joined personal histories are supposed to save you from misunderstandings, they usually cause you to understand all too well what is meant. (14)

A conversation between friends that is highly "meta" about difference suddenly loses its discursive distance from the non/issue now at hand. In a moment, the encounter has turned into a reckoning between personal and public selves. A historical-sized incommensurability, whose sedimented complexity is disproportionate to the interaction, reveals its pervasiveness *through* a face-to-face meeting. Yet this "battle" between selves that is staged on macrosocial and microsocial terrains reduces itself down to the unsaid: the tacit understanding of an internal division. In his reading of the lyrical uneventfulness of Rankine's scenes of difference, Arthur Wang notes: "The encounter here is not only a stark, instantaneous chasm between friends—it happens in the vague temporality of 'sometimes'—but also an exposure of a fault line within the self. This selfhood exceeds volitional orientations, identifications, and affiliations, and American positioning puts both figures in their place in this racialized encounter."[2] Wang argues that the affective and formal indirection of Rankine's lyrics keeps these encounters from building up to a political feud. In contradistinction, *Citizen's* low-level desire for the truth behind the joke appears to Andrea Long Chu in terms of affect's ability to delimit sites of the political where the explosive message has been preemptively

[2] Arthur Z. Wang, "Situation, Occasion, Encounter: Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and Lyric Theory in the Historical Present," *Contemporary Literature* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 532. "*Citizen*'s project is not to clarify microaggressions (a term Rankine uses in interviews but not in *Citizen* itself), nor to elevate nearly imperceptible ordinary racism to the status of political event. Rather, *Citizen* challenges our shared assumptions about the eventfulness of lyric and demands an examination of the processes through which contemporary poetry becomes (or fails to become) an event" (517-8). Rankine "offers affect in place of systematic knowledge" (527).

deactivated. Chu compares Rankine to a forensics-type "subject…venturing into the fallout zone of an undetonated event to collect samples of the incident's deformations (coincidences, flukes, misunderstandings) in hopes of finding something that will stick."[3] The reflexive work of returning to the scene in the hopes of finding an object for one's hurt feelings only further binds these encounters to their small scale. Chu notes that critiques of the 2010s discourse on microaggressions, triggers, safe spaces, and relational trauma maintain that ordinary disturbances displace the more urgent examples of systemic violence. At the same time, the confusion around what a microaggression actually indicates, and what a person might mean by something they didn't mean, in turn makes situations more contentious. As a happening where nothing technically happens, the micro-ness of these encounters is their double-edged sword.

In Rankine's poetic renditions, what intensifies the uncertainty of these encounters is the interpretative urgency to assign a concept—a meaning to another's meaning—which both holds out for and dispels the promise of a restored balance. Simultaneously pursuing and mourning this promise, Rankine's proliferating questions—"What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth?"—seek an answer which could clarify the comment's true referent and purpose (9). The uncertainty is fed by an indecision over how to resolve it, a frustrated dynamic which forms the core of this dissertation: the swerve from uncodified moments to hyper-codified categories of difference and their associated meanings. Slowing down this move, Rankine remains in liminal states of affect and its interpretations, thereby *prolonging* tension as she oscillates between micro-social encounters and macro-totalities of race, class, and gender.

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[3] Andrea Long Chu, "Study in Blue: trauma, affect, event," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, November 6, 2017, last accessed June 19, 2023, https://www.womenandperformance.org/bonus-articles-1/andrea-long-chu-27-3.

This project focuses on the ways that modernist narrative fiction allows us to grasp difference's microsocial motions, whereby a socially particularizing moment actualizes something intangible in a relation. On the one hand, the ambiguity calls out for a concept (e.g., this is a racist comment; this a racist encounter; this is a racist friend) but at the same time resists reduction to just one thing. I advance that the abeyance of a concept in incidents where something is seemingly proposed under the radar are not just better disposed for aesthetic analysis—there is a distinctly aesthetic quality to them. Phrased more boldly, my thesis is that the aspects of uncertainty that characterize these moments, where it is unclear whether a racist or sexist comment was made, bear out a *modernist* experience of abstraction. Not only do early-twentieth-century representations of these encounters make one doubt what a tense exchange truly adumbrates—an ambiguity not without consequence—but they suspend the analytical move to assign larger meaning to what has barely risen to the surface. My chapters look at cases where the uncertainty inside a text involves the unsteady pivot from sensuous understanding, unsettled feeling, half-known truth—all falling within the microsocial domain—to a consolidated idea, interpretation, or fixed totality, that is itself placed in suspension, outside our reach.

To maintain that a microaggression is like a modernist object would be the most extreme version of the argument I am making. The uncomfortable analogy emerges from a desire to find out what holding open moments of difference can teach us about modernism, criticism, and relations to other people. And yet, I maintain the conceptual leap is not a momentous one. Relational uncertainty is a classic problem of modernism, and my choice of focus returns us to the originary impetus of its literary experiments: the representation of what's ineffable in modern social interaction. The resurgent interest in the microscopic processes of difference in North American sociology and neoliberal culture provides an aperture through which to re-examine early-twentieth-century novels of indeterminate encounter under the light of situated, open-ended interactions with

others. This historical homology will help us to recognize the sophisticated ways that modernism has been illuminating the "meta" and the "minor" of the sociopolitical and its equivocally unobtrusive appearances all along. So while the micro-phenomena of race, class, and gender, and the minute attention thereof, have always been a protein of modernist narrative fiction, with the aid of lasting coalitions between aesthetic and sociopolitical thinking of recent decades, which are threaded through my chapters, this interest can now be handled as more forward-facing subject matter.

But in not unambivalent terms. My project homes in on the affective-interpretative notion of "uncertainty" through the lens of modernist abstraction in the works of Nella Larsen, Henry James, and William Faulkner. Coursing with ambivalence, this cluster of authors persistently cues up problems of analysis in their depictions of the everyday ways that the micro and macro are concatenated. In considering their relation, I argue that these modernists help us see this dyad *as* a dyad precisely by placing its connections in suspension. Their techniques of indirection enable literary discourse to capture how situated difference comes through in two's: the dyad of the face-to-face encounter is significant in showing how *there is already* a larger totality or abstraction at stake. Not only do these writers make us see the dyad as such, they allow us to also stay for a moment and ask: if we were to make this pivot, how do we go about it? As I will elaborate, they help us to see affinities between narrative poetics of encounter and the allusiveness of a passive-aggressive rejoinder through the transfiguration of what is said by what is meant; the disruption of a uniform perspective; the modulation between dialogue and scene; and the need for alternate forms of observation to textualize the non-verbal. All the while, these authors subvert contexts in which ambiguous exchange is made into an aesthetic object to behold and incorporates some symbolic surplus. My chapters read these and other permutations of literary-modernist abstraction that both convey and conjure up microsocial features in encounter, and vice versa, across modern as well as contemporary fiction. Reading this dynamic in its distinctly modernist fashionings helps me to place

fiction writers into new arrangements: James with Larsen; Larsen with Wyndham Lewis; and in my final chapter, modernism with novels by Sally Rooney and Raven Leilani.

Why not Woolf?

The meaning of "subtle" differences for intimate relations is the decisive context of this project. I rotate the role that familiarity plays in the complex interpretative processes of perceiving asymmetry and living amid its aftermaths. And indeed, what type of intimacy is this where the registering of difference produces difficulty? My examples are all defined by a state of attrition where what's unspoken holds the reins and open discussion remains impeded.

To be sure, a critical tradition already exists which apprizes modernist abstraction for its creative and social acumen of difference's obscurities. Referring to the poetic circumlocution of Gwendolyn Brooks's *The Anniad* to "'tell all the truth, but tell it slant,'" Hortense Spillers writes: "The point is to bury inverted racism in ridicule and obscure reference, but not before contemplating its effects."[4] Brooks's polar opposite, Wyndham Lewis, enacts in the words of Fredric Jameson the "brutal foregrounding of politics and sex and its ostentatious practice of style," scrutinizing the social world with such machinic intensity that we can no longer fathom it.[5] But as I have stated, a critical awareness of microsocial sites of difference is already internal to the modernist work. For instance, recall this representation of under-articulated class conflict in a dinner scene of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Written between 1910 and 1920, the passage shows Charles Tansley, an intelligent and insecure pupil of Mr. Ramsay, in the process of dissimulating his

[4] Hortense J. Spillers, "Gwendolyn the Terrible: Propositions on Eleven Poems," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 122, 123.
[5] Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 1.

judgments about everyone at the table, which, as we learn, also channel his awareness of his working-class background. Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Bankes start speaking in French; while Tansley

> had no knowledge of this language, even spoken thus in words of one syllable, at once suspected its insincerity. They did talk nonsense, he thought, the Ramsays; and he pounced on this french instance with joy, making a note which, one of these days, he would read aloud, to one or two friends. There, in a society where one could say what one liked, he would sarcastically describe "staying with the Ramsays" and what nonsense they talked. It was worth while doing it once, he would say; but not again. The women bored one so, he would say. Of course Ramsay had dished himself by marrying a beautiful woman and having eight children. It would shape itself something like that, but now, at this moment, sitting stuck there with an empty seat beside him nothing had shaped itself at all. It was all in scraps and fragments. He felt extremely, even physically, uncomfortable. He wanted somebody to give him a chance of asserting himself. He wanted it so urgently that he fidgeted in his chair, looked at this person, then at that person, tried to break into their talk, opened his mouth and shut it again. They were talking about the fishing industry. Why did no one ask him his opinion? What did they know about the fishing industry?[6]

The dinner conversation encapsulates the experience of being perceived differently. Tansley's indecision between wanting to contribute and silently forming acerbic observations at once arises from and formalizes the class differences that a dinner invitation papers over just so. Unfolding an analysis of the encounter has become an object of Tansley's perception of it. His awareness of his role in the interaction makes his discomfort into something outsized, of which he too is aware when it is finally his turn to talk: "Mr. Tansley raised a hammer: swung it high in air; but realizing, as it descended, that he could not smite that butterfly with such an instrument as this, said only that he had never been sick in his life" (104).

Woolf's magnification of Tansley's discomfort directly describes not reality itself but something otherwise. This realm is occupied by another observer of Tansley's interior experience of his difference, shifting his unilateral act of "seeing" into the scene's social subtexts to an intersubjective consciousness of them:

[6] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York and London: Everyman's Library, 1991), 104. Further citations inside the text.

> Lily Briscoe knew all that. Sitting opposite him could she not see, as in an X-ray photograph, the ribs and thigh bones of the young man's desire to impress himself lying dark in the mist of his flesh – that thin mist which convention had laid over his burning desire to break into the conversation? But, she thought, screwing up her Chinese eyes, and remembering how he sneered at women, 'can't paint, can't write,' why should I help him to relieve himself? (103)

The passing mention of Lily's difference is coded with previous allusions in the story to her neglecting to find a husband. The sign of racial identity is embedded in relational meanings that are not discussed by other characters. However, Woolf's direct marking of difference serves to register Lily's experience of being perceived, too, invoking a memory of Tansley's sexist remarks spoken in her direction. Writing of modernist fiction's ability to not only disclose but also conjure relations in the text through descriptions of facial expressions and moods, Dora Zhang argues: "Although description has long been understood as a form of textual visualizing, the vivid images conjured up in modernist descriptions *direct us to 'see' something other than how the world looks*."[7] In seeing the world not how it is, Woolf's characterization of a dinner party is not primarily about the social sensing of the unsaid, but rather conducive to the insertion of things that don't transpire as main events of the plot but hover over them in the discourse.

As it turns out, this microsocial moment in Woolf elicits a capacity to not only perceive but interact with covert power dynamics. If Lily's attunement to Tansley's perception of his inferiority is enabled by an awareness of *her* lack, it also miraculously bypasses the "thin mist" of non-talk about difference to register his need for reassurance, then withhold it. Given Tansley's put-down of her occupation as an artist, Lily opts against providing the gendered courtesy of a conversational boost, as he would be expected to tender on his part were her life in mortal danger.[8] According to Jennifer

[7] Dora Zhang, *Strange Likeness: Description and the Modernist Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 3; my italics.

[8] "There is a code of behaviour she knew, whose seventh article (it may be) says that on occasions of this sort it behoves the woman, whatever her own occupation may be, to go to the help of the young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his

Spitzer's reading, "the detail functions as a formal device that not only sets Lily's thoughts in motion but mediates a set of relationships between Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party, Lily's struggles with her composition, and the social roles and patterns she interrogates."[9] So much of modernist fiction turns on the affective and analytical workings of encounters such as this one, which sees into another's comment, body language, and other microexpressions a constellation of things that run counter to a situation. Modernist fiction does not just reflect the open gestures of an encounter; it redirects them through narrative devices *culled from* the detection of experiences which defy straightforward expression: free indirect discourse, focalization, multiple points of view, highly attuned description or its glaring omission. As my chapters go on to illustrate, the microsocial is a place where we see the social effectivity and affectivity of macrosocial concepts working on us and also a space for their special revision.

In a crucial departure, the seamless understanding of unspoken and half-articulated sentiment highlighted in Woolf becomes a trenchant issue for James, Larsen, and Faulkner. Like Woolf and highly modernist in their approaches, each author stages a version of this micro/macro and personal/historical dyad. But whereas in Woolf it is immediately clear to pivot from the social scene to the war—to talk about the dinner is to talk about war—this trio of modernists uncover impediments for both the artistic representation of that torque and its inter-social outcomes. While Lily knows her position and therefore how to recalibrate it, characters written by Larsen, James, and Faulkner defer this designation. Observations of minute, mundane particulars are not moments of revelation. Instead lingering on amorphous states, their texts interrogate the insights and agency one

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urgent desire to assert himself; as indeed it is their duty, she reflected, in her old maidenly fairness, to help us, suppose the tube were to burst into flames. Then, she thought, I should certainly expect Mr. Tansley to get me out. But how would it be, she thought, if neither of us did either of these things? So she sat there smiling." Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 104.

[9] Jennifer Spitzer, "Scaling the Detail: Woolfian Proportions," *Modern Language Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (June 2023): 183.

derives from the scrutiny of social structures and performance. What is more, the macro-phenomenon (e.g., the war) in their works is more miscellaneous and empirically ungraspable. For Woolf, because the outer cause of the dinner party is the war, the tension between Lily and Tansley can be concretized through this external-world explanation which, across all contexts, remains available. By comparison, the modernists in my study do not penetrate the "thin mist" because they are lost in the fog of interpretation. We might imagine a Jamesian rendition of the scene suggesting the following: what would emerge if we mentioned the war, the income disparities, and choice of marriage partner only indirectly—anyway they're not the main point—and held apart our very awareness of these crude realities from a definitive verdict? A Larsenian representation could entail this: the war is significant—no one said it wasn't—but how is Lily's withholding incentivized by the conditions of her relationship to her race and gender? And a Faulknerian: we don't speak about the war for it lives in the very marrow of human experience, yet *not* speaking about it reveals lacunae in the ways individuals navigate encounters without stable frameworks of race, gender, and sex.

To be sure, staying with these constantly shifting, under-mediated moments is already to annex a few concepts and codes: histories of interracial trauma, marital fidelity, moral ideas of what constitutes a relationship, etc. The key distinction for my argument is that the poetics of Larsen, Faulkner, and James are caught up in the structural mechanism produced by the encounter or the relation itself, which forms the hermeneutic horizon for understanding minor deviations. The interplay between parts and their totality contributes to the uncertainty that prompts and arises from their interpretation—that is, the meaning of the other person's meaning and meaning itself *within* relation. As is the risk of making what is invisible, symbolic, and subsidiary the focal point, the micro is the site where analysis doubles down and doubles over.

Mean difference

The central dilemmas of this project are deceptively simple, and, one could argue, would dissipate through head-on solutions. We can imagine the forms this could take: the explicit naming of the cause of discomfort; open communication about disparity; confirmation that encounters are reflections of their sociohistorical circumstances; and/or deliberate examination of one's blind spots. Yet the fact that these issues cannot be resolved through more straightforward means underscores that open confrontation is simply not an option in this set of modern novels. Conflict is left inconclusive; for the most part, it doesn't even happen. These are not "spaces of brutal differentiation," in the words of Christina Sharpe.[10] When tension does occur, it creates dissonance in realms of the symbolic, ideological, and intuitive. To treat explicitness as the solution for uncertainty is to ask what is gained by the disambiguation of difference within its uniquely configured contexts. What ideal or fantasy underlies the drive for explicitness, and what leads us to believe that it would ameliorate, rather than magnify, discrepant realities? Inquiry into the production of difference takes on these risks, which involves understanding that it is impossible to locate the kernel of truth. An inspection of the true source of tension can spin into a debate over who is the owner of truth and whose reality predominates.[11] This is not to invalidate efforts to call out transgressions as they arise but rather to foreground the uncertainties that sustain them.

Through readings of Henry James, Nella Larsen, William Faulkner, Sally Rooney, and Raven Leilani, I explain the workings of what I term "mean difference," which refers to the unsettling capacity of the "minor," the contingent, and the casual to crystallize asymmetrical realities and

[10] Christina Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), 72.
[11] Thank you to Olivia Stowell for her presentation on *The Real Housewives of Potomac*, titled "Farce, Property, and Pizza Delivery," which helped me arrive at this insight. *Beverly Hill* Screening and Multimedia Symposium, University of Chicago, May 6, 2023.

power exchange; and the challenge of securing fixed meaning to difference's most tacit signs. Difference is "mean" where the casual question, the mixed-message compliment, the involuntary facial reaction, the too-incisive observation, and other microsocial blips crystallize the asymmetrical realities of two people in relation. Meanness refers to the triviality of these expressions and also their lamentable smallness. The meanness and meaning of latent disparity convey the project's footholds in the "minor" and indeterminate quality of these differences. This type of indeterminacy is poised for conflict: the manifestation of difference tends to feel mean where a person believes their identity has been situated by another's comment, but to bring attention to this act is also deemed hurtful. The lack of codification to these relations contributes to the ambiguity and its antagonizing effects. In this project, I highlight the various interpretative difficulties that occur with attempts to assign, suspend, or reconfigure the meaning of fleeting affects and micro-expressions. With all this in mind, my project rotates the problem of uncertainty within the contexts of aesthetics, criticism, and sociology.

The representation of mean difference points also to an aesthetic approach or judgment on the part of the narrative work. What unifies James, Larsen, and Faulkner is an aesthetics of indirection with respect to the microsocial—that is, a hesitation or deferral, both narratological and character-driven, to affix a framework of racism, sexism, and class, even as their manifold social and material constructions are revealed thus. Interestingly, these encounters do not result in the rejection of social ties, but tread on what is held in common beneath difference. The focus of representation is on managing the interior experience of socially and politically fraught interactions whose asymmetry is revealed in modest conversation.

This project takes up, once again, the interpretive difficulty of modernist fiction as a heuristic for staying the ambiguities of non-schismatic difference and its feedback loops between affect and interpretation. In the microsocial we confront the other's meaning of meaning. That

proves daunting insofar as this "tacit dimension" of human knowledge, in the words of the Hungarian philosopher Michael Polanyi, is constituted by our own nonverbal notions and prejudgments. To quote Polanyi, given "the fact that *we can know more than we can tell*" but also that "no one speaks of a knowledge he himself has and cannot tell," the intuitive realm of personal and social experience exists, but is not articulated, in scientific or critical analysis.[12] Thus, "[w]e recognize the moods of the human face, without being able to tell, except quite vaguely, by what signs we know it."[13] In this project "micro" refers not only to the scale of face-to-face encounter but also a lower altitude of perception at which these fleeting signs become apprehensible; "to see a problem is to see something that is hidden. It is to have an intimation of the coherence of hitherto not comprehended particulars."[14] My usage also encompasses the "minor" in terms of a minimal affective expression and relation. In this way, micro-ness more accurately describes a technical difficulty for people who linger with the rhetorical messages of involuntary signs, not an actual scale of consequence (i.e., micro as petty).[15]

As I suggested through Rankine, part of the uncertainty here is that, through one lens, the trivial comment or gesture is not so trivial when it looks less like an isolated act and more like the revelatory piece of a hidden totality. What is an accidental gesture then becomes a plausible signifier for systems of race, gender, and class circulating through society. Yet what persists in making these incidents profoundly equivocal is that the registering of their metaphorical and literal effects is one-sided. Almost anything can appear intentional if you are the one paying attention. Individuals not aligned with cis-hetero-identity categories not only are made to be more vigilant of the everyday

[12] Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension,* with a new foreword by Amartya Sen (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4, 8.
[13] Ibid, 5.
[14] Ibid, 21.
[15] Thank you to Nan Z. Da.

reception of their difference but the task befalls them to sift through the random and perfunctory functions through which it becomes intelligible. This is in large part because injuries grouped under what Pierre Bourdieu termed "symbolic violence" continue to be dismissed.

To briefly discuss an example of this dismissive attitude, we can turn to Randall Collins, a sociologist working in the tradition of Erving Goffman, who researches the microsociology of violence. Indexing the equivocality of the prefix, Collins's conventional usage of "micro" refers to blatant forms of violence in face-to-face armed conflict, protests, bullying, and bar scuffles. Objecting to "symbolic violence" because it lacks a "clear core referent," Collins writes: "Macro-cultural approaches to violence become vacuous when they reach the concept of 'symbolic violence.' This helps us not at all to explain real violence, but muddies the analytical task."[16] Collins explains his distinction between symbolic and real violence:

> "Symbolic violence" is mere theoretical word play; to take it literally would be to grossly misunderstand the nature of real violence. Symbolic violence is easy; real violence is hard. The former goes with the flow of situational interaction, making use of the normal propensities for interaction rituals. The latter goes against the interactional grain; it is because the threat of real violence runs counter to the basic mechanisms of emotional entrainment and interactional solidarity that violent situations are so difficult. It is precisely this tension that produces confrontational tension and fear, the chief feature of micro-situational interaction on which pivot all the features of violence when it does occur.[17]

If it feels like there is an equivocation here, it is because there is one. The under-stated tension (to me, it is unclear whether it is the tension between the academic semantics of symbolic versus real violence or the tension inside an interaction) is at once innocuous and also the trigger point that determines when violence becomes real. But also, because "symbolic violence" prefers to go with the flow that it remains non-real. We can see how the low threshold required to commit a microaggression (it is "easy") coincides with skeptics' judgment of the low bar that exists for

[16] Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 24.
[17] Ibid, 25.

identifying a compliment as violent. But the *analytical* offense created by taking symbolic violence seriously is not only to water down all acts of violence (which is also to affirm their interrelatedness) but to proceed without a conceptual apparatus. To make his point, Collins invokes an anecdote of a male conference attendee who protested when he didn't get called on in a Q&A portion: "There is a micro-sociology of who does or does not get to speak in a group meeting, and at what point in the sequence of speakers; even on this level, to invoke 'symbolic violence' as an explanation of what happens is merely to make a rhetorical complaint, *not to provide an explanatory mechanism*. The fact that sophisticated intellectuals can believe that what they call symbolic violence is at all close to physical violence, shows how unaccustomed most intellectuals are to thinking in micro-sociological terms, and what little familiarity we have with real violence."[18] Perhaps Collins's choice of object shuts down an opportunity to think "symbolic" and "real" violence in tandem, just as it overlooks the extent to which the attendee's complaint already contains an explanatory mechanism that beckons unpacking.

The mystery here is the connection between the detail of symbolic violence and the differences it cues up that are compactly presented. As Rankine shows, the ambiguous offense goes hand in hand with one's sharpened sense of their racial and gender identity. The stakes of a micro-incident can accrue and immediately escalate as black Americans perpetually endure neglect, psychological and physical disorder, economic undermining, unarmed attacks, and death. *These* consequences of the microsocial, which as Rankine avers informs jury decisions, require of minoritized subjects to search for the meaning beneath the meaning. As Derald Wing Sue reports from his sociological research on microaggressions: "Most microaggressive messages are embedded in a wider array of communications in which multiple messages and meanings are delivered during

[18] Collins, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*, 468, footnote 10; my italics.

an interaction and encounter."[19] The off-putting comment is not an isolated event insofar as it has arrived through preexisting patterns or orders of relation. Furthermore, the message contains multiple meanings that do not cancel each other out. As Sue writes, a compliment on the impressiveness of a person of color allows the speaker to convey both praise and denigration for a racial group. The manifest message coincides with its diametrically opposed "metacommunication," making the comment psychologically impossible to figure out. Sue names these compounded factors the source of the "attributional ambiguity" that overtakes the recipient of a microaggression. Should they passively accede to the implied message, the attribution pathologizes their behavior, as the recipient is always already interpellated by the incident and the decision to address it. However, to call out a racist or sexist comment is to dispense an implicit accusation; to do nothing is to engage in self-deception and enforce the invisible asymmetry indexed by the comment. Yet to second-guess one's felt experience, to hesitate to call the racist or sexist incident what it is, can deepen the harm, especially when the deferral of such self-won clarity gets in the way of closure. This maddening process defines the "catch-22 of microaggressions," in Sue's words: whether the recipient clarifies or ignores the incident, they are still promulgating their own subjugation, if in the end only hurting their own feelings.

Despite the impreciseness and harmful spirals of rumination, mean difference also falls on the sheer brevity of affect and its transition to emotion. As Chu states: "affect is a lousy substitute for evidence."[20] To return once more to *Citizen*, Rankine writes that "words work as release—well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention" (69); in this regard, the microsocial is a site of privileged information indeed. At the same time:

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[19] Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2010), 56.
[20] Chu, "Study in Blue: trauma, affect, event."

> Do feelings lose their feeling if they speak to a lack of feeling? Can feelings be a hazard, a warning sign, a disturbance, distaste, the disgrace? Don't feel like you are mistaken. It's not that (Is it not that?) you are oversensitive or misunderstanding. (152)

Despite "a lack of feeling" to the feeling, affect provides a way of coming into an awareness of a situation's significance. And yet, the experience's elusiveness challenges positivist approaches of detection. "[A]ffect is a lousy substitute for evidence" in moments of conflict because, as Chu elaborates,

> affect is simultaneously *nonmimetic* and *recursive*. That is, not only do affects not resemble the events whose effects they nominally are (something slow might leave you out of breath, or a molehill might provoke a mountain), but feelings also need not feel like the feelings they are (you can be frustrated about being bored, or confused about being aroused by being humiliated). In other words, even if under laboratory conditions an event could somehow be kept stable long enough to act as a viable stimulus, the subject's chances of having a consistent, predictable affective reaction would still be next to nothing.[21]

The retracing of the memory, the weighing of viewpoints, the labor of analysis—every step taken to address the tension only points back to the moment's emptiness. Meanwhile "[n]ew shipments of affect keep coming in, of course, but what's on the manifest doesn't match what's in the containers, and instructions for discriminating between affects that are and aren't politically admissible are missing from the box. Hence reverse-engineering an event sturdy enough to support claims of structural or even personal violence becomes seriously risky business."[22]

In short, I want to wager that the interpretative difficulty of mean difference is inextricable from the affect of experience, the experience of affect: its incidentalness/systematicity; its determinateness/indeterminacy; its brevity/immanence; its surface/depth-ness; its implicit/explicitness; its trivialness/violence; its detachment/hyper-attunement. Might we say these are the very "fault lines" (Wang) that forge the dynamic between the personal/the political; the individual/the social; the objective/the subjective; self/other? All this seems be unfairly at stake in

[21] Chu, "Study in Blue: trauma, affect, event."
[22] Ibid.

microsocial details of difference, perpetuating what Anne Cheng calls the "impasse between recognition and reification."[23]

Affect and interpretation

Drawing inspiration from Sue's exposition of attributional ambiguity, I draw my study on modernist microsocial encounter into debates on the scale and frameworks of affect and emotion's interpretative difficulties. Toggling between affect and meaning generates more confusion in microsocial contexts. How do micro-expressions and affective states grant the observer knowledge about a person, an encounter, a relation? Can the meaning behind a comment or gesture be properly valued outside its effect on the listener? Broadly speaking, how does a person's subjective experience obtain social truths from within states of imbrication? The process would involve the discernment of some intelligible meaning from the incoherencies of emotional experiences—in short, it would require moving confidently from affect to interpretation and back the other way.

The central questions of my project spin off from long-standing debates on the relation between affect and cognition & judgment both in the literary and cultural study of emotion and in psychological and neuroscientific research. In affect criticism today, the appraisal of emotional activity in people and aesthetic objects alike turns on the presumption that behavior deemed pre- and sub-cognitive (e.g., attachment, compulsions, trauma) is linked to meaning. Beyond the psychoanalytic purview, not only can observable emotional and behavioral patterns accurately convey non-discursive and intimate information about another person—for example an ideological

[23] Anne A. Cheng, *Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory of the Yellow Woman* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), ix.

belief they would not have verbalized or conceded—but otherwise fugacious episodes are externally oriented to the analyses of history, politics, sex, and life.

To take a prime and foundational example, Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* is built around the very processes of "the conversion of singular to general or exemplary experience…the becoming historical of the affective event and the improvisation of genre amid pervasive uncertainty."[24] The motivating question, then, is not only "how can it be said that aesthetically mediated affective responses exemplify a shared *historical* sense?" (3) but also "[w]hat remains, therefore, is to specify how the activity of affective attachment can be located formally in a historical, cultural, and political field in ways that clarify the process of knotty tethering to objects, scenes, and modes of life that generate so much overwhelming yet sustaining negation" (51-2). In their cumulative effect, sentences such as these retroactively illustrate how the scrutiny of singular affective experiences installed itself as a procedure of intellection in the humanities, a mode of aesthetic reading, and a style of writing in literary and cultural studies. Helping to instate affect as an academic concept, Berlant's most enabling move was not only to handle emotion as a mobile analytic across interpretative scales but to study the indeterminate link between feeling-out others' feelings and sociopolitical regimes of signification through aesthetic works. Berlant premises that "the visceral response is a trained thing, not just autonomic activity. Intuition is where affect meets history, in all of its chaos, normative ideology, and embodied practices of discipline and invention."[25] They co-opt the *uncertainty* of understanding emotion as *the* way to reflexively tune into structures of crisis happening simultaneously on multiple levels. Famously, the impasse "is a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic" (4). But also important for literary-critical approaches to interpreting affect is that "the idiom that affect

[24] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.
[25] Ibid, 52.

theory can provide encourages *more than* a focus on orthodoxies of institutions and practices. It can provide a way to assess the disciplines of normativity in relation to the disorganized and disorganizing processes of labor, longing, memory, fantasy, grief, acting out, and sheer psychic creativity through which people constantly (consciously, unconsciously, dynamically) renegotiate the terms of reciprocity that contour their historical situation."[26] Thereby, the ordinary can be a "porous zone that absorbs lots of incoherence and contradiction and people make their ways through it at once tipped over awkwardly, half- conscious, and confident about common sense;" and also people themselves can and do "make up modes of being and responding to the world" even as "[l]aws, norms, and events shape imaginaries" (53). The micro-plane of incalculable feeling and improvised response in everyday situations not only stages but dialogically reacts to and even reforms the macro-levels of structural categories, only *appearing* to be "out there" rather than already marking the perplexing process of being-with.

And so, while the relation between affect and meaning is conceived by some as a divide, Berlant theorizes it as an adjustable incommensurability that is obliquely apprehended—perhaps solely known intuitively, imaginatively, viscerally, aesthetically—making the movement between the two a matter of "managing simultaneous, incoherent narratives of what's going on and what seems possible and blocked in personal/collective life" (4).

Given Berlant's claim that "affect theory is another phase in the history of ideology theory," it is all the more surprising that Ruth Leys finds fault with the affective turn in literary studies and the social sciences for its departure from the political meaning of emotion. In "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," Leys argues that newer paradigms of affect studies, which take after the legacy of Silvan Tomkins and his student/proponent Paul Ekman and follow in the footsteps of Eve Kosofsky

[26] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 53; my italics.

Sedgwick and Brian Massumi, give priority to resonance over reason, intensities over ideology, "bodies over ideas."[27] The move away from post-structuralist readings of language and so-called identity politics that prompted this turn has gone too far in the direction of uncongealed descriptions of states of being. Leys writes:

> The whole point of the turn to affect by Massumi and like-minded cultural critics is to shift attention away from considerations of meaning or "ideology" or indeed representation to the subject's subpersonal material affective responses, where, it is claimed, political and other influences do their real work. The disconnect between "ideology" and affect produces as one of its consequences a relative indifference to the role of ideas and beliefs in politics, culture, and art in favor of an "ontological" concern with different people's affective experiences and reactions.[28]

According to Ley's exposition of the field, affective response is defined as the most authentic site of the political *because* it eludes the truth claims of institutional projects. Unmediated, embodied states escape interpretations that treat affect as transmitters of cognitive beliefs and objective ideology. For Leys, this has made affective experience paradoxically "independent of signification and meaning"[29] and also so ubiquitous in close readings of texts that it "emphasizes the reader's or viewer's affective experience of a text or image to the extent that that experience might be said to stand in for the text or image in question."[30]

To be sure, my interest lies in not only the role of indeterminate processes of social relation in the transmission of feeling-based aesthetic judgments such as the interesting and the relatable,[31] but also the elision that runs through how we form judgments about feelings (our own and others') in academic prose where, virtually everywhere else, affect's incoherency creates hurdles. In

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[27] Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," in *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 343.
[28] Ibid, 322.
[29] Ibid, 314.
[30] Ibid, 323.
[31] See Sianne Ngai, "Merely Interesting," *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (Summer 2008): 777-817, and Brian Glavey on the poetics of relatability in the sharing of aesthetic experience in "Having a Coke with You Is Even More Fun Than Ideology Critique," *PMLA* 134, no. 5 (Oct. 2019): 996-1011.

navigating its versions of these issues, this project is specifically concerned with discursive spaces of feeling that produce incongruities between dialogue and narrative. But what one will also find in my readings of blurry encounters are various obduracies in/of relation, partly constituted by macro-forces that shape concepts of who we are and how we behave, but more immediately by dynamics set by people themselves, which become both clear and unsettled through a micro-incident or analysis.

Not cited in its pages, an example that gives legs to Leys's critique is Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*. Stewart refuses the movement to think the microsocial in terms of fixed totalities. She writes: "Models of thinking that slide over the live surface of difference at work in the ordinary to bottom-line arguments about 'bigger' structures and underlying causes obscure the ways in which a reeling present is composed out of heterogeneous and noncoherent singularities."[32] To this Stewart adds: "[a]t once abstract and concrete, ordinary affects are more directly compelling than ideologies, as well as more fractious, multiplicitous, and unpredictable than symbolic meanings. They are not the kind of analytic object that can be laid out on a single, static plane of analysis, and they don't lend themselves to a perfect, three-tiered parallelism between analytic subject, concept, and world. They are, instead, a problem or question emergent in disparate scenes and incommensurate forms and registers; a tangle of potential connections."[33] Ordinary affects lie outside the realm of ideology and symbolic meaning, associated with singular signification rather than the manifold experiences interpellated by them. Stewart's account of everyday ineffable states and happenings are therefore not diagnostic; instead it collects experience without judgment or order: ordinary affects "work not through 'meanings' per se, but rather in the way that they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds. Their significance lies in the

[32] Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 4.
[33] Ibid, 3-4.

intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible. The question they beg is not what they might mean in an order of representations, or whether they are good or bad in an overarching scheme of things, but where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them in a state of potentiality and resonance."[34] A collaborator of Berlant's, Stewart writes in a style that pays homage to *Cruel Optimism* but indexes a departure from creating theory from affect—a resistance to the hypotaxis of criticism and crisp, evaluative claims in preference for paratactic writing that moves side-by-side rather than up-and-down from a larger framework.[35]

In their questions about the conceptual consolidation of affects, Leys and Stewart lay the ground for this project's approach. We may place them together to ask *how* the difficulty of corroborating the significance of affective response is both analytically and socially interwoven, in part because it requires that we distinguish the interpersonal contexts in which they gain significance and identify who performs this labor and whom it serves most. We may note this while still appreciating the risks of rigidifying affects into structural categories—the "how" of how to transition from one to the other and back again—while also remaining sensitive to the consequences

[34] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 3.

[35] Stewarts introduces *Ordinary Affects* as "an experiment, not a judgment. Committed not to the demystification and uncovered truths that support a well-known picture of the world, but rather to speculation, curiosity, and the concrete, it tries to provoke attention to the forces that come into view as habit or shock, resonance or impact. Something throws itself together in a moment as an event and a sensation; a something both animated and inhabitable" (1). The self-account evokes the division between emotion and ideas that Leys alludes to: "what is crucial is not your beliefs and intentions but the affective processes that are said to produce them, with the result that political change becomes a matter not of persuading others of the truth of your ideas but of producing new ontologies or 'becomings,' new bodies, and new lives" (343). The difference that Leys seems to overlook is that affects here are not without ideas (e.g. they are means of perceiving what has become so elusive as to be routine) but that these affects do not make up a larger conceptual apparatus as they do in Berlant. We can see how Stewart's sentence deploys Berlantian claims (i.e. "the idiom that affect theory can provide encourages *more than* a focus on orthodoxies of institutions and practices") but operates more as tribute.

of letting affects lie without naming (which redounds on the "who," the "what," and the "why" of this pivoting move).

But in more concrete terms, inquiring into the meaning-assignment of affect creates challenges within intimate relations: in the words of Stewart, "[f]rom the perspective of ordinary affects, thought is patchy and material. It does not find magical closure or even seek it, perhaps only because it's too busy just trying to imagine what's going on."[36] Moreover, an attempt to assign institutional meaning to such indeterminacy, as Leys observes, "marginalizes the intact person with his or her intentions and meanings and raises difficult questions about how conceptuality can be added on to nonconceptual mental contents and processes" while "more or less surreptitiously transferring to subpersonal mechanisms the very powers of 'cognition' and meaning-making they deny the person."[37] To ask how "nonconceptual mental contents and processes" are yet "subpersonal" rather than how they float across the surface of encounter (more in the room with us than submerged, so to speak) would be to dive deeper into the opacities of this interpretative gambit.

Performing reading strategies that move from affect to interpretation and linger in the space of transition, this project examines the aesthetics, politics, and sociology of disparities that permeate through and are permeated by everyday ambiguities in modern and contemporary Anglophone fiction. It focuses on the micro as a crucial site for examining the difference social hierarchy and inequality make in how individuals manage the tricky parts of everyday encounters becomes palpable. Difference moves through intra-social encounter in ways that are not straightforward, easily decoded, or even apparent to us in the moment. Therewith, one finds opportunities to affirm that "subpersonal material affective responses" *are* one locus where "political and other influences

[36] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 5.
[37] Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," 16-7.

do their real work" (Leys) because they are implicit and so present great difficulty. Indeed, in both literary and sociological representations of encounter, the "nonconceptual" and the "subpersonal" are significant for their surreptitiousness in transmitting and jamming an obscured totality.

One objection to these theorists could begin by noting that, alongside discourses in affect theory, scholars of race, queer theory, feminism, and disability studies have been theorizing the sociopolitical affordances of feelings for giving rise to collectivities *through* their resistance to normative meaning.[38] Micro-incidents and macro-categories of meaning are concatenated and embedded through the ways of life, making interpellation and identification not so simple to parse. To take an example from scholarship on the ordinariness of difference, Ju Yon Kim's concept of the "racial mundane" is largely constituted by "immediate, tangible embodiments of social historical pressures [that] seem to make persuasive claims" and "[d]iffering assumptions about what those claims *are*."[39] Encounters with difference may further entrench assignations of identity but they also show that what is mutable for some is not so for others.[40] In the words of afro-pessimist thinker

[38] Consider, for instance, the following sentences written by queer and trauma theorist Ann Cvetkovich: "I find that the demands of thinking about race in relation to trauma converge with those of thinking about sexuality because both require a method that is alert to the idiosyncrasies of emotional life"; and "[m]y investigation of trauma thus becomes an inquiry into how affective experience that falls outside of institutionalized or stable forms of identity or politics can form the basis for public culture." See *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7, 17.

[39] Ju Yon Kim, *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 13.

[40] This idea speaks to a situation that bell hooks reports in her work on the "oppositional gaze," a critical form of paying witness to difference in filmic texts. This negating gaze examines racialized encounters against the grain in order to recalibrate stereotypes of blackness and gender in popular media. hooks notes that the older, black female spectators she interviewed did not necessarily claim their manner of looking as an anti-racist practice and indeed identified with the tribulations of protagonists dealing with white employers represented onscreen. She reflects: "While every black woman I talked to was aware of racism, that awareness did not automatically correspond with politicization, the development of an oppositional gaze. When it did, individual black women consciously named the process." See "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 128.

Frank B. Wilderson: "Shared experiences in the realm of the social do not necessarily index shared positions in the realm of the structural."[41]

In my project, the microsocial provides more highly specific ways for describing ineffable differences in situated encounters. The distributed effects of difference contribute to the difficulty of assigning stable meaning to fleeting signs. Rather than simply reflecting the macrosocial, mean difference becomes a shorthand for this very problem in critical and aesthetic theory of how to move in a coherent way between these two areas. Modernism enables us to pointedly ask how to form arguments about microsocial encounters while looking through subject positions to relational codes, behaviors, and dynamics. My aim is to stay with this movement from feeling to framework in my readings of uncertain encounters and demonstrate the ways in which the microsocial is productive in its own right.

Modernism and difference

Mean differences give systemic issues a familiar face, we might say, but how to read that face and its significance? Similar to Sianne Ngai's "ugly feelings" and Xine Yao's "disaffected" states, mean difference attunes the observer to larger systems through their circumscribed agency, and in the course provides a sharper sense of their relational behaviors as they reckon with power struggles at homebase.[42] But what then? How to muddle through being-with others where mean difference has come to light?

[41] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 269. Quoted in Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 31.
[42] See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005) and Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

As I suggest, moving between meanings and scales constitutes the locus of these works' significance for present-day reflection on the interpretative labor of everyday difference. I claim that the analysis of the aesthetics—the perception and reflexive judgment—of an encounter is where the metaphysics of difference becomes an unavoidable issue. Here, seemingly inconsequential matters such as the form, style, tone, mood, and mode of a comment, verbalized or withdrawn, redound on the meaningfulness of "invisible" distinctions.

Literary-critical and sociological research on everyday social inequality continues to confront dismissals of microsocial elements as illusions, even as feminist, queer, race, and disability scholars have proven the opposite. The question is, then, what can modernist aesthetics offer? The answers proffered in this project suggest that inquiries into lower-degree difference, conflict, and power transfer can be augmented by the lens of modernist abstraction. Part of the interest is the surprising constrictiveness of ordinary relations defined by anomic conditions of tenuous intimacy, spontaneous connection, and eroded trust. I argue that not only do modernism's poetics of ambiguity and indirection focus on relations that proceed through rift and paradox, but make comprehensible objects out of the gray areas of race, gender, class, etc.

The microsocial has been an enduring interest in modernism and modernist studies, abundant in their analyses of fleeting encounters in relation to images, objects, and media that capture, convey and/or further conceal the profound motions of history, time, and existence. In my specific focus on "microsocial encounter," I examine not air, moods, or atmosphere—as has been the recent pattern of affect-inclined research in modernist studies—but the social transfer of affects in situated interaction, the interplay of their observation and interpretation, and the scales at which their significance is adjudged.[43] Asking how we square the phenomenological with the structural, I

[43] See for example Dora Zhang, *Strange Likeness*; Hannah Freed-Thall, *Spoiled Distinctions: Aesthetics and the Ordinary in French Modernism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Kara Watts,

return to modernist abstraction for a body of work that encapsulates various artistically human problems of and for mediation within discursive spaces of feeling.

Indeed, a recurring feature of encounters in *Mean Difference* is the unsaid, the withheld, and the occluded feeling or thought. Across texts, this indirection corresponds to a wavering over how to place a frame of meaning on an encounter. One reason for this are the internal involutions of distance and proximity, which become estranging in their semi-perceptibility yet testify to the presence of a relation that's at stake. The modernist fiction writers I have chosen center this continual uncertainty around being-with, attending to, and reading the familiar other precisely through hyper-attention to how they are perceived in encounter. The interlinking of *this*—that is, the close and distant, the intense and the inert (the inertia of intensity), the solid and the dispersed, the rigid and the amenable—speaks to the social dynamics that not only cement these works as modernist but also are routed through their formal structure. In other words, why in the works of James, Larsen, and Faulkner, is there so much work to know so little? Why devote such creative and cognitive effort to know less and less? And how does this uncertainty persist structurally, through finely arranged aesthetic objects?

The answer to these questions lies in the stylistic distinctions of microsocial encounter between these modernists and the "relational modernists," as Dora Zhang calls them, Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust. The focus of all is, to some extent, the anatomy of feelings and affects in modern social interaction. The difference falls on the placement of the external structure that organizes these encounters. As I suggested at the outset, in Woolf there is always something hanging above intersubjective moments, and that is the war, which specifies the fleeting feeling of dinner parties and the aerial vantage from which one may behold the linked unraveling of an upper-middle

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Molly Volanth Hall, and Robin Hackett, eds. *Affective Materialities: Reorienting the Body in Modernist Literature* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2019).

class housewife, Mrs. Dalloway, and a traumatized soldier, Septimus Warren Smith. In part due to the absence of a fixed outer case, the seamless certainty of invisible threads one finds in Woolf simply does not exist in Larsen, Faulkner, or James. For them, the primary framing structure that is both the hinge and the caesura for microsocial experience is the encounter itself, and all its inner confusions of expression, perception, and introspective awareness.[44] This is the tricky part: as I am defining it, the modernist microsocial encounter (1) is both the part and the whole. It unfolds a relation that is always on the verge of dispersing, if not already so. Yet (2) since narratives are reported from *inside* the encounter, it precludes a cohering perspective that sees the relation of the relation to the entire narrative. That relation is so uncertain for these modernists is signaled by the encounters themselves, all in various states of attrition, as well as their undue intensification through painstaking representation. Therefore, by this logic, James's *The Golden Bowl* can fail to mention a millionaire's source of income and key features of the character's appearance (i.e., identifying factors) while applying convoluted sentences to *under*-shoot a description of the instant when perception becomes insight. This materializes the "circumambient conditions," to quote Seymour Chatman, which encompass not only relations between characters but also the narrative's attempt, in the words of Rebekah Scott, "to name them, by ransacking grammar and lexicon and, beyond, the

[44] Ruth Bernard Yeazell makes the canny point that in James's late fiction, characters are never not awake: "Creatures of an age which produced Freud, they nonetheless strenuously resist any surrender to the unconscious…For James's heroes and heroines, to stay awake and alert is thus imperative, especially at moments of crisis, for to relax into sleep is to risk a loss of control and to allow suppressed feeling and knowledge irresistibly to surface" (16, 18). Unlike the sleepy and dream-like figures found in Woolf and in James Joyce and Djuna Barnes, people written by James, Larsen, and Faulkner stage "the painful struggle of the intelligence literally to come to terms *with* full consciousness—and thus in some measure to hold it in check" (18). Yeazell's observation begins to explain why the affective realm perpetually crests encounters, and perhaps why characters cannot get away from its half-hidden truths. As Yeazell writes: "But if the heads of James's characters seem top-heavy, that is only because those heads are swollen under vast pressures from below. For in the minds of James's men and women the force of all that is unconscious and unspoken makes itself continuously and powerfully felt" (18). See *Language and Knowledge in the Later Novels of Henry James* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

far realms of metaphor, and its exquisite ability to find, along the scale of generality, terms to fit the case."[45]

But on top of describing and materializing the atmospheric, I argue that these encounters of difference are modernist with respect to their toggling between the micro and macro. This claim begins to feel conceivable when we recall the modernist technique for articulating the inarticulable, in light of what Dora Zhang has taught us. Even when one is not expressing their view on money, gender, sex, class, and race in their responses to, say, another's authoritarian tone, it is feasible that they are. The equivocalness of these gestures is precisely how differences often appear in modern social interaction. What enables this equivocality to occur in the novels is a modernist form of narrative fiction that collapses the processes of perception and attribution, observation and communication, memory and moment, and makes them *stand out* as semantic ordering units of story, discourse, and narrative. In my first chapter, I demonstrate that in the late fiction of Henry James, not only is that uncertainty enlarged but it is left suspended in the diegesis. By summoning an observer to drop in additional details or increase/decrease the emotional intensity of dialogue, I show how James extends the nineteenth-century realist method of observation to record that which does not technically happen and *leave* it there as a piece of the interaction. The incidental activity of observation is isolated in James's device of the imaginary observer, used to probe at what is unspoken with interest but without judgment. Thereby, what is known as Jamesian indirection suspends and keeps suspended what someone says and what they might mean in order to incorporate the implicit dimension of the social into the narrative.

[45] Seymour Chatman, *The Later Style of Henry James* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 126-7. Rebekah Scott, "'The dreadful done': Henry James's Style of Abstraction," *Textual Practice* 35, no. 6 (June 2021): 78.

One finds the Jamesian technique of indirection taken up by Nella Larsen, who expands its scope to address what James does not: how to treat social difference and its conflicts without really talking about either. As we learn in *Passing*, to take note of something is not only to register a difference but to already perform a calculation, even while the object or purpose of that move is not always clear. I home in on this manifold microsocial process through my analytic of tact: a minute behavior that covertly conceals one's noticing of difference and also increases the ambiguities of race itself. Tact is at once a socialized proclivity for hedging, a narrative form that transfigures the manifest through the latent meanings of speech, and finally a modality of racial and gendered difference that puts off knowledge of itself as such. Epitomizing this indirection, Larsen's race novel, *Passing*, centers mostly on the homosocial aggressions of women who tactfully hide their observations and hurt feelings. And so in my second chapter, the microsocial is a site of restrained tension—its restraint being key to its ability to redirect the flow of emotion and meaning—that is amplified where it brushes against generic accounts of friendship, racial identity, and material consumption. The tact of Larsen's women is often successful in nipping a fight in the bud; however, due to the shifting landscapes of modern interaction, distancing blurs into aggression. Through Adorno and Jameson, I explain how tact became its opposite at the turn of the century, no longer a way to smooth out tensions in the absence of fixed social categories but a way to channel hostility and manage others' emotions without their knowledge.

In a racially ambiguous girl written by Faulkner, the focus of my third chapter, one finds a provocative case study for attributional ambiguity. I examine this vague figure for her function in the novel in order to ask: what makes an encounter racial? At which point does gazing upon the behavior of another become a perceiving of otherness? Organizing these questions under the "problem" of mediation that the girl poses, I rotate the interpretative difficulty in Faulkner to describe opacity within his limits for representing non-white characters. Here, I claim that the

encounter with difference sets up an uncertainty that is highly recognizable to Kantian notions of aesthetic judgment of the beautiful which lacks a concept and also Édouard Glissant's and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theories of opacity.

For modernism, the microsocial provides a bank of discretionary knowledge for those who know how to look. In the words of Mark Seltzer, there still exists "the correlationism by which the human observer is the measure of all things, not least in a novel in which hundreds of sentences have the phrases 'he thought' or 'he realized' attached to them."[46] In contemporary vernaculars absorbed into the American millennial novel that is the focus of my final chapter, the everyday tics of "I think" or "I feel like" convey more so the provisionality of an individual's responsibility to what is discovered vis-à-vis their micro-observations. Reflecting upon this, novelists Sally Rooney and Raven Leilani show how the painstaking approach to scrutinize difference in the present day is a gratuitous gesture—the stalling of microsocial analysis is the interpretative difficulty of the fourth chapter. Larsen, James, and Faulkner therefore anticipate the reluctance towards generalization in these contemporary novels. Compared to their modernist forerunners, Rooney and Leilani are staunchly un-tactful about difference: subtexts that are kept at bay in Faulkner, James, and Larsen are directly named and discussed. *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Luster* (2020) center on the perceptions of women in their early 20s whose identity position enables them to see the confrontation, and contradictions, of everyday life and large-scale categories of race, gender, age, and class. I argue that Rooney and Leilani foreground both scales, and, in toggling between them, reveal points of mismatch. This non-equivalence indexes a broader crisis of the usefulness of super-subtle analysis to a neoliberal culture cognizant of the asymmetries that dictate everyday interaction. Moments in which difference seems to buffer lead characters to hesitate to interpret encounters in

[46] Mark Seltzer, "The Official World," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Summer 2011): 730.

intimate relations under the framework of disparity solely. Leilani and Rooney explore the limits of the microsocial in making a difference about difference in intimate relations.

The political stakes of holding open the concept of an encounter inform a longstanding stand-off in modernist studies between formalist analysis and cultural studies. In a recent collection that brings affective approaches to modernist works, the editors write that the affective turn "contributed to the revitalization of cultural studies over and against literary studies. Constructed by discourse and interpellated by power, the body was only a subject, and the subject was dead."[47] This ontological division is changing for a generation of scholars whose work in modernism overlaps with affect theory, cultural studies, and minoritarian aesthetics. In *Misfit Modernism: Queer Forms of Double Exile in the Twentieth-Century Novel*, Octavio R. González argues that modernist techniques of point of view and impersonality make visible the marginalized identities and ineffable experiences that do not neatly fall into categories.[48] Yan Tang has argued that modernist theory and representation of affect "show us that ideology is always embedded in aesthetic form's production of affect."[49] In both her books on modernist fiction and affect, *Flat Protagonists* and *Spaces of Feeling*, Marta Figlerowicz registers the social anxiety that arises from and tries to offset the crushing discovery that one has overestimated their emotional importance in others' lives, and also the ways

[47] Kara Watts, Molly Volanth Hall, and Robin Hackett, eds. *Affective Materialities*, 7.
[48] See Octavio R. González, *Misfit Modernism: Queer Forms of Double Exile in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020).
[49] See Yan Tang, "Modernism, Critical Theory, and Affect Theory," in *Modernism, Theory, and Responsible Reading*, ed. Stephen Ross (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2022), 64. Tang argues that modernism anticipates the conceptual and stylistic features of affect studies and its contemporary questions and trends. She identifies a genealogy of affect theory in modernist traditions of "aesthetic emotion."

that narratives model this issue when our perception can't sustain the emotional complexity of the people we encounter.[50]

In drawing on and departing from Heather Love's micro-sociological readings of modernism (thin description does not do justice to multi-layered ambiguity), I approach close reading as a microsocial interpersonal strategy rather than what we might associate with a more traditional, New-Critical version. What theory of the novel do we get if close reading were acknowledged as a social strategy of survival, attention, and conflict management? If psychological novels of manners in this project were attended to with this manner, my intervention is to ask: what sociological information does modernist aesthetics contain about the everyday management of difference? How does modernism's interest in ambiguity and indirection proffer a critical consciousness for decoding vernacular forms of inequality? Does modernism in turn induce further opacity, and how do we interpret the subversive or reactionary politics of its indirection?

I claim that literary discourse's capacity for indirect expression and its textualizing of the unsaid cast it as the most astute paradigm for pinpointing the nuanced experiences of mean difference. Holding together the ambiguities conveyed and forged through narrative discourse, my analyses are conducted with the idea that aesthetic works are fitted for the task of perceiving the oblique obliquely. Yet more specific to this set of authors, the restricted encounters with others' internal life, and one's own, call for a type of ethnographic attention of the reader to infer what others think and feel from what they say and don't. In adopting the constraints imposed by public behavior as an artistic one, their novels highlight the role of nascent processes of relation for the formation of interiority. In James's case especially, the effects of this constraint underscore the

[50] Marta Figlerowicz, *Flat Protagonists: A Theory of Novel Character* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), and *Spaces of Feeling: Affect and Awareness in Modernist Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

paradox of the limited access we have to others' states and the occasional productiveness of intra-social attention. In my James chapter, the observation of micro-expressions—errant messages of true intent—by an even more fleeting figure serves to enhance the dramatic implications of dialogues and realizations half-sensed. In Larsen, tact is a complexity required of the performance of passing upheld by women. In miraculously rediverting moods and others' sensing of them, they tacitly work to protect the other and also hedge around the alliance which that protection implies. Faulkner's unprocessed connections between observations and memories contain nascent understandings of what is transpiring in an encounter that remain so for the sake of self-preservation. Finally, Rooney's and Leilani's characters learn that even averted conflict can clarify one's perspective and role from within a relation. In what follows, I argue that the abstraction in these works is constituted by and for these unspecified micro-features of difference. The examination of how their appearance is distributed across encounter, and why they don't dissipate following their detection in modernist and contemporary literature, provides more precise explanations of how difference differs and what is held in common. Not only does literary discourse capture this process in its multiple registers, but the experience of microsocial difference also follows the poetics of literature.

Chapter One

Henry James's Device of the Observer: A Study on Microexpressions

In the late works of Henry James there are observer characters—May Bartram, Lambert Strether, the governess, Fanny Assingham—and then there are hypothetical observers, invoked for what they would have seen had they been present. This chapter begins to unravel why James needed both. Formally speaking, the device of the imaginary observer (and that of the "spectator") and the observer character fill the same expository function: they are vehicles for crucial perceptions in the plot, arbitrate in the reader's understanding of the protagonists, and provide an opportunity to linger on seemingly inconsequential details.[1] Moreover, the *ficelle* and the imaginary observer alike help to sustain an aesthetic undertaking in James's texts to hold our attention on zones of uncertainty created around social difference.[2] But despite their family likeness, what sets the

[1] The observer character and figure of the observer also break up the plot for easier consumption. As James writes in the preface to *The Ambassadors*, Strether receives a "confidant or two, to wave away with energy the custom of the seated mass explanation after the fact, the inserted block of merely referential narrative, which flourishes so, to the shame of the modern impatience, on the serried page of Balzac, but which seems simply to appal our actual, our general weaker, digestion." Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 321.

[2] To read James as a novelist of social difference, rather than social manners solely, is to categorize his work more emphatically in terms of a "guide to social life" of modernity, as Jennifer L. Fleissner and other critics of James have recently been advancing. In these readings, we see the concerns of formalist and sociopolitical camps of thought already fused together in the analysis of opaque relations in the texts. For instance, to quote Fleissner: "And yet it seems, unquestionably, as a set of formal operations that the social fascinated Henry James. While James was penetratingly aware of the force of social structure at the macro level, of class above all, his deepest interest lay in the architecture of engagement between particular persons." See *Maladies of the Will: The American Novel and the Modernity Problem* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 206-7. Analyzing the forces which animate the formal and sociological role of female observer characters, Sianne Ngai writes: "From overstepping telegraph girl to unpaid but still strangely working tutor to ambiguously compensated, overtly instrumentalized female companion, these figures reflect what we might call James's 'perioccupational' preoccupation: his interest in acts of affective labor in the uncertain, sometimes queer areas surrounding older established relationships, and particularly in the wake of surprising withdrawals of care from places or institutions traditionally thought to supply it, such as families and employers. Inhabited across class divides and other categories of social difference such as age and gender, the economically ambiguous zones around the older or more familiarly defined

invented observer apart from his living counterpart is the scale of interpretation. The anonymous observer homes in on microexpressions released involuntarily and unbeknownst to other characters, as illustrated here in *The Awkward Age*:

> Mrs. Brook, for some minutes, had played no audible part, but the acute observer we are constantly taking for granted would perhaps have detected in her, as one of the effects of the special complexion today of Vanderbank's presence, a certain smothered irritation.[3]

Here the observer emerges, not for the first time, to note a slight provocation in Mrs. Brook's body language, a ripple of negative affect that would have otherwise remained unnoticed. Upon summoning "the acute observer," James may outline the tangle of emotion that Mrs. Brook's controlled reticence belies. But on top of this, the presence of the observer feels necessary here in order to perceive what Vanderbank does not: that Mrs. Brook's silence is in fact negatively coded. The observer does not explicate the reasons why but instead leaves this affective connotation floating in the discourse.

Considered in the history of the Western novel, the centrality of microsocial observation to James's depiction of polite exchange is nothing new. Indeed, we could say that the novel of manners, stretching back to Jane Austen, is intrinsically interested in the uncontrollable release of emotion through the most minimal of signs. Looking back on this tradition, James takes a key ingredient—hyper-observation—and distends it across the decorous situations that bring it forth. For while Jamesian observation comparably works to point to what is behind a comment or gesture, its effect is not to recontain any ensuing deviations into some central line of conduct, but to linger on these uncertain states with the effect of negotiating the relation between the said and unsaid.

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ones in which these acts of donated labor take place—defined by patriarchal, imperial, and wage relations—point to a general uncertainty surrounding moral codes." See "Henry James's 'Same Secret Principle,'" *The Henry James Review* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 46.

[3] Henry James, *The Awkward Age* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 184. Further citations inside the text are marked *AA*.

To briefly draw a contrast with Austen's tactics of microsocial attention, while the noteworthy tooth-pick scene in *Sense and Sensibility* uncovers a tension between the explicit and inexplicit material of discourse, it does not suffer the problem of toggling between them. As we see there, Austen unfolds Elinor Dashwood's scrutiny of a man (later revealed to be her brother-in-law Robert Ferrars) holding up the line at a jeweler's shop as he makes his purchase: "one gentleman only was standing there, and it is probable that Elinor was not without hopes of exciting his politeness to a quicker dispatch. But the correctness of his eye, and the delicacy of his taste, proved to be beyond his politeness."[4] The narrative delves into his mannerisms ("he had no leisure to bestow any other attention on the two ladies, than what was comprised in three or four very broad stares...on this impertinent examination of their features, and on the puppyism of his manner in deciding on all the different horrors of the different tooth-pick cases presented to his inspection"[5]) and dutifully moves on, given, as D.A. Miller argues, the implications that these inspections obtain for Ferrars's sexuality. In staging an encounter of suppressed gender, sex, and class conflict, Austen's scrupulous reading of Elinor's reactions does not ultimately underscore an incongruity between characters' perceptions and their reality. Elinor's disturbance soon disappears, and the opacities of social difference are not lingered on in the story (even as Miller registers their homology to Austen's style). Thereby this encounter stays within the ambit of poor manners, bad taste, and the disruption of heteronormative roles. The encounter's under-studied dimension is run aground because, as Miller writes, Elinor's "unfailing good manners constrain her to bury more deeply," and "hence allow her to cultivate more passionately, the whole *croce e delizia* of nineteenth-century interiority…[A]ppealing to nothing finer than the common 'sense' of obvious social notions[,] Elinor dismisses from her mental activity its usual companions—doubt, hesitation, puzzlement,

[4] Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 208.
[5] Ibid, 208-9.

curiosity, discrimination, ambivalence, reflection—so that her mere observation is already passing a summary judgment."[6] Interrupting the movement of observation into judgment, while also flagging their simultaneity, James puts into radical question the empirical assuredness through which we discern and know things about one another, in registers both superficial and profound.

In a distant connection to Claudia Rankine, Austen shows a micro-subversion of the social, where, in fulfilling my definition of the "micro," tension does not provoke confrontation yet disorder takes place (i.e., Elinor does not tell off Robert). In both authors' accounts, we find a situation in which a person registers a formless offense at the way a stranger behaves as if they don't need to imagine the life-worlds of the people they encounter. James is similar to the extent that his narratives flag microsocial details precisely at points where characters have divergent understandings of the same, ambivalent encounter.[7] In James's late fiction especially, asymmetrical understandings of everyday conversations become freighted with large-scale implications, for instance the division between appearance and reality; the moral grounds upon which people's uncertainty can remain un-interrogated; and the ethical sense of *knowing how to identify which opacities must be protected* that are constituted mutually within relation.

But on a formal level, the internal experience of doubt is not easily pushed off as in Austen; rather it is threaded through the composition of James's passages. Staying with this point a little while, this chapter explains how James not only takes up but leaves around amorphous states through his unique device of the imaginary observer. This virtual figure appears in the midst of dialogue to scrutinize microexpressions without explicating what they might mean for the interaction at hand. Through it, James sets up a form of intensive attention that observes without

[6] D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 14, 20-1.
[7] Thank you to Frances Ferguson for these succinct takeaways.

judgment, thereby inhibiting the urge to move between a microexpression and its concept within a scene, relationship, narrative or some such totality. In the history of the modern novel, James's observer turns around the problem of how to shape unmediated content into an interpretation in light of the gap between awareness and cognition, but also one's affective experience and others' engagement with it. This imparts a specific type of mean difference to my project. Inspired by the formulations of Marta Figlerowicz, the "meanness" here refers to the inconclusive difficulty posed by the premium we place on our affective experiences and introspective awareness. As Figlerowicz attests, the contradictions of affect stem from its inescapable responsivity: that someone notices our affects, and vice versa, would imply a more intimate interest in and by the other person, when in most cases, they are not all that invested in what these affects might mean about and for us. In Figlerowicz's words, "we are often unable to involve other people in taking stock of our feelings as fully and intensely as we need them to be—and this inability is one of the points of difficulty in our relations to others."[8] This further underscores the imperfect reciprocity that marks an event of responsivity: though noticing affects does happen a lot in intimate relation, it is decoupled or incompletely linked to the interpellations and interpretations they appear to grant. The "meanness" of this fact lies in the idea that what is brought out in relation cannot be then automatically re-conducted or metabolized through it. This is itself is not a sign of neglect or aggression: as Figlerowicz writes, "[i]ts more basic, inalienable cause is simply that we care more about our affects than anybody else could."[9] In many ways, James presages a similar interactional problem appearing in my chapters on Larsen and Faulkner, as well as Rooney and Leilani. As individuals arrive to encounters with relatively different degrees of knowing, this inevitable aspect of social exchange is

[8] Marta Figlerowicz, *Spaces of Feeling: Affect and Awareness in Modernist Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 7.
[9] Ibid, 5.

recast in James as a critical problem with ethical consequences for our responsiveness to others' affects and our interpretation of this particular dyad (i.e., our responsiveness and what that says about us and others).

Our surreptitious observer

Throughout *The Awkward Age* and other late novels such as *The Golden Bowl*, the observer enters when characters are dissimulating feelings of awkwardness, irritation, doubt, and/or dread.[10] To describe these opaque moments, James interposes an imaginary figure between a character's emotions and her silence. The figure resembles a passerby who speculates over the meanings behind facial expressions. In his estimations he displays something more than polite attentiveness but rather a remarkable sensibility for subtle shifts in emotion. Take, for instance, his study of Nanda Brookenham's mien in *The Awkward Age* as her mother pries into her relationship with Mr. Longdon:

> A supposititious spectator would certainly on this have imagined in the girl's face the delicate dawn of a sense that her mother had suddenly become vulgar, together with a general consciousness that the way to meet vulgarity was always to be frank and simple. (*AA* 191)

[10] The device finds a predecessor in the figure of the reader in James's earlier work. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James frequently uses the device to tap the implied reader's memory. He reminds her of plot points—"The reader will perhaps not have forgotten that Mr. Rosier was an ornament of the American circle in Paris, but it may also be remembered that he sometimes vanished from its horizon" (408)—and incentivizes her perceptiveness—"The reader already knows more about him than Isabel was ever to know, and the reader may therefore be given the key to the mystery. What kept Ralph alive was simply the fact that he had not yet seen enough of the person in the world in whom he was most interested: he was not yet satisfied" (446). At one point James states, rather bluntly, what he wants the reception of Isabel to be: he writes that Isabel "would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant" (105). James eventually phases out the reader figure to make way for the observer. *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

The spectator primes the reader to understand that however Nanda will respond to her mother, it will be double-voiced. Here the spectator not only registers the minor disturbance passing across Nanda's face but also describes the perceptions of her mind.

Perceptions but not specifications. The observer can cross a dialogue's threshold of inexplicitness, a facility denied to other characters and even the narrator, but the figure never surpasses what is a "general consciousness." Notably, the discourse flags his understanding as "suppositious": ultimately, they are guesstimates of Nanda's emotional state as she verbally jockeys with her mother. Paradoxically, even as the imaginary observer shares scenic space with characters, the device also works to interrupt the consistency between the narrating apparatus and the people narrated. This contradiction is further indexed by the text as the device is used to drive perception *not* understanding.

At the same time, James's hypothetical observer points to the inextricability of perception from understanding—that is, the desire to ascribe deeper meaning to conscious awareness. It also shows that even neutrally naming the presence of an affect is to enact something: in this context that something endows scenes with uncertainty by identifying that there is more than meets the eye. The uncertainty increases when we also consider that this observation may and may not have been as attentional as we perceived its effects to be. In my readings of the figure, I will expand upon how James knew to channel this capacity of simple deixis into a narrative technique for representing momentary, equivocal states that only an observer can capture.

Having intermittent, albeit limited, access to a character's interiority could make James's spectator an extension of an omniscient narrator. However, drawing on James's theories for the novel, I will read James's shift into the gear of the observer device, in contradistinction to the narrator and the observer character, in broader terms of rotating a critical problem for the modern novelist of representing unmediated information by keeping in abeyance—or "hanging fire," to use

James's phrase—involuntary microexpressions, swift affective adjustments, and waves of awareness. But also to dwell on these amorphous states is also to give rise to something narratologically: in the case of James's late style, to shoehorn tangential meanings and tinker with rhetorical effects of a passage—only to ultimately end up in uncertainty once again.

But if received as a sociological insight, the observer's microsocial insights measure out an intra-social space of emotions and perception that is both embedded and slightly out of place in interaction. For not only does noticing the unnoticed imply that there is more to the encounter than meets the eye, but it points to the unintentional effects created by others' interested attention in us. Therefore, through this device James may register the presence of implicit dynamics while leaving their significance and links unspecified. As I go on to show, this equivocation allows James to gently, yet quite visibly, reorient how he wants certain scenes to signify to his readers. What this denotes for my project is that observation, in suspending the incisive understanding we find in Woolf, works to conjure up more affects and contemplation in navigating social exchange—in short, indirection is redirection with an artistic *purpose*.

Functioning as a tool of criticism, James also turns to the device to perform his corrective in the tradition of the novel, mainly to the nineteenth-century narrator who shares too much with the reader. In the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, James addresses his proclivity for summoning a spectator to witness the activity of his characters. He acknowledges this "accepted habit," his

> preference for dealing with [his] subject-matter, for "seeing [his] story," through the opportunity and sensibility of some more or less detached, some not strictly involved, though thoroughly interested and intelligent, witness or reporter, some person who contributes to the case mainly a certain amount of criticism and interpretation of it.[11]

[11] Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 3. Further citations inside the text are marked by *GB*.

Better that the unaccountable stranger deliver these insights than the "mere muffled majesty of irresponsible 'authorship'" (*GB* 4). James's impatience with authors who use the narrator to wink at the reader dates back to "The Art of Fiction." In this early example of modern literary criticism, James descends on Anthony Trollope's importunate use of the omniscient narrator to chat with the reader and point out the artifice of the story. Stricken, James writes: "He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best."[12] For James, these chummy disclosures are a "betrayal of a sacred office" and a "terrible crime" that in turn could toxify the "air of reality" and "illusion of life."[13] In an 1883 essay, ostensibly written in tribute to Trollope after his recent death, James remarks, a touch off-color, that he took

> suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, a make-believe. He habitually referred to the work in hand (in the course of that work) as a novel, and to himself as a novelist, and was fond of letting the reader know that this novelist could direct the course of events according to his pleasure.[14]

Such "little slaps at credulity" are inexcusable violations of the author's code, which requires a discreet narrator to uphold.[15] According to narrative theorist Garrett Stewart, what bothered James about these authorial asides was their "admission not of textuality but of fictionality, of sheer

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[12] Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), 857.
[13] Ibid, 861.
[14] Henry James, *Partial Portraits* (London: MacMillan, 1894), 116.
[15] James was not the first to protest the intrusions of the author on aesthetic grounds. According to Rachel Sagner Buurma in "Critical Histories of Omniscience," Victorian novel critics before James argued that the author's disclosures of the overall structure weakened the coherence of the story. But while "for them, omniscience was, in fact, a necessary quality of the novel which nonetheless endangered its desirable organic wholeness and artistic totality," for James it represented an authorial power that had to be curbed (124). This preference was later adopted by a tradition of early-twentieth century literary critics. See Buurma for an account of pre- and post-Jamesian novel criticism as well as the retroactive coordination between the Victorian novel and the omniscient narrator, in "Critical Histories of Omniscience," in *New Directions in the History of the Novel*, ed. Patrick Parrinder, Andrew Nash, and Nicola Wilson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 121–33.

manipulable invention, which for James broke the novelistic contract with the reader, the reader who should be led to believe in the coherence of the world described."[16] Pointing out the exterior design could mean toppling the "house of fiction." Rather than abuse omniscient narration, James introduces an observer to bring out what is not readily evident in characters' behavior. At the risk of trafficking in unwanted details, James always expresses the observer's impressions in the subjunctive mood ("Our spectator would have found") as though to hedge their import. In contemplating a microexpression the observer never pinpoints its origin. He approaches the character to consider the mystique of her face. In contrast to an omniscient narrator, the observer does not clear up the vague moments that attract him in the first place. Instead, he heightens their vagueness with inconclusive hypotheses. So, in recording "the long, the suppressed wriggle" (*AA* 233) going down a character's back, the invented observer detects micro-sensations that others cannot yet only materializes a character in her lineaments. With this device, it appears James solely seeks to register that characters are reacting, reflecting, realizing, and regretting.

Despite the array of research on observation in James, material on the observer figure is scarce. His characteristic unobtrusiveness may be the cause: he drops by to play the part of the uninitiated onlooker only when the occasion calls for him. The device aligns with other forms of situated observation in James, which have attracted scholars to examine in their phenomenology, point of view, "subjunctive spectatorship," and more.[17] Still, the greatest attention has been paid to "Jamesian observers," characters which James named the "lucid reflectors" of his stories. In *The Lucid Reflector: The Observer in Henry James' Fiction*, the terms Ora Segal uses to describe the observer

[16] Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 419n12.
[17] On the subject of "subjunctive spectatorship," see David Kurnick, "'Horrible Impossible': Henry James's Awkward Stage," *Henry James Review* 26, no. 2 (2005): 109–29. See also Paul B. Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011) and Mario Ortiz-Robles, "Point of View's Points of View," *Henry James Review* 39, no. 3 (2018): 218–25.

character can be applied to this virtual figure: "reflective nature, sensitivity to impressions, analytical turn of mind, speculative propensities, and, above all, insatiable curiosity and capacity for appreciation."[18] To be sure, the character shares a number of generic qualities with the form of the observer, although their respective diegetic functions prevent them from being redundant. What distinguishes the device from the character is, simply, that he is not a character; he is not embroiled in the events of the story, and so his judgment remains impartial. His perspective is not tinted by his love for the main character (*pace* Ralph Touchett). His fleeting impressions do not lead to misprisions in the narrative. Alternatively, the observer character's "moral and epistemological perspectives are . . . necessarily more limited; and as a consequence of these limitations, the observer cannot simply adopt the superior explanatory tone of the authorial guide."[19] The *device* of the observer, however, can, in large part because his thoughts need not be rationalized within the diegesis; they are neither "exhibited as the fruit of a long, complex, groping process of speculation and evaluation" nor "justified by being shown in the making." Thereby, the observer's speculations can be summarily deployed to enhance rhetorical effect and encourage critical reflection in the reader.

Yet, in considering the aesthetic unity that James prized, what *isn't* intrusive about a stranger entering unannounced and studying people's faces? The essential characteristics of this device make it a conduit for surplus details and affects discontinuous with the scenic order and also a device for adding static to characters' thinking and actions. No less, the imaginary observer can be read as a blatant interference, a bald imposition of the author's hand. For while the narrator can be crowded out, the figure of the author never fully disappears. Even though James uses the device of the

[18] Ora Segal, *The Lucid Reflector: The Observer in Henry James' Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), xii.
[19] Ibid, 144.

observer or spectator to covertly insert extradiegetic details as a workaround for omniscience, the device behaves as a proxy figure that acts out the author's desire for more personal attention to minute behaviors. As James states in *Portrait*'s preface, the "house of fiction" is "nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist."[20] Here James aligns himself with the watcher, in contradistinction to the narrator, as to establish the paramount importance of intensive noticing. As an expression of James's formal principles, the device of the observer circumvents omniscient narration while still allowing the author to steer the story. It thus becomes clear why James ultimately identified the spectral spectator with himself:

> Among many matters thrown into relief by a refreshed acquaintance with "The Golden Bowl" what perhaps most stands out for me is the still *marked inveteracy of a certain indirect and oblique view* of my presented action; unless indeed I make up my mind to call this mode of treatment, on the contrary, any superficial appearance notwithstanding, the very straightest and closest possible. . . .Again and again, on review, the shorter things in especial that I have gathered into this Series have ranged themselves not as my own impersonal account of the affair in hand, but as my account of somebody's impression of it—the terms of this person's access to it and estimate of it contributing thus by some fine little law to intensification of interest. The somebody is often, among my shorter tales I recognize, but an unnamed, unintroduced and (save by right of intrinsic wit) unwarranted participant, *the impersonal author's concrete deputy or delegate*, a convenient substitute or apologist for the creative power otherwise so veiled and disembodied. My instinct appears repeatedly to have been that to arrive at the facts retailed and the figures introduced by the given help of some other conscious and confessed agent is essentially to find the whole business—that is, as I say, its effective interest—enriched *by the way*. (*GB* 3-4; my italics, save the last sentence)

In formal terms, the device stems from James's misgivings about the intrusiveness of omniscient narration while attesting to an abiding effort to manage whatever opaque emotional or mental process that is transpiring under our nose. However, James does not want to be detected wending in and out of the narrative. So, while abjuring the omniscient narrator, James relies on a "deputy or delegate" to make his stories more interesting by way of heightening the rhetorical effect of descriptions. He does so without cornering the reader into sympathizing with the protagonist or

[20] James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 46.

circumscribing the meaning of a passage. Quite the opposite: he narrows the focus on microexpressions but also points up to a realm beyond characters' immediate attention. Harbored in that realm—an affective realm—are incidents that almost or never happen.

Instead of contradicting James's aesthetic creed, the device is its consummate form. It appears that the device of the spectator grows out of James's ideal for the art novel. Given the novel's multi-perspectivalism, the narrative can make room for an additional, ancillary figure without completely sacrificing the unity of action and place. That the figure is an observer reaffirms James's stance on perspective as a virtue of novelistic form. In the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James attributes the "high price of the novel as a literary form" to "its power not only, while preserving that form with closeness, to range through all the differences of the individual relation to its general subject-matter, all the varieties of outlook on life," but also to its ability to "appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould."[21] Paradoxically, the novel's mimetic performance becomes more complete when its form is destabilized through the accumulation of focalizers. The novel's "high price," therefore, is situated in its tendency to accommodate many viewpoints without compromising the integrity of its structure. The indeterminate observer and the fixed novelistic structure together create the particular effect that James wants: for the reader to witness a passage not as an author's arrangement but through the characters' nimble distinctions of each other's feelings and sensing of meaning—with only partial insight. James's usage of the device points to the interpretative agility of spectators to not only play up the drama of seemingly trivial details but also frame them as objects that multiply a perceiver's understanding of an encounter. It is now time to home in on James's various

[21] James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 45.

deployments of the observer in order to explain how he keeps encounters open and suspends interpretation.

The observer in action

The nature and frequency of the device's appearance often accord with the representational strategy James adopts for a given work. In *The Awkward Age*, where he experiments with dramatic presentation, there are approximately thirty references[22] to a spectator and an observer, whereas in *The Golden Bowl* there are about ten[23], many of which refer to actual characters in the novel or the trope of the circus performer, reflecting the social charades of Maggie Verver, her father, and their spouses. In these two works, the uninvited observer appears in order to penetrate subtexts, compare remote gestures, and/or draw the reader's attention to puzzling behavior.

The figure of the observer concerns himself with the discrepancy between what characters say and what they convey through microexpressions. In *The Awkward Age*, a novel where, according to James, there is no "going behind" the action of the story, the device of the spectator pulls the curtain aside from characters' private thoughts and gestures at the visible signs of masked feeling.[24] Consider, for instance, the impact of the observer on this passage where Nanda and Vanderbank stand beside each other in pregnant silence:

> Both on their feet now, as if ready for the others, they yet—and even a trifle awkwardly—lingered. It might in fact have appeared to a spectator that some climax had come, on the young man's part, to some state of irresolution about the utterance of something. What were the words so repeatedly on his lips, yet so repeatedly not sounded? It would have struck our observer that they were probably not those his lips even now actually formed. (*AA* 133)

[22] The spectator or the observer can be found in *The Awkward Age* on pages 31, 41, 45, 59, 68, 87, 88, 89, 97–98, 105, 109, 117, 133, 140, 149, 156, 159, 184, 188, 189, 191, 202, 226, 227, 233, 246, 258, 293.
[23] In *The Golden Bowl*, see pages 49, 117, 140, 182, 418, 487, 491, 527, 546, 585, 589.
[24] James renounces the "going behind" method on page 12 of the preface to *The Awkward Age*.

In a scene befitting "The Beast in the Jungle," the spectator/observer appears when the silence between two characters inexplicably intensifies. The spectator's impressions are stated even more tentatively than usual: the climax is as latent as the unformed words on Vanderbank's lips. The appearance of a spectator creates a receiver for the messages telegraphed by the "young man's" micro-gestures, which might be feelings of discomfort, mounting emotions for Nanda, and/or ill-defined notions barely known. In short, the spectator has the "power to guess the unseen from the seen," a faculty that James ascribed to fiction writers (*AF* 861). In this case, the "unseen" could be a confession of romantic love, a potential climax that dissipates when Vanderbank speaks.

The observer later resurfaces at an actual turning point in the novel to parse Vanderbank's reaction to Mr. Longdon's consequential offer. In this scene, Longdon has just suggested that he will "back" Vanderbank should he propose to Nanda. A hypothetical onlooker steps forth to turn the spotlight on Vanderbank's smile:

> Another person present might have felt rather taxed either to determine the degree of provocation represented by Vanderbank's considerate smile, or to say if there was an appreciable interval before he rang out: "I think, you know, you oughtn't to do anything of that sort. Let that alone, please. The great thing is the interest—the great thing is the wish you express. It represents a view of me, an attitude toward me—!" (*AA* 162)

Note here that Vanderbank is so hard to read that even the spectating figure strains to gauge his response. The fact that the figure is "rather taxed" to arrive at a judgment may be a cue for the reader to also take pause. His reaction operates to orient the reader to the making and mirroring of affect. In both examples from *The Awkward Age*, the device is used to leverage Vanderbank's indeterminacy into an opportunity for a lingering look.

As an accessory to the narrative, the invented observer embellishes descriptions and conjures affects for the reader to note. In *The Golden Bowl*, the device distends the meanings of interactions even further than in *The Awkward Age*. In the first scene of the novel, Prince Amerigo

drops in on Fanny Assingham to thank her for arranging his marriage to Maggie and to divine her motives for the matchmaking. Anxious about the imminent wedding, the prince wants to know why Mrs. Assingham believes he is a suitable match for a billionaire's daughter—surely she knows something that he does not. Circling around the question, his small talk betrays his nervousness, which leaves Mrs. Assingham unsettled, leading the prince to read her reticence as proof of dissimulation. The stakes of their discomfort are steep: as happens often in James, what begins as a missed connection escalates into muffled panic and quiet catastrophe. While the scene is focalized through the prince, at one point the narrator imagines how their meeting might look to a spectator:

> The unspoken had come up, and there was a crisis—neither could have said how long it lasted—during which they were reduced, for all interchange, to looking at each other on quite an inordinate scale. They might at this moment, in their positively portentous stillness, have been keeping it up for a wager, sitting for their photograph or even enacting a *tableau-vivant*.
>
> The spectator of whom they would thus well have been worthy might have read meanings of his own into the intensity of their communion—or indeed, even without meanings, have found his account, aesthetically, in some gratified play of our modern sense of type, so scantly to be distinguished from our modern sense of beauty. (*GB* 49)

Despite their inner turmoil, on the surface the prince and Mrs. Assingham look composed, as composed as two figures inside an artwork. Their artful arrangement practically conjures up a spectator, who puts forward two courses for construing their outward appearance: the first is content-driven, the other, form. Effectively, the spectator serves to crystallize two approaches to interpreting the novelistic representation of body language and thereby provides a way out of the hermeneutic impasse. What's more, the presence of the spectator frames the meeting as an object to be contemplated and ironizes the duality of their behavior by noting the juxtaposition between scene and image. In this more radical application of the device, the spectator furnishes the passage with a new perspective through which it can be inspected. The additional aspect prompts the reader to undertake an analysis of something that did not happen but still exists in the story. This highly recursive moment marks the unsaid as an opaque element of encounter, one that is opportune for

aesthetic appraisal. Not only does the device serve to make this fleeting encounter feel like an aesthetic object but also the uncertainty thematized by the characters themselves shifts their exchange into an aesthetic mode.

Jamesian redirection

In this chapter, I have sketched the various appearances of the observer and the spectator that would suggest James's reflexivity in setting them apart for scrutiny. Recording these appearances yields an account of how James builds in affects and aspects to generate interpretative contexts for comparing story to discourse within his fiction. When filtered through an observer, microexpressions that are merely incidental become important, even interesting, for contouring drama into descriptions of observable emotion. Indeed, the nature of the device befits its function: flashing across the page, it is a microexpression that emits James's intentions for his work's reception. Stated more boldly, the observer runs against James's promise of non-interventionism. Despite his aversion to the intrusive narrator, James admitted that the figure of the spectator was a means for imagining himself into the story. Although in the preface to *The Golden Bowl* James maintains that he never allowed the "muffled majesty of authorship" to "*ostensibly* reign," he confesses to his renunciation of this "pretence" in order to "get down into the arena and . . . live and breathe and rub shoulders and converse with the persons engaged in the struggle that provides for the others in the circling tiers the entertainment of the great game" (*GB* 4). Here James imagines himself interacting with his characters in a virtual reality of the story, distorting once again his aesthetic theory with the detached but interested observer.

We might now more fully appreciate the impossibility of a direct and studied clarification of these opacities that afflict both James and his characters. For one, to clear up abstraction, to attempt to place a concept to what is under-motivated, would be to inhibit the creative processes of

inspection. As Ruth Yeazell reflects, "translating" James's late novels into "unwritten plot summary and character sketch" and leaving them at that runs "the risk of doing violence to what is most idiosyncratic and exciting in them, of making their peculiarly fluid and unsettling reality something far more stable and conventional." If it as a fear of conservatism that prevents one from correcting misunderstandings inside the status quo, perhaps for James that hesitation makes us more capable of nuance in grasping the profundities of reality itself without forgetting the facts that resist being lost sight of: "To allow that style to fully work on us is to find ourselves in a world where the boundaries between unconscious suspicion and certain knowledge, between pretense and reality, are continually shifting—a world in which the power of language to transform facts and even to create them seems matched only by the stubborn persistence of facts themselves."[25]

In the next chapter on Larsen, we will see how discretion not only turns on but induces a counterintuitive hyper-awareness of whatever is being avoided, be it sexuality, class difference, racial identity, and more. As we move to the next example of mean difference, we might keep in mind the ways in which James's observational techniques helped us to appreciate the invisible layers of affect that are admixed into everyday exchange. Half-hidden, the observer's recording of these layers may enhance one's notion of the ability of narrative fiction to work on multiple levels: that is, to notice shifts between dialogue and scene, to hold open their meanings, and to direct the trajectory of a passage all at once.

If we were to decode James's aesthetic activity in terms of a social behavior, we could read James's emphasis on the observer's distance as an avoidance of presumption in dealing with other people. One who respects distance in dealing with others can be attempting to restrain their assumptions about how people think and act. Yet, as we have seen throughout my readings of the

[25] Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 2, 3.

observer, it seems that stopping oneself from claiming too much knowledge about others turns that solicitude into its own reversal. Distance coincides with a feeling that one must work to avoid disclosing what they think, who they are, and what they came for.[26]

Indexed by the extraneous observer, observation about what others notice of us becomes a surfeit of relation, for it is a mystery not only how we operationalize these insights but also that they are imperfectly reducible to the relation at hand. Re-engaging Marta Figlerowicz's thesis, the recursiveness around not knowing how to decode and where to place a microsocial fragment after it materializes is linked to a floating aggression in the work of Nella Larsen. Here, the tactful noticing of affect and the managing of one's interpretation of it does not ease the difficulty of relation, but in fact foments hostility on the levels of character and narration.

[26] I am once again grateful to the wisdom of Frances Ferguson in helping compose these sentences.

Chapter Two

Tact: Nella Larsen's Agons of Noticing

"the very movement of withdrawal bears features of what it negates."
— Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*[1]

Irene Redfield arrives to Clare Kendry's apartment for tea, thinking it will be just them. To her surprise, Irene finds that Clare has also invited Gertrude Martin, a mutual friend she hasn't seen since childhood. Wordlessly, Irene understands that Gertrude knows Clare's secret: that she is hiding her mixed-race background from her white husband, John Bellew. Otherwise, Clare would not have invited Gertrude to her home, duly so because Gertrude and Irene also "pass." The unexpected appearance of a third disturbs Irene: "[Gertrude's] presence there annoyed Irene, roused in her a defensive and resentful feeling for which she had at the moment no explanation."[2] However, "[l]ater, when she examined her feeling of annoyance, Irene admitted, a shade reluctantly, that it arose from a feeling of being outnumbered, a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind"; unlike Clare and Gertrude, Irene's husband is black (24-5). Irene knows she has no valid reason to be irritated with Gertrude. Hiding her annoyance over its under-motivated cause, Irene's unsettledness darts in and out of the scene's "oppressive little silence" (24) in a sneering focalized description of Gertrude's appearance ["Gertrude, Irene thought, looked as if her husband might be a butcher" (25)]; and again when Irene visibly does not share Clare and Gertrude's relief that their children were born light-skinned:

> This time it was Irene who said nothing…Irene, who was struggling with a flood of feelings, resentment, anger, and contempt, was, however, still able to answer as coolly as if she had

[1] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 2020), 29.
[2] Nella Larsen, *Passing: Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 24. Further citations inside the text.

> not that sense of not belonging to and of despising the company in which she found herself drinking iced tea from tall amber glasses on that hot August afternoon. Her husband, she informed them quietly, couldn't exactly "pass." (26-7)

Colloquially speaking, tact refers to a faculty for not-giving offense, a know-how for saying and doing the right thing at the right time in the strain of encounter. In her novel *Passing*, Nella Larsen reveals that tact is bound up in the practical problem of managing one's affect when differences related to race, class, sex, health, and other unspoken concerns arise in conversation. Wary of subtle disruptions both inside and out, a tactful individual strives to preserve the line of interaction, to borrow Erving Goffman's phrase, with inevident course-corrections that keep the conversation going or enable a graceful exit.[3] More often than not, tact is about the unstated: what is obvious is left unsaid; what is non-obvious is also left unsaid.

Tact operates in the episode of Clare's apartment across multiple diegetic levels. First, it is embodied by Irene's attempts to suppress signs of discomfort so as not to draw attention to herself. This restraint is keyed to the scene's dualistic structure—the women's conversation and Irene's semi-obfuscated negativity—across which the narrative shuttles while the dialogue marches on. Larsen's discourse tactfully balances astride these levels, turning to reported speech to summarize tangents and background, and free indirect discourse where a sentiment is too unwholesome for polite society.[4]

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[3] Goffman articulates the "line of interaction" in the course of describing an intuitive strategy for handling friction that we may also assign to tact: "withdrawal is often not so much an informal punishment for an offense as it is merely a means of terminating it. Perhaps the main principle of the ritual order is not justice but face, and what any offender receives is not what he deserves but what will sustain for the moment the line to which he has committed himself, and through this the line to which he has committed the interaction." *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 44.

[4] Thadious Davis writes that free indirect discourse in *Quicksand* "function[s] to convey Helga's artistic sensibility while masking her private dissatisfactions with herself." *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1994), 260.

Interestingly, Irene's tact also consists of making her displeasure *available* to her companions through orthogonal departures from a topic or an edginess in her tone. In these softly violent outbreaks, Irene demonstrates where she is not committed to remaining in equilibrium with the others, for example her friends' colorism. However, it is hard to say precisely what unsettles Irene once she becomes conscious of this fault line. For while on the surface, the tension is "about" their children's skin color—itself weighted with coded semantics—it would feel inaccurate to designate *this* as the true substance of conflict, and race its focal point. For starters, Irene's *preexisting* feelings of discomfort intensify the rhetorical effect of Clare and Gertrude's espoused preference for Caucasian-looking children. From where does Irene's discomfort come, then, that it must be tactfully suppressed? We could begin by tracing it back to the unpleasant surprise of Gertrude's company: and what makes this surprise unpleasant? Is it that Irene is made to fraternize with someone she considers lower class? Is it the oddity "that the woman that Clare was now should have invited the woman that Gertrude was" (24)? Do we take Irene at her retroactive word that she felt "outnumbered" in marrying a black physician? Or is it also because Irene is thrown off in discovering a third keeper of Clare's secret, which she has been unwillingly made to protect yet feels oddly possessive of? The unease may in fact stem from this—that Irene feels her authority persistently undercut by Clare, a feeling the narrative articulates as a pretext to the episode: "She'd done it again. Allowed Clare Kendry to persuade her into promising to do something for which she had neither time nor any special desire" (23). Is *this* the original dilemma which is inexplicably irritated by the conversation around race? We could read Irene's behavior at Clare's apartment as a progressive distancing from this emotional starting point, although the discourse moves aside of these possible subtexts.

In this chapter I will be showing how tact points to spaces in encounter where what is going on is put into radical question. Contributing to this uncertainty, although the text is synced to Irene's

immediate reaction to what has been said, the link between narrative and story is not always clear. For one, the affect of Irene's outburst belies the fevered emotions held at bay. The aesthetics of modernist indirection at play here has to do with not only the ambiguities of racial presentation, through which the novel is often read, but also the non-verbal conflict among the three women—or Irene's conflict with them, as these "ugly feelings," to use Sianne Ngai's phrase, centrifugally involve everyone.

If we were to read *Passing* as bringing the Jamesian techne of observation under a racial and feminized framework, Larsen emphasizes the *practical* effects of keeping open the connections between observation and understanding, subtext and reality, and pretense and authenticity. Unlike the ambivalent interactions found in James, the divergent understandings of an encounter do not bequeath finer, moral nuance to the difficulties of being-with others. Rather, in Larsen, it lies more closely to the relation between interpretation and projection—in other words, am I making the object in worrying about it? The blurriness of paranoia and self-skepticism augments the blurriness of roles in ambivalent friendships. Larsen's *Passing* presents a distinct version of microsocial noticing by more emphatically highlighting its stakes in situations of under-articulated differences related to race, class, and gender.

In the novel, registering the presence of difference often heightens the awareness of an inexplicable tension. I argue that this discomfort is promptly managed during conversation with *tact*—an equivocation that subdues hurt feelings while at the same time channeling aggression. Larsen thereby extends the "modernist technique of reticence" that Mark Goble explicates through James, "which makes keeping something to oneself the same as making a spectacle of oneself," to an evasion of conflict that corresponds to hostility.[5] As Goble notes in late James, the act of

[5] Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 21.

communication and its strategic avoidance "are experienced as effectively identical, as little more than different ways of doing the work involved in connecting one person to another."[6] Focusing on what is communicated through non-communication, Larsen imparts the Jamesian insight that in ambiguous encounters, the roundabout approach is actually a determinate form of expression—"the discovery that the most circuitous may be experienced as the most immediate"—and expands this contradiction not to deepen the moral complexities of social perception but to stay with the outcomes of living with under-articulated differences.[7] Ironically, the occlusion of non-normative thoughts draws more attention to these ineffable asymmetries.

This reversal feels especially specific to a modernist treatment of encounter, where indirection makes the issue of difference more immediate, and attempts to contain or clarify the source of discomfort shores up more hostility.[8] But on top of that, Larsen foregrounds something that James does not: the ways in which the noticing of difference automatically cues antagonistic feelings. In *Passing*, this is so partly because not having one's mind made up about her relation to a racial identity makes her an object of scrutiny (by the other characters and narratologically). For Larsen, this hostility coincides moreover with moments that magnify the lack of a reason for the unease besides the arbitrary trigger that tipped it off. With tact, one can check a bad mood with a better attitude, but as Larsen represents, discontent and its involuntary signs are not so easily stifled but rather waft through encounter. Because negative emotion is often blocked in the novel (anger, disappointment, fear cannot simply flow) it is expressed in a rerouted fashion in the narrative. Larsen's focus on relational noise sounds the presence of several conflicting truths, which, because they are non-absorbable, generate a negativity in the work that shapes its structure.

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[6] Goble, *Beautiful Circuits*, 37.
[7] Ibid, 39-40.
[8] As Goble notes, "James is never more modernist than when he discovers that the messages whose effects we feel mostly deeply are sometimes those that literally communicate the least" (33-4).

The "minor" variants of Clare's inconsiderateness, of which Irene subjectively believes *herself* to be the target inasmuch as she is the sole person who notices them, nourish Irene's indecision over whether to stay in or leave the friendship. One searches for an out from noticing things about others when the cycle has become relentless. This recursiveness is cemented into the form of the ambivalent friendship between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry around which *Passing* is organized. In portraying *this* indistinct, close-to-the-surface, unspoken feeling and diffusing it across an entire novel, Larsen aesthetically and critically renders the inner workings of social orders through mean difference.

Larsenian tact

The word "tact" itself appears in the novel in three other occasions of nascent conflict, each time indexing an ongoing subterfuge to de-escalate and delay the "revelation" of a *partially* articulated racial and class difference.[9] All instances turn on suppressed microsocial expression. When Irene encounters Clare passing at a luxe hotel restaurant—same as she—Irene wonders if it wouldn't "be more tactful to seem to forget to inquire how [Clare] had spent those twelve years" since they had seen each other (16). Irene has heard the rumors that after leaving her family and friends, Clare met her husband as a sex worker catering to wealthy whites. Here, tactfulness signifies not only a fake feeling of naïveté—which Clare catches and outs Irene using only her tone—it also holds Irene's awareness of her obfuscation, equally concealed: "A moment passed during which she was the prey

[9] In the first instance, Irene is disturbed by the "polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably" have her removed were it discovered that she is a black patron of the hotel's restaurant (11); the second is when Irene is dissimulating her curiosity around the source of Clare's material comforts and her relationship to her white husband, as I explicate (15-16); and in the third, Irene is offended that Clare apparently doubts her "good judgment and tact" in keeping Clare's secret (44). The throughline here is a character's deflection of a sordid interest in the baser origins of things: the province of another person's heritage, income, marriage, and the compass of their discretion. Conduct in the novel is repeatedly organized around consciousness of half-gained knowledge.

of uneasiness. *It had suddenly occurred to her* that she hadn't asked Clare anything about her own life and that she had *a very definite unwillingness* to do so. And *she was quite well aware* of the reason for that reluctance" (15-6; my italics). Note that the reader is not made privy to the reasons behind Irene's tact but rather bears witness to her maneuvers to spare Clare, and herself, the embarrassment of an explanation. Irene's tact, deployed to keep an enigmatic subtext hidden, serves to highlight a crucial aspect of this small custodial labor: tact's equivocalness, whereby in believing that "the kindest thing [is] not to ask" (16), Irene is simultaneously mitigating and masking feelings of discomfort. Larsen's elision of the motive behind Irene's tact—that Clare might have been a prostitute, and whether *that* is the subtext remains unclear—lets through another murkiness: that by "forgetting" to ask Clare about her life, Irene is controlling the degree to which she is in association with her, a calculation that lurks behind all their encounters in the novel.[10]

With tact, Larsen accomplishes an eclectic representation of a distinct social indirection: the *involuntary* sensing of difference as it is *immediately* masked from another. Tact strives for a state that passively remains in a place of unknowing that imparts an active desire to not know. In what follows I will exfoliate the connection between this type of indirection in the narrative—a willful ignorance—and the agons of noticing. As a microsocial device that practically grows out of the text, tact is a heuristic that operates on many levels: it is an affective attitude thematized in the story's action; a hermeneutic tool of investigation in high-stakes encounters of modest conversational

[10] Jennifer DeVere Brody argues that Clare is actually the one in control of this meeting. "[T]he dynamics of her movement symbolize this fact" as Clare "'commands'" Irene to sit, drinks tea Irene pours her, and listens to the information and gossip that Irene fills the silence with (1059). Modulating silence and speech is consistently connected to power exchange in the novel: later Clare will take control of a conversation when she *breaks* the silence (1061). Brody reads their clash as two "representatives of different ideologies locked in struggle for dominance" (1053), which helps explain how Clare's ability to control the micro-order of their encounters not only disturbs Irene's composure but also her sense of self. See "Clare Kendry's 'True' Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen's Passing," *Callaloo* 15, no. 4 (Autumn 1992): 1053-1065.

modes; and itself a kind of narrative micro-form where characters are navigating asymmetrical understandings of an encounter. That this indirection is connected to race, class, and sex is Larsen's signal contribution to the post-Flaubertian novel. We can already see its difference from Jamesian indirection: whereas in James, observation suspends the connection between attention and interpretation, in Larsen that suspension works to curtail and channel aggression.

Tact operates as a metonymic key for *Passing*: both the story of concealed race and Larsen's restrained style prop and are propped up by the channeling and curtailing of aggression required to portray *these* kinds of subterfuge. At one point in the text, the figure of an "on-looker"[11] is used to (1) portray the masked disturbance of Irene, Clare, and Gertrude as they endure Clare's husband's parlor-room racism (2) and hold together the literal/surface-level content and a figurative/submerged reality. Akin to James's device of the observer, the onlooker executes a modernist technique whereby a limited external, though initiated, perspective provides a contrasting vantage in order to move more *inward* to an indirect realm of encounter.

At the same time, the tactful concealment of antagonism makes narrative and style emerge in a distributed relation, resulting in irregular correspondences between a conversation's manifest and latent content. Larsen critic Octavio R. González refers to this as the work of Larsen's "minoritarian modernism": *Passing* mobilizes a modernist approach to social perception and psychology in order to foreground invisible realities of marginalized characters that require techniques of indirection to draw out. González notes that in Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, this is achieved through "stylistic restraint and surface-level civility" and the narrator's "cognitive privilege and social distance" from the main character in order to pass judgment but not definitively.[12] Building upon these readings, I

[11] "An on-looker, Irene reflected, would have thought it a most congenial tea-party, all smiles and jokes and hilarious laughter…" (29)
[12] Octavio R. González, *Misfit Modernism: Queer Forms of Double Exile in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), 87, 68.

suggest that microsocial activity in Larsen's sophomore work not only indexes the higher levels of situational disturbance with which non-white characters are saddled, but also foregrounds equivocal states that have no name. In turn, tact is a comportment which slows down the jump between the microsocial to the macro-concepts of an encounter. To this end, Larsenian tact encompasses the indirection of a person who grasps the structure of an encounter enough to know they're in the one-down position, while also sensing a general confusion over what's being concealed. Indeed, these considerations about the mediation between the micro and macro on the one hand, and the nature of an equivocal state on the other, are being worked out through the affect of tact itself. Reading for tact gives solidity to blurry, macro-phenomena. Here, tact functions as *investigative device or instrument*. Over the course of this chapter and explored more centrally in the next chapter, tact will take on another modality within aesthetic criticism: the problem of mediating between the micro-level of encounter and macro-concepts of inequality.

***Passing*'s displacement of race**

Larsen's usage of the word "tact" in Irene and Clare's encounter at the Drayton Hotel highlights an important construction within the novel: the ability to talk about something without actually talking about it; and thus to experience conflict without fighting. Without any mention of the word, the episode in Clare's apartment displays still another facet of Larsen's tact: *the narratological displacement of discourse about race and racism*. The orchestration of narrative and style to move race out of the picture largely hinges on the main protagonist, Irene Redfield. Through her cautious indirection, as Adrienne Brown and other Larsen scholars observe, we are able to "spend over a dozen paragraphs with Irene as she settles into her surroundings at the Drayton before race enters her

consciousness."[13] Irene's aversion to the emotional and discursive excesses of race, from the "race question" to news reports about lynching, likens her to a tradition of modernist opacity around sex that manifests narratologically in asexual characters. Bolstered by Irene's generalized avoidance of hyperbolics, we might say that not only is the plot of *Passing* constructed around the collective concealment of Clare's blackness from her husband, but the narrative is also vitalized by a pattern of marking-and-moving-on from overtly racial topics.

Such microsocial deferrals in the text have supported declarative readings of *Passing*'s thin political content throughout its reception history, particularly its departure from issues of social advancement faced by black Americans after *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Still, as Rafael Walker notes, a recent trend in *Passing* criticism has been "to establish that the novel is about much more than race."[14] We might say that the novel is intent on establishing this itself. Readers tend to center Clare in analyses of the novel's occluded representation of race, making her the linchpin of perception-based scenes constructed largely through surfaces, architectural settings, and the compositions of a racializing and sexualizing gaze.[15] Often read as prudish and priggish, I argue that Irene's tact bespeaks a critical element of Larsen's modernism that has gone under-theorized. Crucially, Irene's irresolution around race, and relatedly class, can be said to represent the novel's techne: the "suspension between an encounter and an understanding needed to give it meaning," to quote Kent Puckett on Anglophone novels' "bad form" of protracting characters' social mistakes for the purposes of plot and also of

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[13] Adrienne Brown, *Black Skyscraper: Architecture and the Perception of Race* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), 110.
[14] Rafael Walker, "Nella Larsen Reconsidered: The Trouble with Desire in 'Quicksand' and 'Passing,'" *MELUS* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 176.
[15] See Brown, *Black Skyscraper*; Hazel Carby, "The Quicksands of Representation: Rethinking Black Cultural Politics," in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 163-75; and Walker, "Nella Larsen Reconsidered." See also Anne Cheng's "Passing, Natural Selection, and Love's Failure: Ethics of Survival from Chang-rae Lee to Jacques Lacan," *American Literary History* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 553-74.

pointing them out in the first place.[16] To this point, I argue that the semi-concealment of this "suspension," and the unease it breeds, forges a *deeper kind of indirection* that is at work in the novel's examination of race. Ultimately, this indirection points out that amorphous zones in encounter are pregnant with meaning *because* they are replete with social differences, while marking them off as realms of the social we don't discuss. In knowing to put a frame around these zones, Larsen alerts us to how we know without saying what we know. At the same time, in drawing attention to the thresholds at which the "micro" is concatenated with the "macro," Larsen also highlights how designated blurry zones are necessary for macro-concepts to function. This is especially so in scenarios that lack a clear concept for what is being differentiated in the perceiving of difference.

Exemplifying this, the episode in Clare's apartment, and the novel as a whole, builds up from a basic uncertainty of which Irene is conscious: that she is pissed at Gertrude and can't explain why. This detached type of indirection also appears when after "hugging her unhappy don't-care feeling of rightness" (27) for the duration of the apartment episode, Irene inexplicably masks her rage when Gertrude expresses her consternation over Clare's predicament and John's racism. Irene tactfully replies: "'I was more than a little angry myself'" (32). And elsewhere, when, "for some obscure reason which she shied away from putting into words," Irene does not voice her resentment when Clare spends what seems like a lot of time with Irene's children and domestic employees (57). It also occurs when Irene is made "vaguely uncomfortable" by the "beseeching earnestness" of Clare's voice and face (59) and, unforgettably, Clare's florid way of expressing herself: "All those superlatives!" (53), to which Irene responds by "taking care to speak indifferently" (53). Given that Irene's aggression and restraint are pitched at the speech acts of one's utterances—*how* one talks about race, class, sex, but also the manner in which they make a request or discharge an opinion, and

[16] Kent Puckett, *Bad Form: Social Mistakes and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17.

what that says about them—Larsen's character *herself* gets caught on these microsocial widgets manufactured from identarian taxonomies and judgments that vex their appraisal.

Packaging up these moments as Irene's "unknowing" and repression and stopping at that, Larsen criticism has not aptly drawn out the microsocial poetics of such dynamic indirection—particularly the strategies of aggression, the qualia of intersubjective tension, and the many other agons that power Larsen's work. As I have been unfolding, the conjoined conditions of Larsen's tact are the microsocial sensing of differences in social standing—that they are *marginal* differences seems key to their explosiveness—and also Irene's (mis)understanding of her shrouded emotions, such as *why* she is bothered by poignant and pointed expression in comparison to other respectability-aiming, middle-class characters. If Irene's tiny attempts to block Clare's influence are forged in the foothold of a deeper relational issue—that she lets herself be controlled by Clare and does not know why—Larsen keeps count of every emotional blow, to the point where the *entire novel* can be reduced to chains of reactions to comments, comments on reactions. Meanwhile the reader is left wondering why *this* feeling acquires *that* figuration.

All this rotates on what is left unsaid. As I will now show, *Passing* is structured by difficult oppositions which it overtly cannot speak of. The episode at Clare's apartment provides yet another redolent example of the inchoate work of displacement that I am tracking. In this instance, the difficulty to manage emergent difference appears to prompt a reflexive move in the narrative which notes the absence of an explanatory mechanism that could absorb the tension. Following the discussion of miscegenated children, the conversation shifts to the topic of a mutual friend who converted to Judaism: "he was no longer a Negro or a Christian but had become a Jew…A black Jew, he calls himself." It is an ironic twist on the previous touchy subject: to go from children passing as white to a friend passing as Jewish (coded as white), Larsen subverts then reverses the notion that the process of switching races is only plausible through empirical observation. Aside

from that, the subtext of the conversation is that changing one's race or religion to be more proximate to whiteness is undertaken for mercenary ends. Unable to leave this suggestion alone,

> […] Irene, who was still hugging her unhappy don't-care feelings of rightness, broke in, saying bitingly: "It evidently doesn't occur to either you or Gertrude that he might possibly be sincere in changing his religion. Surely everyone doesn't do everything for gain."
>
> Clare Kendry had no need to search for the full meaning of that utterance. She reddened slightly and retorted seriously: "Yes, I admit that might be possible—his being sincere, I mean. It just didn't happen to occur to me, that's all. I'm surprised," and the seriousness changed to mockery, "that you should have expected it to. Or did you really?"
>
> "You don't, I'm sure, imagine that that is a question that I can answer," Irene told her. "Not here and now."
>
> Gertrude's face expressed complete bewilderment […] (27)

By this point, Clare and Irene are discussing Clare's passing entirely in code. The displacements within the exchange approach that of a passage by Henry James and the mounting, amorphous threat resembles a scene by Wyndham Lewis. Sensing the rising tension at her party, Clare "began to talk, steering carefully away from anything that might lead towards race or other thorny subjects. It was the most brilliant exhibition of conversational weight-lifting that Irene had ever seen. Her words swept over them in charming well-modulated streams. Her laughs tinkled and pealed. Her little stories sparkled" (27). Conscious of Clare's effort to move on, Irene is impressed despite herself: "For a while the illusion of general conversation was nearly perfect. Irene felt her resentment changing gradually to a silent, somewhat grudging admiration" (28).

Again we see Larsen's multifaceted production crystallized vis-à-vis tact. But here, Clare's tact makes a significant narratological departure when she attempts to distract from disagreement with historical event: "Clare talked on, her voice, her gestures, colouring all she said of wartime in France, of after-the-wartime in Germany, of the excitement at the time of the general strike in England, of dressmaker's openings in Paris, of the new gaiety of Budapest" (28). It is a rare allusion to the sedimented history of an interwar novel published in the Depression era. The performance is met with boredom: "But it couldn't last, this verbal feat. Gertrude shifted in her seat and fell to fidgeting with her fingers. Irene, bored at last by all this repetition of the selfsame things that she

had read all too often in papers, magazines, and books, set down her glass and collected her bag and handkerchief" (28). Objective, historical fact is literally consumed by the more pressing, unvoiced issues at hand. Indeed, these events come to look minor in relation to the tensions they are invoked to eclipse. Compactly summarized, war and striking fail to shift the developing emotional situation, which lacks such nominal clarity. By the end, the passage is stubbornly "still hugging [its] unhappy don't-care feeling of rightness" (27). If allegorizing a confrontation between the micro and the macro, the passage seems to land, unemphatically, on the side of the former. In this specific instance, historical context is not only too physically remote but also inert for diverting attention from the things not being shown. The conversation is a place where the acknowledgment of the power of these macro-level forces is still working; their relevance is acknowledged in historical and temporal terms but is not as reifying as it could be. What may appear as a passive reflection on more serious topics is actually a productive aesthetic that frames what isn't discussed and generates something else to see.

Could this deflective display also be read as a reformulation of the manifest vs. latent problem, spoken in a different accent, that evokes a more general misalignment found in modernist novels? This misalignment characterizes the novel form following Flaubert, in which the political and cultural meaning of a text is not easily prised from the work itself. Fredric Jameson notes this difficulty in terms of the modern novel's "gap between style and narrative…the two 'levels' of the narrative text begin to drift apart and acquire their own relative autonomy; in which the rhetorical and instrumental subordination of narrative language to narrative representation can no longer be taken for granted."[17] However, Jameson is reluctant to posit a historical disjunction out of the

[17] Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 7.

"unsatisfactory alternative between stylistics and narrative analysis, or in other words, between the micro- and the macro-level of cultural artifacts" in his close readings of Wyndham Lewis:

> Every serious practicing critic knows a secret which is less often publicly discussed, that there exists no ready-made corridor between the sealed chamber of stylistic investigation and that equally unventilated space in which the object of study is reconstituted as narrative structure. In practice, whatever the solution adopted, there is always an uncomfortable shifting of gears in the movement from one of these perspectives to the other: nor does the assertion of this or that "homology" between style and narrative do much more than to pronounce resolved in advance the dilemma for which it was supposed to provide a working answer.[18]

Jameson goes on to separate the micro-level of the sentence, its phenomenological "here-and-now of immediate perception or of local desire" as a stylistic monad which can be independently appreciated, from its existent opposition to the "large, abstract, mediate, and perhaps even empty and imaginary forms by which we seek to recontain" it. On the one hand, this approach prevents reduction of the specificity of the micro to some larger unity, but on the other requires insistence on a "negative element"—in the context of Wyndham Lewis, "an intolerable closure, an atmosphere of violence and destruction which the narratives articulate into a self-perpetuating sequence of rape, physical assault, aggressivity, guilt and immolation."[19]

No doubt the agonism in *Passing* does not come close to that of a work like *Tarr*. Conflict is so nuanced in Larsen that, technically, it does not even happen. What makes tact all the more central to my readings of Larsen is that issues around difference barely breach the surface of encounters. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that Larsen is on the same spectrum as Lewis for the agonism that subtends their novels. Interpersonal conflict arising from divergent understandings of a situation, which lacks clear guidelines in rapidly ascending modern capitalism, is not episodic but mediates a formal design. In *Passing* specifically, the relation between manifest and latent is ordered by

[18] Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*, 7.
[19] Ibid, 8.

judgments about difference that reside intangibly beyond speech but are somehow still part of the dialogue. The ineffable feelings that this generates require nonce aesthetic strategies to represent. And as the text teaches us, displacement is more akin to elision—a means for marking presence by saying nothing.

Relations of/to race in *Passing*

If the tact in and of *Passing* encodes an affect of boredom, unease, and even apathy towards external-oriented accounts of race, class, and gender, criticism evinces a parallel equivocalness in its attempts to classify the novel's representation of difference. Is this mirroring surprising? It is insofar as critics continue to discover new ways to rotate Larsen's aversiveness to racial treatment in order to theorize race. The interpretative difficulty mainly has to do with where to place race in the hierarchy of Larsen's aesthetic concerns. For Deborah E. McDowell, "[f]ocusing on racial identity or racial ambiguity and cultural history, the book invites the reader to place race at the center of any critical interpretation."[20] However, Claudia Tate avers that the "only time Irene is aware that race even remotely impinges on her world occurs when the impending exposure of Clare's racial identity threatens to hasten the disruption of Irene's domestic security. Race, therefore, is not the novel's foremost concern, but is merely a mechanism for setting the story in motion, sustaining the suspense, and bringing about the external circumstances for the story's conclusion."[21] With just two examples, specification is becoming slippery: race is peripheral to the point of pure form, but also so pervasive that it is the primary register of Irene's underlying—and need we be reminded, quite

[20] Deborah E. McDowell, introduction to *Quicksand and Passing* by Nella Larsen (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), xxiii.
[21] Claudia Tate, "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation," in *Passing: Norton Critical Edition*, 344.

material—anxiety about her livelihood. Rafael Walker's close reading chooses both and neither: "Larsen is underscoring the utter fiction of race. At the same time, however, she is demonstrating its predominant role in structuring relations. This problem is at the core of *Passing*, the engine of its tragedy."[22] Before the goal of defining the role of race in a work of modernist fiction, *Passing* requires us to lean harder on our aesthetic responses in order to justify the novel's "real" content over and above its subsidiary conceits. At the same time, attempts to confirm race through subjective judgment alone are continually subverted in the story—which perhaps begs the question *of us* why race need be the first port of call for studies on passing as a phenomenon of modernity. Inevitably in interpretation, race will be subordinated in order to highlight its relation to other structural categories.

In Judith Butler's essay on *Passing*, we find the question of subordinating race readdressed to the problem of power. According to Butler, previous psychoanalytic readings have treated sexuality as an "autonomous sphere of relations or disjunctions," not "articulated through or *as* other vectors of power," namely race. Butler asks if a reading of racial and sexual difference in *Passing* can "articulate the convergent modalities of power" and "not only through their convergence, but the sites at which the one cannot be constituted save through the other."[23] To read convergence would then require "something other than juxtaposing distinct spheres of power, subordination, agency, historicity, and something other than a list of attributes separated by those proverbial commas (gender, sexuality, race, class) *that usually mean we have not yet figured out how to think the relations we seek to mark*."[24] Butler's sentence performs an interesting loop: it first uses a list to elaborate "distinct

[22] Walker, "Nella Larsen Reconsidered," 177.
[23] Judith Butler, "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge," in *Bodies That Matter: The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 123.
[24] Ibid, my italics. Of course, this bespeaks the blurriness within our usages of "difference." As Mecca Jamilah Sullivan writes in *Poetics of Difference*: "On the one hand, 'difference' defines human subjectivity at the most basic level by disaggregating self from other; on the other hand, the

spheres of power," then exposes listing as a shorthand for hailing only the most predominant identity categories. Each is a carrier (or placeholder) for a deeply suggestive connotation, and at the same time is nothing but.

Butler's critique of enumeration appears to say that a laundry line of signifiers displays each term in its distinction but not in a programmed relation. Curiously, listing is a stylistic feature of Larsen's prose, invoked where Irene is figuring out the basis of *her* relation to Clare. Readers will be familiar with the epithets that Irene sticks onto Clare: "selfish, wilful, and disturbing" (52); "She was selfish, and cold, and hard. And yet she had, too, a strange capacity of transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes almost on theatrical heroics" (6). In lining up these marginally akin emotions, Larsen's narration enacts its character's indecisiveness. It does not get anywhere yet proceeds to pile it on:

> Sometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive. And there was about her an amazing soft malice, hidden well away until provoked. Then she was capable of scratching, and very effectively too. Or, driven to anger, she would fight with a ferocity and impetuousness that disregarded or forgot any danger; superior strength, numbers, or other unfavourable circumstances. (6)

The effect of singling out each attribute is to suggest the importance of the distinction, say, between "ferocity and impetuousness." But in the novel these small emotional pile-ups deepen Irene's psychological disturbance, which takes on a recursive form: "Irene felt, in turn, anger, scorn, and fear slide over her" (11); her "humiliation, resentment, and rage were mingled" (7). The list marks a lack of resolution when it comes to Clare: "she still remained someone apart, a little mysterious and strange, someone *to wonder about* and *to admire* and *to pity*" (58; my italics). This stylistic staccato exists

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illimitability of 'difference'—the vast and unending field of self/other constructions—is, arguably, the idea that most consistently vexes identity theorizing, a conceptual faultline that consistently results in hierarchical categorizations of identity and lists of social alterities that are inevitably incomplete." See *Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 28.

outside moments when an ideology of racial kinship proves to be insufficient ground. Irene's measuring out of her feelings has to do with determining how what is de jure becomes de facto, how these feelings add up to an idea of racial solidarity that is at once a "duty" (36) and a "barrier" (44).

Either way, the careful designations of Irene's feelings or their unmotivated tallying shows the micro-mechanism of the novel's fatigued and fatiguing search for some such attribution: "Endless searching had brought no answer to these questions. There was only an intense weariness from their shuttle-like procession in her brain" (45). This uncertainty leads Irene to do things for Clare "for which she had neither time nor any special desire" (23). Butler's brief, though polemical, staging of the problem decidedly raises a hermeneutic tension: spheres of power, which almost anyone can grasp are conjoined, remain abstractions insofar as whatever *a priori* meanings they hold for an encounter and/or relation is best apprehended *a posteriori*—and even then, their encoding is hard to parse (e.g. were they there all along?). Butler's point ultimately speaks to the hermeneutic-emotional difficulty of making relations out of race, class, sex, gender, etc. in uniquely cross-hatched entanglement. For their part, Butler's close reading takes on a "shuttle-like" motion; they re-multiply the differences at play by terming passing "vacillation"[25] and treat the convergence of race and sex as forms that can be neatly disarticulated.[26]

On the one hand, the interpretation of speech, facial expressions, and the many microsocial instantiations of difference demonstrates the limits of the interpreter's positivism. In other words, our rational attempts to give form to what is tacit and contingent can actually further dislocate the

[25] John Bellew's "speech vacillates between degradation and deification, but opens and closes on a note of degradation. The force of that vacillation illuminates, inflames Clare, but also works to extinguish her, to blow her out. Clare exploits Bellew's need to see only what he wants to see, working not so much the appearance of whiteness, but the vacillation between black and white as a kind of erotic lure. His final naming closes down that vacillation, but functions also as a fatal condemnation—or so it seems" (127).

[26] "…Clare is a fetish that holds in place both the rendering of Clare's blackness as an exotic source of excitation and the denial of her blackness altogether" (126)

production of difference. But on the other, it also highlights the sheer cognitive difficulty to *think* convergence, as Butler's reading denotes—to describe its processes in context and to then develop a reading of their practice as a form or pattern, in building towards a macro- or meso-level legibility. This catch understandably triggers some negativity—one can't simply bypass the provocation of Butler's proverbial commas comment—a hostility that collects too in *Passing* around "figuring out how to think the relations we seek to mark" as these elements dehisce in encounter. In the text this is dramatized by the reassembling inscrutability of Clare's face: "All indication of tears had gone from [Clare's] eyes and voice, and Irene Redfield, searching her face, had an offended feeling that behind what was now only an ivory mask lurked a scornful amusement" (17); and much later: "Clare's ivory face was what it always was, beautiful and caressing. Or maybe today a little masked. Unrevealing. Unaltered and undisturbed by any emotion within or without" (65).

The interpretative difficulty I am unfolding is not duly a reflection of a lack of imagination or conscientiousness on the part of Larsen's reader. Rather, I am suggesting *Passing* disarms attempts to *specify* race within co-present realms of power. In staying with this indeterminacy, Larsen provokes the following questions: if we could fathom these realms all at once, even with dexterous fluidity, would that be enough to ameliorate the workings of racism? Is the tactful approach to race a channeling of the desire to articulate race in relation to other categories of difference, while constantly also denying us the fulfillment of this wish?

These questions gain ground within a historical explanation for what Adrienne Brown describes as Larsen's "larger interest during this period in developing new tactics for capturing the tenor of contemporary lived racial experience," whereby the "*material* grounding of race and its *lived* experience turn out to be discrete phenomena."[27] The splitting up of "empirical certainty" about

[27] Brown, *Black Skyscraper,* 105, 118.

difference is Larsen's aesthetic response to changing notions of race in the 1920s, crystallized in popular mania around the Rhinelander case: that race can be verified through visual perception of bodily signs via close examination in controlled environments.[28] In *Passing* as in *Quicksand*, a main character's visceral experience of encounter is repeatedly unwound from her "empirical certainty." Irene's perceptions do not grant her confidence in her ability to "know" what is "actually" happening in an encounter with another person. Ultimately the decoupling of perception from race makes race in the novel "like a ghost—something immaterial yet present, intangible yet visceral, a phenomenon in excess of any physical body that may host it or any environmental context that could surround it" (118). Indeed, the blurriness of race in a face-to-encounter shows through in Irene's "extrarational orientation to race," for which we might say *tact is a modality*. It thereby becomes clearer how for Irene race is lived out as an ideological distinction between willfully passing (the "Clare Redfield" version that turns its back on Blackness) and passively passing (which lets one get into hotels and restaurants without hassle). This can explain why the word "tact" suddenly crops up in the text when Irene feels her entire being is attacked after Clare chooses to move their correspondences to a P.O. box, apparently calling into question Irene's discretion around keeping Clare's passing a secret.

[28] Brown, *Black Skyscraper*, 120. See Adrienne Brown's account of the Rhinelander trial (115-6). In short, a biracial woman is accused of misleading her white husband and subjected to a jury's examination of her half-naked body. It was determined that while her race would look indeterminately white in crowded, urban settings, in the judge's private quarters, she was indisputably mixed. Larsen overturns this newer conception of race that took hold of the popular imaginary, which presumes the stability of visible signs of difference over against traditional notions of race as biologically determined by blood. Instead, Larsen participates in what Brown calls the "fraying of racial certainty" (120) taking place in urban architectural landscapes for which the connection between material signs and situations of racial difference is set adrift from its empirical sensing.

In sociological terms, whereas a macro-level analysis might conceive of racial identity as a generalization that nullifies particulars in order to read persons in terms of a category,[29] in Larsen's poetics, the faults of someone passing is comparable to the spectacle one makes of herself by not speaking up in conversation**.** This could be handled as evidence for the extents to which Larsen's treatment of difference has abated, or "de-dramatized" to borrow Lauren Berlant's term, through its microsocial investigations. But foregrounding *tact* as a behavioral attunement to race where it is not grounded in a concept, and also as a form of narrative discourse, allows us to observe the cases in which race is executed by relational dynamics that can appear politically vacuous, for instance presumptuousness, reservedness, assertiveness, etc. To center on tact as an equivocation is to also see when it starts having effectivity on multiple levels, much like race itself.

There is another piece to the puzzle to the novel's suspension of race: gender. We might venture that because consequential considerations about behavior float in the background for, it appears, solely the female characters, who go through great lengths to *keep* them there so to achieve homeostasis in their marriages, friendships, and social affairs, the sensing of difference comes down to a low-simmering tension, a thinly concealed tact. Therefore, in order to capture racial perception "as an extrasensory phenomenon" in a novel intent on helping readers "to grasp not only aesthetic subtlety but also the changing rhythms of modern life increasingly rooted in *the ephemeral unsaid* over elusive empirical certainty," it makes sense that Larsen turns to tact's microsocial domains.[30]

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[29] In his tract against treating nuance as a brand of theoretical sophistication, sociologist Kieran Healy calls abstraction "a way of thinking where 'new ideas or conceptions are formed by considering several objects or ideas omitting the features that distinguish them.' Abstraction means throwing away detail, getting rid of particulars. We begin with a variety of different things or events—objects, people, countries—and by ignoring how they differ, we produce some abstract concept like "furniture," "honor killing," "social-democratic welfare state," or "white privilege." This sort of abstraction is part of the guts of social theory." See "Fuck Nuance," *Sociological Theory* 35, no. 2 (June 2017): 121.

[30] Brown, *Black Skyscraper,* 118, 105; my italics.

Furthermore, I want to suggest that the lens of microsocial encounter can help us populate what Brown terms the "ephemeral unsaid," which I take to compass the tacit dimensions of racial experience depicted through Larsen's experimental approach to textualizing the non- and un-verbalized. As I have been elaborating, the "extrasensory phenomenon"[31] of racial encounter participates in individuals' silent understanding of micro-order constructed through interaction. Read in this light, Irene's lists are a tactic for figuring out social order *without* processing the material bases of difference.

Interlude: structures of female homosociality

The curious thing is that women written by Larsen tend to avoid accepting designations of power. Something about being recognized as a carrier of social cachet provokes behavior that deflects such attributions. This could provide one explanation as to why Irene's inner discourse sounds defiant while her behavior among others is hesitant and reserved. We see this "twist" too when Irene is confused that Clare "wasn't, however, in spite of her poise and air of worldliness, the ideal dinner-party guest. Beyond the aesthetic pleasure one got from watching her, she contributed little, sitting for the most part silence, an odd dreaming look in her hypnotic eyes" (57). This confusion is created by Irene's own ruminations on microexpressions—her tendency to search for motive in what is sensuous—but it also registers the instability of characters' supposed upper-hand. Simultaneously, it is as Gabrielle McIntire writes that, in a larger sense, "race is prone to the endless convolutions of semiotics, register, prejudice, and interpretation. Larsen shows us that what we think we know and

[31] Brown, *Black Skyscraper,* 118.

can name about alterity we can only just begin to grasp. Race, as such, is an especially elusive signifier, always already displacing both the effects of naming and of corporeality itself."[32]

Although the point that race is co-constitutive of other identity categories is relatively straightforward (even while its presentations are not), what makes race "especially elusive" in this novel are the capsizing logics of homosocial aggression. It is precisely when comparisons are drawn and experiences are presumed to be shared that the involutions of power go into overdrive (and simultaneously become the least detectible in encounter—but of course this gets pushed to the narrative's surface by Larsen). Conjoined with Larsen's aesthetically novel approach to race, might *Passing* also be read as the discovery of deft means of channeling frustrations with and among women? Is the novel not itself an ingenuous display of the many ways one can insult the other behind her back? This idea takes on fuller meaning if it were to account for Larsen's microsocial poetics: wherein words are taken out of context and fears drag on; where figurative meaning needs no further discussion; symbolic connotation is deadly serious; and observation is displaced by its rhetorical outcomes. This creates slippages between manifest and latent material, and the outsize attention to stylistic presentation occurs at the expense of narrative closure. The fixture of the "ephemeral unsaid" refers to the uncanny ability to perceive how identity becomes "marked" in encounter and also the hostility that arises among the women when absent or quasi-relations become reified in these terms. At the same time, here it takes an unjustifiable amount of emotional energy to keep things underground for the sake of continuing a relationship neither woman seems to want or benefit from. This stands to reason given the novel's apparent partiality to the affordances of female aggression for fomenting artistic ambiguity: "Impossible for her to put it immediately into

[32] Gabrielle McIntire, "Toward a Narratology of Passing: Epistemology, Race, and Misrecognition in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," *Callaloo* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 779.

words or give it outline, for, prompted by some impulse of self-protection, she recoiled from exact expression" (63).[33]

In short, what ironically allows for greater latitude in Larsen's jointly aesthetic and sociological venture are tactfully repressed moments of tension between women. Why all this becomes correlated to *tact* requires us to consider how the unsaid becomes an agon of conversation at the turn of the twentieth century. First of all, tact turns on the shame management that makes passing possible. The ambiguities of noticing are steeped in forms of addressing race in polite conversation in modern encounters around difference. The accusation of non-white ancestry in a person hoping to rent an apartment or interview for a job would sometimes preclude the observer from asking.[34] Tact had become a more general tool of indirection in Northern cities for probing at someone from a distance, all the while masking too-interested attention. This results in a strangely tight-lined procedure for *not* securing conclusive meaning.

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[33] To return one final time to Butler's reading, "[t]o specify this convergence" between racial and sexual difference, they find recourse in the unsaid. The work of withholding is channeled through the novel's usage of the word "queering," which no doubt draws up tact: "queering is linked to the eruption of anger into speech such that speech is stifled and broken, and then to the scene in which Clare and Irene first exchange their glances, a reciprocal seeing that verges on threatening absorption. Conversations in *Passing* appear to constitute the painful, if not repressive, surface of social relations. It is what Clare withholds in conversation that permits her to "pass"; and when Irene's conversation falters, the narrator refers to the sudden gap in the surface of language as "queer" or as "queering."…queering is what upsets and exposes passing; it is the act by which the racially and sexually expressive surface of conversation is exploded, by rage, by sexuality, by the insistence on color." "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge," 130-31.

[34] See Louis Fremont Baldwin, "Detection Difficult," in *Passing*: "the uncomfortable uncertainty which the accuser feels, when he decides to launch his accusation against the suspected…how extremely delicate a matter it is even to entertain a suspicion along these lines, which if expressed and unfounded, would prove lamentably regrettable on the one hand and offensive to the point of insulting on the other" (116). Baldwin notes the practice of passing, once used to escape physical bondage, functions in 1920s urban centers "to effect an escape from an industrial, commercial, political and social bondage" (115). The threat of distinguishing oneself racially arose through subtle cues that gave someone away and/or qualified as the overstepping of legal boundaries.

The signal problems of modernity expressed in a retreat from the directness of encounter coincides with the laxity of being in relation: the loosened codes of starting and maintaining contact across modern situations. With this in mind, we can receive Irene's hatred of Clare's racist husband and also the following thought: "He was, it was plain, doing his best to be agreeable to these old friends of Clare's. Irene had to concede that under other conditions she might have liked him" (31). Under a specifically negative valence of handling others, tact represents the signal problems of modernity where individuals must navigate their symbolic relations to others at cross-purposes.

Once a fallback for social freefall, the fate of tact in what Theodor Adorno calls its "precise historical hour" of modern, Western capitalist society evokes the microsociology of the modernist narrator.[35] Possessed with sophisticated means to ascertain life's inner movements, the "distance between narration and focalization" makes the narrator's understanding provisional.[36] Next I examine the historical conditions of Larsen's tact and draw out its aesthetics with the indirection of Henry James. I compare Larsen to James not only because their work turns on secrets that must be "tactfully *reconcealed*" by women, as Sianne Ngai notes of James's observers, but as two novelists who write from inside encounter.[37] Indeed, their obliqueness is produced by a narration that remains at this level, looking out from within, despite making inroads in representing ephemeral gesture and integrating the search for understanding into the diegesis. Furthermore, James's fixation on and aversion to hyper-attention to the microsocial could help explain why negativity bred from incisive understandings of social order requires subterfuge. Taken together, tact in Larsen and James has to do with social perception that looks at someone or something askance in order to disambiguate. After bringing Adorno's notion of tact into a homosocial framework, I will fold James into a

[35] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 39.
[36] González, *Misfit Modernism*, 66.
[37] Sianne Ngai, "Henry James's 'Same Secret Principle,'" *The Henry James Review* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 48.

Larsenian paradigm of indirection in order to then tease apart in Larsen the aesthetic-symbolic workings of female aggression.

The historical turn of tact

> "Irene made a little mental shrug…And gradually there rose in Irene a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar. She laughed softly, but her eyes flashed." (10-11)

Over the course of the nineteenth century into the twentieth, tact acquires an element of aggression that appears in tandem with the dispersal of social connection under modern capitalism. Once limited to the realms of music and touch, the modern concept of tact comes to refer in the early nineteenth century to the sense, skill, or judgment of handling difficult social situations without the fullness of contact. As David Russell explains in his book on tact, what once signaled an aesthetic value in the upper class for discriminately dealing with others was adopted as a "democratic social practice for uncertain times."[38] Information on tact as concept and style proliferated in nineteenth-century writing on British educational reform, art, psychoanalysis, and most synthetically in the Victorian essay with a "renewed insistence on mediation, considered not as technology but as a quality of attention: on the qualities and distributions of spaces and experiences *between* people, rather than focusing on identarian knowledge about the constitution of individual subjects."[39] This move towards an open-ended pluralism was epitomized in "the small, tactful moments of handling" relation for "claims and assumptions from which to demand new relationships in a shared world."[40]

[38] David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 6.
[39] Ibid, 3.
[40] Ibid.

Tact becomes an ideal technology of capitalist social order in the twentieth century. Coinciding with the loosening of social divisions and strict morals defining conduct, tact shifts as a means of handling others not set by paradigmatic differences to figuring out how to adjust one's behavior. Tact corresponds to the aporia of touch, as Jacques Derrida puts it, "in the sense of knowing how to touch *without* touching, without touching *too much,* where touching is already too much…By essence, structure, and situation, the endurance of a limit as such consists in touching *without* touching the outline of a limit."[41] It also represents the anomie of life in competitive, industrializing societies apathetic to what happens to others yet is also embroiled in the personal details of close interactions. This opposition underlies the "reflexivity of modernity," which as defined by sociologist Anthony Giddens, is a "consistent—and, as Erving Goffman above all has shown us, never-to-be-relaxed-monitoring of behaviour and its contexts [which is not] specifically connected with modernity, although it is the necessary basis of it." In a culture marked by the perpetual scrutiny of daily life "reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character,"[42] it becomes clear why, as modernist critic Hannah Freed-Thall argues, "hypersensitivity to nuance," emerged "as a twentieth-century aesthetic and critical attitude: one marked by a heightened attentiveness to material variability and vibrancy, to slight modulations of position, to distinctions so minute as to be nearly indiscernible…Such attentiveness offers a quiet, evasive mode of resistance to routinized ways of viewing and ordering the world."[43] Robert Pippin notes that in Henry James's fiction, "all the major characters are walking

[41] Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 67.
[42] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 37, 38.
[43] Hannah Freed-Thall, *Spoiled Distinctions: Aesthetics and the Ordinary in French Modernism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 67.

a high wire with lots of normative turbulence but without any safety net, dependent wholly on each other and their own talk and negotiations and perceptions for balance."[44]

The covered-up noting of difference around difference expresses tact's turn to aggression. Female homosociality is where the attitude of ambivalence (Simmel) and the high-wire balancing act of depending on others (Pippin) are ratcheted up as women are thrown into niches of comparison and competition exacerbated by problems posed by their relationships to one another. What functioned as a "provisional and stylistic response to persons and things rather than a predefined method for interaction or an insistence on full knowledge" matured over capitalism's development and infiltration into everyday encounter as the equivocalness of others' behaviors without clear standards of understanding.[45]

For Theodor Adorno, tact indexes the loss of structuring principles (the absolutism of convention and class divisions) but not "that of competition" which "far from being overcome, has passed from the objectivity of the social process into the composition of its colliding and jostling atoms, and therewith as if into anthropology."[46] If originally tact is "the saving accommodation between alienated human beings" in nascent industrialism, its fate in state capitalism "makes existence still more unbearable, is merely a further indication of how impossible it has become for people to co-exist under present conditions."[47] Here, the "discrimination of differences" that "consists in conscious deviations" that attend to the specificity of the other person turns into its reverse: such that the "question as to someone's health, no longer required and expected by upbringing, becomes inquisitive and injurious, silence on sensitive subjects empty indifference, as

[44] Robert Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 35.
[45] Russell, *Tact*, 54.
[46] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 30.
[47] Adorno, "On the dialectic of tact," in *Minima Moralia*, 41.

soon as there is no rule to indicate what is and what is not to be discussed."[48] It then makes more sense that Irene is "unable to think of a single question" to ask Clare about passing "that in its context or its phrasing was not too frankly curious, if not actually impertinent" (17-8); yet not asking "would seem queer and rude" (16). Adorno unfolds what appears to be behind Irene's tactful wariness of overstepping:

> mere lying. Its true principle in the individual today is what it earnestly keeps silent, *the actual and still more the potential power embodied by each person*. Beneath the demand that the individual be confronted as such, without preamble, absolutely as befits him, lies a covetous eagerness to 'place' him and his chances, through *the tacit admissions contained in each of his words*, in the ever more rigid hierarchy that encompasses everyone.[49]

Adorno's analytic of tact spells out new features of Irene's microsocial behavior. In treating Clare "as an equal," Irene is at once denying the difference between them, a withheld knowledge that reveals itself in blips. Invariably, Clare catches these self-revelations: "she gave Irene a curious little sidelong glance and a sly, ironical smile peeped out on her full red lips, as if she had been in the secret of the other's thoughts and was mocking her" (16). Knowing what the other is thinking becomes a threat, given Irene's recurring anxiety that Clare sees through Irene's efforts to dissimulate. Here, tact's "pseudo-democratic" approach can no longer control for its most nefarious byproducts: that "individuals begin, not without reason, to react antagonistically to tact: a certain kind of politeness, for example, gives them less the feeling of being addressed as human beings, than an inkling of their inhuman conditions, and the polite run the risk of seeming impolite by continuing to exercise politeness, as a superseded privilege."[50]

That tact as aggressive stance can overlap almost completely with tact as restraint is obviously an empirical problem with ethical costs.[51] As Adorno observes, because tact "overlooks"

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[48] Adorno, "On the dialectic of tact," in *Minima Moralia*, 40.
[49] Ibid, my italics.
[50] Ibid, 40.
[51] Thank you to Nan Z. Da.

individuating differences, rather than mitigate disparity it inadvertently corroborates how power is immanent to all encounter, especially those that have become caught up in their own micro-interactional rhythms. Therefore it is the smallest abrasions that convey most *immediately* "a life of direction domination" (40).[52] If optimism tells us that all which is externally heteronomous and harmful recedes once we deal with the specificity of the human before us, Adorno highlights that encounter can still be organized around the "subjective reconstruction of objectively binding ideas."[53] *Passing* fixes its attention on this phenomenon within female relationships. In Larsen, homosocial tact evokes an Adornian idea that, if not racial ties, middle-class gender roles, or childhood origins, the friendship of Irene and Clare is held together by the pressure of holding it together.[54] The introspective awareness that one is performing scripts which don't suit a situation creates more uncertainty and tension. Add to this the women's mutually concealed insecurity over her economic and family issues, which feeds her hostility towards her friend who is experiencing her version of these tribulations.

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[52] For Adorno, tact is indoctrinated by a capitalist social order which deems that all social exchange be seamless and depends on the covered-up absence of "total contact" (45). In Adorno's analysis, it is unclear how tact contributes to the unbearable feeling of living under such conditions: does tact enable aggression to be openly ignored or does it enable aggression's liberated expression in concentrated micro-forms? Ultimately, tact reveals the aspiration for total transparency in a social order—an understanding of everyone's placement and role—and so "behind the seeming clarification and transparency of human relations that no longer admit anything undefined, naked brutality is ushered in" (45). Tact's penchant for facilitating transparency in these terms is linked to a utilitarian resistance to disturbances of unhesitating action, which are controlled for even in the anti-tinkering technology of modern doors (43-4). The aggressiveness of tact is therefore another symptom of the "sickness of contact" which does not admit arbitrariness into relation and seeks to eliminate ambiguity. The urge to specify the practical orders of life sacrifices tenderness which needs no purpose. For an explication of the countering force of delay as one of Adorno's means of critique, see Jakob Norberg, "Adorno's Advice: *Minima Moralia* and the Critique of Liberalism," *PMLA* 126, no. 2 (March 2011): 398-411.

[53] Adorno, "On the dialectic of tact," *Minima Moralia*, 39.

[54] "Just as nowdays house-walls are cast in one piece, so the mortar between people is replaced by the pressure holding them together." Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 45.

Might tact's "paradoxical interchange"[55] be also reflected in the novel's unsettling of racial assumptions and the rigidness of an aesthetic form, which as Gabrielle McIntire, notes, "creat[es] an impressively tight formal structure that labors to generate and maintain confusion"?[56] Larsen resembles Henry James most in this way: tensile indirection around meaning and a strong commitment to novelistic form.

In the rest of the chapter, I argue that hiding competing views (unsuccessfully) charges up the indirection of Nella Larsen, just as it draws her aesthetics of homosocial aggression into fruitful comparison with the tact of Henry James. If a reader were to make the objection, as many have, that James's novels do not confront issues related to class or race, as it turns out, neither do Nella Larsen's. However, as I have been contending, their works respectively inaugurate a relational mode of indirection that makes something about what it isn't—where to focus on a provocative comment is definitely not to engage in a debate about race, and nevertheless this is precisely part of what it is to experience race (and gender and class). The James comparison will allow me to solidify first the symbolic nature of such comments and second their productive capacities to shift the emotional and aesthetic field of gravity. Remarkably, these easily dismissed shifts—which appear so not only because they're brokered by women but because they are so confoundingly spontaneous—enable relationships to keep ensuing *throughout* negativity, disingenuousness, and self-degradation. Finally, the comparison of James to Larsen reveals that both authors' rejection of a notion of difference deterritorialized from face-to-face interaction happens through confrontations that exceed clear lines

[55] Adorno, "On the dialectic of tact," in *Minima Moralia*, 39. Adorno notes that the "paradoxical interchange between absolutism and liberality" found in Goethe, Beethoven, and Kant's "subjective reconstruction of objectively binding ideas" is "eminently tactful" (39). One also finds this interchange between order and freedom in Lukacs's theory of the novel, which he writes is strung together with "tact."

[56] McIntire, "Toward a Narratology of Passing: Epistemology, Race, and Misrecognition in Nella Larsen's *Passing,*" 779.

of division. More broadly, their focus on loaded encounters between women provides renewed insight into the inner workings of power in the mundane.

Jamesian tact

> "Where was one's pride and one's passion when the real way to judge of one's luck was by making not the wrong, but the right, comparison?"
> — Henry James, *In the Cage*[57]

One illustration of the agons of indirection in *Passing* is the counter-intuitive effect of Irene's lists, whereby naming her feelings, Irene grows more confused about her relationship with Clare. This enigma is connected to another, which further prompts the women to scrutinize their relation—the "strange whirligig," to borrow a term from James, whereby Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry end up in similar class positions despite their different uses of passing.[58] The microsocial poetics of these ambiguities is explored by a "writer who chose to escape the American racial climate in order to depict trite melodramas about egocentric black women passing for white."[59] *This* inflection to the convergence of race, gender, and class tends to be evaded in minoritarian readings of Larsen. I want to suggest that one doesn't exclude the other; the triteness is important for Larsen's novelistic representation of certain configurations of difference in the early twentieth century.

Indeed, it is precisely the novel of manner's tact around social issues that demands this sort of exploration. The close-up examination of the interaction of self and other vis-à-vis subtleties of verbal expression, gesture, and feeling undergoes a notable shift from Jane Austen and George Eliot. In the nineteenth-century novel following Flaubert, the prevailing purpose of super-subtle sensing

[57] Henry James, *In the Cage*, in *Tales of Henry James: Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Christof Wegelin and Henry B. Wonham (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003), 298. Further citations inside the text.
[58] Ibid, 235.
[59] Tate, "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation," 350.

served to connote a character's class bracket and their position in wider network of interrelationships, couched in notions of morality and salvation of the will. But in the modernist novel, not only does the representation of social category become more encoded, but relatedly, the intensification in rendering the indirectness of interaction goes hand in hand with the overabundance of stylistic detail at the expense of plot and clear narrative structure.[60]

The most apparent shift in the novel's microsocial focus is the divergence of encounter to a concealed realm, amply present but impenetrable. Microsocial description takes on a subterranean dimension of encounter populated with contingent elements: perception, feeling, thought, directed at infusing atmosphere into scene. According to Jameson, for certain novelists the narratological form of the "subconversation" becomes the stock content of the modern text, where "the apparent surface conversation is no longer the real one; in which, beneath the routine and insignificant, contingent exchange of spoken words, there comes into view some more fundamental human contact, some deeper wordless groping struggle or interaction."[61] When description is no longer focused on situating character in a larger network, but rather shows him riven to a gnashing relationship, microsocial exchange "is foregrounded beyond any casual link."[62] The unstable distinction between the literal and manifest content of the novel we noted earlier supports the ascendance of the subconversation, a forming part of the virtual reality of encounter.

With Jameson's help, we can ponder further how Larsen's aesthetic language of tact channels its aggressions around implicitness. For the majority of the novel, excluding its very end,

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[60] In *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*, Jennifer L. Fleissner makes the point that the naturalist novel's ever-expanding collection of the tiniest details of its heroines' daily adventures organized both the comprehensive vision of history and that vision's breakdown. This also gives way to "the modernist truism that *any* woman's story, if examined closely enough, could be seen as made up of multiple everyday crises, lacking fixed resolutions, that might themselves provide material for an entire novel." (Chicago and London: University of Press, 2004), 25.
[61] Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*, 40.
[62] Ibid, 47.

the revelation of Blackness (to which white characters are oblivious or apathetic) falls second in line to the emotional management of how identity is revealed. The aesthetic correlate is an episode such as Clare's apartment, where the embedded narrative of Irene's feelings weaves through the dialogue, producing "a kind of 'double articulation' or surcharged text—a text and commentary structure within the text itself."[63] The subterfuge this generates is fueled by a character's counter-positioning to coercive conversations that force speakers into corners. We might even say that their defensive gestures *increase* the perception of coerciveness. In sociological terms, the simultaneity of these dimensions in face-to-face interaction is executed through, in Goffman's terms, a "double stance—the individual's task actions unrebelliously adhere to the official definition of the situation, while gestural activity that can be sustained simultaneously and yet noninterferingly shows that he has not agreed to having all of himself defined by what is officially in progress."[64] Both Larsen and James mine this double stance for its narrative and stylistic possibilities, this tiny void, both ephemeral and recalcitrant, created when a person imperceptibly breaks off from an encounter. For Goffman, this departure is laden with tension: "when this suppression, this *effortful non-perception* occurs, a new distractive element has been added to the context of the encounter, increasing the amount of attended-to-material that must be treated as if not attended, and hence, by definition, increasing the tension level."[65] If tact relates to narrative indirection because both introduce additional material that cannot be unpacked within the constraints of the moment, this then raises the question: why does more hidden information equal more tension, and for whom? Only, it would appear, for the social actant concerned that her deviation will be disruptive to others (while ruefully registering that no

[63] Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*, 41.
[64] Erving Goffman, "Role Distance," in *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2013), 133.
[65] Erving Goffman, "Fun in Games," in *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2013), 56; my italics.

one notices it but herself). Ultimately, this individual would not want to be discovered in such a contrivance.

With respect to the modern novel, Jameson notes that while "the novelist can simply *explain* the deeper significance of the insignificant words and gestures of his characters…The originality of Henry James was indeed to have projected this analytic capacity back into his characters themselves, who thus become virtual specialists in text grammar or speech act theory, their reflexions constating a veritable *metalanguage* with respect to the conversational raw material on which they work."[66] The inevitable result is that the meaning of action appears more provisional because it is susceptible to the "minute and microscopic negotiation with the shock and scandal of the Other."[67] Narrative thereby becomes dependent on encounter to an extreme degree; its events acquire a narrow focus on "painful, fitful and undesirable contacts with one another; and this structure reaches down into the most minimal encounters of a space and time as packed as an egg."[68]

As my previous chapter argued, the constricted appearance of the Jamesian observer is conditioned by its function to notice affects and microexpressions without further designation. The indeterminate affect of James's narratives corresponds to its strategy to mask the controlling hand of the author. Jamesian indirection elicits a feature of tact—one must be tactful tactfully—just as it issues into the story an awkward, overextended formal device to keep its author's presence veiled just *enough*, registering, as Jennifer Fleissner notes, that "for him, the point was less to abandon all boundedness in favor of social immersion than for both to be given their due."[69] We find another mode of James's tact in his prefaces. James's writing style here consistently strives to balance under-

[66] Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*, 63.
[67] Fredric Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 225.
[68] Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*, 47.
[69] Fleissner, *Maladies of the Will*, 226-7.

statement with surges of feeling. This is illustrated in James's rather erratic pronouncement on his practice of indirection:

> The manner of the thing may thus illustrate the author's incorrigible taste for gradations and superpositions of effect; his love, when it is a question of a picture, of anything that makes for proportion and perspective, that contributes to a view of ALL the dimensions. Addicted to seeing "through"—one thing through another, accordingly, and still other things through THAT—he takes, too greedily perhaps, on any errand, as many things as possible by the way. It is after this fashion that he incurs the stigma of labouring uncannily for a certain fulness of truth—truth diffused, distributed and, as it were, atmospheric.[70]

James's hard-to-place tone gives the impression of the forced cheeriness of a person trying to block the reader's view of his work and yet *wanting* to seem visibly overstretched in its endeavors.

A proxy figure for its author, the nameless telegraphist of *In the Cage* enacts this invisible yet detectible hard work. Because her job requires her to remain inconspicuous, she hides her flair for social observation. This is figured into the opening lines of the story: "It occurred to her early that in her position—that of a young person spending, in framed and wired confinement, the life of a guinea-pig or a magpie—she should know a great many persons without their recognising the acquaintance" (229). Confronted with the curious exposure and invisibility of her work transmitting messages for others, the telegraphist is shown here viewing herself in the "cage" from her patrons' vantage, while registering the anonymity that leaves her unidentifiable. "It was at once one of her most cherished complaints and most secret supports that people didn't understand her" (232). Of course, what the telegraphist wants most is to be noticed for her savvy for *not* noticing and that this be recognized by the right person.

Unfortunately for the telegraphist, that discerning person is not the male characters of the novel (Captain Everard and her fiancé Mr. Mudge), but a certain Mrs. Jordan, the only person in a position to appreciate the girl's gifts. Their relationship enacts, in minute form, James's procedure

[70] Henry James, "Preface to *What Maisie Knew*, *The Pupil*, and *In the Cage*," in *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. R.P. Blackmur (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 153-4.

for seeing one thing through another thing as a means to approximate a fuller truth. However, conscious of this, the girl's tact is nowhere more combative than in her conversations with Mrs. Jordan, who, like the telegraphist, has fallen on hard times. Mrs. Jordan improvises a gig economy by decorating wealthy people's homes. The nature of their simple transactional work is suffused with intrigue in their conversations, as one tries to one-up the other through ever-increasing mystification. These "skirmishes," as James calls them, turn on the women's tact as each demonstrates her proximity to her rich clientele with aptly placed suggestions while obfuscating her precarious financial position from the other. Their conversations revolve on keeping this hidden from the other; however their similar state of want makes them aware of the other's performance.

The narrative works to keep this interpersonal realm obscure. Even Mrs. Jordan's introduction into the story is placed in an unclear relation to the telegraphist:

> The girl was *blasée;* nothing could belong more, as she perfectly knew, to the intense publicity of her profession; but she had a whimsical mind and wonderful nerves; she was subject, in short, to sudden flickers of antipathy and sympathy, red gleams in the grey, fitful needs to notice and to "care," odd caprices of curiosity. She had a friend who had invented a new career for women—that of being in and out of people's houses to look after the flowers. (James 231)

The parataxis of the last sentence establishes the ambiguous relationship between the girl and Mrs. Jordan, as if Mrs. Jordan's savvy serves as a proxy for the girl's ingenuity just described. The parataxis also suggests their ambiguous *purpose* in each other's life—what need this frenemy fulfills—which is reflected and heightened in the affective instability of their conversations as well as the lack of clarity around their relative position in the social hierarchy. It is the tact that goes into managing how to respond to a provocation or how to dissimulate an unpleasant awareness that elevates these mundane interactions to a plane of analysis.

In critical analysis, the ambiguous romance between the telegraphist and Captain Everard is the story's center point, but it is worth considering whether the dialogues with Mrs. Jordan are its

true driving force. What if the libidinal drive of the main plot with Everard were found here, in the charged polemics between the two women?

Robert Pippin points out that in James's late novels, characters continually realize that the stable meaning for which they turn to others is what sets relations adrift. As Pippin notes, the attempt to openly tackle this paradox of interdependence breeds in James's words "crudities of mutual resistance" between people. For their part, the telegraphist and Mrs. Jordan recognize that they need the other to appreciate her distinct combination of traits. However it is unclear whether this acknowledgment is ever verbalized:

> It had taken some little time (after their having parted company in the tempest of their troubles and then, in the glimmering dawn, finally sighted each other again) for each to admit that the other was, in her private circle, her only equal; but the admission came, when it did come, with an honest groan; and since equality *was* named, each found much personal profit in exaggerating the other's original grandeur. (James 242)

We see the logic of resistance that marks each step of awareness: first to see, then admit, and finally to *use* the other's distinction to enhance one's own. Tact assists this realization just as it absorbs it. The two women are sensitive readers of the wealthy and the social transactions that grease the earning of capital; their acuity is what makes them good at their job and draws them to one another. This insightfulness is used to simultaneously impress and belittle the other, and it is in part the complicated motives of these microaggressions that make the subtexts of their conversations difficult to ascertain. At the end of *In the Cage*, when Mrs. Jordan confesses that a last-minute marriage proposal saved her from destitution, the story's nameless telegraphist "pressed her friend—she had tact enough for that—with no other personal question, brought on no need of further revelations, only just continued to hold and comfort her and to acknowledge by stiff little forbearances the common element in their fate" (James 298). Here, tact operates as a means for preserving a relation where no greater measure feels possible.

Here we see James's art of indirection calibrated to render the symbolic-discursive operations of homosocial competition. What joins Larsen to James is their elaboration of conflict in the course of non-fighting, which usually rotates on the management of some un-gratifying social insight. In James's novella bookended by dyspeptic female encounter, this version of tact tends to disavow drawing attention to what is tacitly known. Therefore, the aggressive energy released by, say, an unsavory comment is rerouted via ellipsis. Consider this subtle usage of tactful indirection: during one colloquy, the telegraphist archly asks that, in response to Mrs. Jordan's apparent taking over of the homes she decorates, "if she circulated only in a sort of tropical solitude, with the upper servants for picturesque natives" (James 231). Smarting at the comparison to a craven imperialist, "having to assent to this glance at her limitations," Mrs. Jordan replies that her friend is not imaginative enough to recognize that her work has the capacity to go gangbusters. The dialogue remarkably ends there, but only because the discourse is sent into suppressed rage:

> Our young lady had not taken up the charge, had dealt with it good-humouredly, just because she knew so well what to think of it. It was at once one of her most cherished complaints and most secret supports that people didn't understand her, and it was accordingly a matter of indifference to her that Mrs. Jordan shouldn't; even though Mrs. Jordan, handed down from their early twilight of gentility and also the victim of reverses, was the only member of her circle in whom she recognised an equal. She was perfectly aware that her imaginative life was the life in which she spent most of her time; and she would have been ready, had it been at all worth while, to contend that, since her outward occupation didn't kill it, it must be strong indeed. (James 232)

The rant truncates the conversation, Mrs. Jordan's comment displaced by the telegraphist's reaction. This discursive elaboration continues until the end of the chapter. As the narrative swerves away from dialogue, James leaves the scene open, contributing to the more general feeling of irresolution while dropping in key biographical details including, crucially, the telegraphist's decision to postpone her marriage and inevitable relocation from London. If this excursus could appear like the telegraphist is having the last word, it is a temporary cessation of tension, as the exchange with Mrs.

Jordan galvanizes the telegraphist to re-up her efforts to find out more about her wealthy patrons in the next chapter.

Jameson is thereby correct in saying that in the subconversation, "such sparks will take the form of speech itself, words and voices hotly flung down as trumps of one another…Dialogue is too weak a term for such exchanges, which, in their violent *stichomythia*, define a veritable *agon* between the polar adversaries."[71] The nuances of female aggression are poised to illuminate some of modernism's characteristic operations of representing the unsaid. For tact, in its agons of noticing what the other seems to need in the moment, facilitates the user's ability to maneuver the *apparent* and the *implicit* meanings of an exchange, so that the mutual registering of the other's difference entails not clamping her down in it.

While James and Larsen implement—and sharpen—modernist techniques to portray the unsaid of female homosociality, such as multiple points of view and free indirect discourse, the loaded remarks and tense encounters between women evoke a curated disinterestedness and strategic distortion associated with modernist style. I hypothesize that this strong attachment to a style of indirection and also a tight narrative structure has to do with their commitment not only to a tradition of manners but the novelistic affordances for rendering the unsaid.

Seeing it rendered as such in narrative fiction, we can postulate about several telling reversals in social interaction in general. The pretense of intimacy enables a deeper kind of sharing which also reveals just how much one is at the mercy of their trust in the other's discretion. Indirection here feels like a mutually protective recourse but it is also precariously balanced on either person's ability to distinguish between, for instance, pretense and fact or literal and ironic modes of divulging. *Passing* can be said to lead us through various sites of these oblique calculations conducted on the

[71] Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*, 37.

affective level vis-à-vis Irene's channeling and restraining of aggression. As I have been positing, these circumventions account for the drift between narrative and style, for the overtaking of the former by the latter. But it also draws out the contiguity of Irene's involutions to the story itself, and Irene's tenuous understanding of her embeddedness in relationships, for she is constantly thrown off when others detect her microexpressions, especially when Clare appears to read her thoughts. Narratologically speaking, this reveals Irene's dependency on Clare to give her feelings external outlet without verbal confirmation.

The unpredictable relation between feeling and expression prompts us to retrace a number of the modernist propensities of the novels with the considerations I have accumulated. As *In the Cage* and *Passing* demonstrate, tact is about noticing and the concealment of that noticing, not only for reasons related to the preservation of aesthetic unity but also concerns for representing micro-social difference. Their novels involve the author's recursive meditation on what it means to artistically represent the microsocial. Tact best describes these finetuned social interactions that don't rise to the level of explicitness. The narratives of Larsen and James stage the difficulty of recording nuanced and fleeting difference, only to then draw the reader to notice the sentence itself moving among perspectives. Their works discipline the tact of the reader by establishing a norm for intensive descriptions of words, gestures, and facial expressions that do not consign interactions to a singular meaning. In Larsen more so than in James, the narrative is highly attentive to the ways conflict and aggression are navigated through the positionality of characters who are not necessarily aligned with a social order.

Revolving around the settings and workings of indirection, Larsen's *Passing* highlights the abstractions that go into encounters with difference which turn on non-explicitness. Here, the realization that we are entangled in each other's differences but not in the same way foments negativity. We may now ask: what if all this indirection stems from a desire for authenticity? The

hedging over one's true feelings, the rumination over what the other meant, the tension—are these behaviors ultimately circling around an urge to cut through pretenses to find the core? One outcome of such transparency could be to acknowledge that our investment in others is not perfectly reciprocated. We could then more honestly walk the line of our own incongruous stakes in the relation while also affirming the desire to remain inside it. The next chapter explores how the endeavor that wishes to address opacities must confront the question of mediating the unmediated. To what extent is it within and outside our control to manage our affects and their reception?

Chapter Three

Faulkner's Opacity: Mediating Uncertainty in *The Sound and the Fury*

In my previous chapter, Larsen's indirection around race might lead some readers to question the political and ethical payoffs of acknowledging difference within social relations. Through scenes with characters who put off publicizing what they observed, Larsen's work thereby poses: what is the value of articulating difference in conflicted relations and whom does it benefit? Asked another way, what is ultimately behind the fantasy of a relation that is transparent about its uneven dynamics? Is the desire to make difference more outward facing enabled by one's everyday closeness to the other? In this chapter I think through these questions in a different context with a racially ambiguous little girl written by William Faulkner. The girl introduces the problem of mediation into *The Sound and the Fury*: her enigmatic appearance increases the stakes of defining a figure who lacks a stable concept of race and a programmed connection to the novel. Appearing disidentified with the story, the girl inhibits the analytical move to incorporate a vague micro-interaction into the macro-system of the work. Her difference, whose opacity is missing a code, makes us stay for a moment and question how to interpret this puzzling encounter with the other.[1]

The following passages by Édouard Glissant and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak deal with a similar problem. In their respective contexts, Glissant and Spivak endeavor to formulate a more authentic way to engage difference in social relationships. Curbing the haste of total knowledge that relation often fosters, Glissant and Spivak come up against a secondary dilemma: how does one go about understanding the singularity of the other when it is expedient to clear up opacities in order to

[1] My usage of "the other" encompasses the connotations of the uppercased term—that is, a state of difference constituted both by exclusion and autonomy from race, gender, class, and other normative identity categories, e.g. the non-white Other—while simultaneously drawing on the processes of relationality with "other people" that make difference both solid and mobile.

get to know someone? Glissant captures the contradiction here: "In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce."[2] The approaches that Glissant and Spivak float in response converge on the idea that one must release their intellectual and affective hold on the other and accept that they can't fully know that which they don't know. As they turn around this problem, Glissant and Spivak consider the impasse of how to relinquish the need to fully know the other without giving up on the process of getting to know, of bonding:

> The excesses of these political assurances would fortunately be contained by the sense not that everything is futile but that there are limits to absolute truth. How can one point out these limits without lapsing into skepticism or paralysis? *How can one reconcile the hard line inherent in any politics and the questioning essential to any relation?* Only by understanding that it is impossible to reduce anyone, no matter who, to a truth he would not have generated on his own. That is, within the opacity of his time and place.[3]

> It is my task as a reader to see where in that grid [of intersectionality] there are spaces where, in fact, "woman" oozes away. Essences, it seems to me, are just a kind of content. All content is not essence. Why be so nervous about it? Why not demote the word "essence," because without a minimizable essence, an essence as *ce qui reste*, an essence as what remains, there is no exchange. *Difference articulates these negotiable essences.* There is no time for essence/antiessence. There is so much work to be done.[4]

Indeed, what drives the need to clarify opacities seems to be a desire to close a mutual breach; whereas the risk of letting opacities lie would be to adhere to an incongruity *as it has manifested.* Appearing to anticipate this, Glissant proffers that we mirror the truth through which the other person defines himself, despite knowing self-opacity to be a constant: "every individual begins not grasping his own motivations, taking himself apart in this manner."[5] We might compare Glissant's approach to a constructive kind of tact that interprets expressions according to a yardstick set by the

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[2] Édouard Glissant, "For Opacity," *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189.
[3] Ibid, 194; my italics.
[4] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 17-18; my italics.
[5] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 193.

owner, even though such a "scale" remains inarticulate in the "opacity of his time and place." We might also consider the point at which Glissant's notion of abiding flexibility would make one's understanding of the other more totalizing, if the aim behind relinquishing total knowledge is to meet difference "as is." For Spivak, if we imagine the two in conversation, the importance is that we do not handle difference as some ineluctable essence. Spivak ponders what inspires the privileging of the other's truth and "essence" given that they are mere "content" which becomes minimizable in relation. It is through encounters with difference that essence's capacity to be influenced is revealed. Without desiring to do away with essence, Spivak advocates that the term's status be downgraded in discourses on intersectionality.

Spivak and Glissant draw our attention to the tension between a surrender to uncertainty, which recognizes that there are parts of others and ourselves that exceed articulation, and the need for abstract thinking that keeps in suspension those aspects which elude understanding. Indeed, such numerous considerations contribute to the *difficulty* of maintaining the "hard line inherent in any politics" as it rubs shoulders with "the questioning essential to any relation." But also, Glissant's and Spivak's respective approaches to difference are based upon a similar resistance to a Western-liberal politics of difference that presumes that the lived experiences of race, gender, class, and other are more knowable when brought under established frameworks and categories.

Like the nebulous tension circulating in *Passing*, we find further blockages for turning behavioral tendencies into states and categories. Is the deconstruction of difference a matter best left to the self (making opacity limited to the individual person, since it is only I who can determine my irreducibly, or choose not to) or is opacity only but caught up in a transpersonal experience where one's attributes are most bemusing when they affect other people? Given these fluctuating understandings, is it then realistic to suspend a concept or category of difference so that relation may support, without dissolving, difference? While Glissant's and Spivak's emphasis falls on the

flexibility required to deal with the other's otherness, it is fruitful to linger on this precursory business of mediation—in short, the problems that minimizing and reducing, via categories and concepts, pose for relationality. In a nutshell, these passages attempt to think through the difficulty of mediating identity from *within* relation's manifest awareness of difference. One puzzle this then presents is that any steps taken to properly name the other person's difference without confining her to one thing always includes the possibility of her feedback. Gaining articulation through application, it is therefore not tautological to note that both formulations about mindfully approaching the other's otherness are, well, other-focused. Glissant and Spivak posit within the intellectual space of what "I," the observer, can do within my limits to "see" the other person in terms that befit them, crucially without ideating as to what perceptions this dynamic may prefigure.

Perhaps this obviousness bespeaks its own shorthand for the deeper issue of mediation found in critical and aesthetic discourse—a problem that, if we're already weighing content with essence, makes it at home in modernist abstraction. Another way to describe the relational problem of mediation is to resituate it as a problem within modernism. The conundrum can be formulated in the same terms we have been using: how does an interpreter move from noticing to attributing, from intersocial attention to a reading of difference, particularly where it is latent? In *Patterns of Intention,* art historian Michael Baxandall reflects on the interpretative consequences of apprehending Picasso's motives behind the markedly abstract 1910 *Portrait of Kahnweiler* in the form of a "problem":

> There may be a danger of equivocation here. A "problem"—practical or geometrical or logical—is normally a state of affairs in which two things hold: something is to be done, and there is no purely habitual or simply reactive way of doing it. There are also connotations of difficulty. But there is a difference between the sense of problem in the actor and in the observer. The actor thinks of "problem" when he is addressing a difficult task and consciously knows he must work out a way to do it. *The observer thinks of "problem" when he is watching someone's purposeful behaviour and wishes to understand*: "problem-solving" is a

> construction he puts on other people's purposeful activity. The intentional behavior he is watching does not always involve an awareness in the actor of solving problems.[6]

To apply Baxandall's thoughts to the "problem" of mediation, it may be that the business of registering the other's otherness is a matter that creates problems where there are none. We may pause to wonder whether a tactful screening for truth-carrying signs is itself an activity that projects concerns onto fleeting expression. Even so, others' activity acquires the form of a problem inasmuch as that which is covered up, withdrawn, and out of reach beckons this interpretative attention. What Baxandall points to is the animating co-production of activity qua sign and a social drive to decode. However, making paradoxes out of problems, the desire to draw *explicit* meaning from behavior runs into interpersonal and analytical quagmires *within* a hermeneutic system of problem-solving—where for example in the microsociality of a brushstroke, "the fact that [it] may have been unreflectively made does not isolate it from the skills and dispositions acquired in a history of reflectively purposeful activity."[7] Compared to the actor (here, the painter) who unguardedly casts about for means to ends, ends for means or abandons the lot altogether, the observer must evaluate the interior quality of another's activity—in its material productions such as an inscrutable art object—to which the actor does not have access in the same way. As Baxandall suggests, the watcher's "problem-solving" thereby slips away from "practical or geometrical or logical" methodology and into an awareness of its own constructedness: "An attention to 'problems' in the observer, then, is really a habit of analysis in terms of ends and means. He puts a formal pattern on the object of his interest."[8]

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[6] Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 69-70; my italics.
[7] Ibid, 67.
[8] Ibid, 69-70.

From the observer's standpoint, the problem is in the form of a problem because of the irreducible gap between another's behavior and its purpose-having meaning. In his book on *The Uses of Uncertainty* in Flaubert, Jonathan Culler considers whether the "easiest solution, designed to permit critical discourse to continue in the absence of a purpose to explicate" would be to turn the flaw into a feature: to adopt "a formalism which attempts to make the problem into a solution by taking the existence of the work, which at first seemed to require justification, as the ultimate purpose to which all its elements contribute."[9] However "to proceed in this way, to use even so formal and empty a final cause, is to make what may be an unwarranted presupposition of coherence" of which novelistic discourse starting with Flaubert is aware. "That is the problem. The novel is an ironic form, born of the discrepancy between meaning and experience, whose source of value lies in the interest of exploring that gap and filling it, while knowing that any claim to have filled it derives from blindness."[10] We are now back to the "problem" of interpreting signs that are spontaneous yet motivated, and ultimately too transient to support intensive reading—an uncertainty of which the modern novel is doubly aware because it incorporates it.

Rather than knowing how to look at something in order to see what's there, microsociality in modernism knows how to look in order to *not* see something. Its grounding in a more indirect approach to catching and assigning meaning to signs echoes Glissant's and Spivak's recognition that projection is *inevitable*. Perhaps this is why they motion for a type of attention to the other that does not totalize but holds judgments loosely. At the same time, totalization seems necessary for the attribution of another's singularity. Regarding this bind, a modernist treatment of difference approaches the problem of mediation at multiple points of uncertainty: as Culler enumerates, "that which gives a taste of the primacy yet indeterminacy of moments, the uncertainty of effort, the real

[9] Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 16.
[10] Ibid, 17, 24.

oppressiveness of choice, the dispersal of activity, the zones of mystery and opacity, which we take to be features of experience as lived. And for that, we might say, a limited point of view is preferable: a narrator who does not yet have the benefit of wisdom, whose order is what the novel itself attempts to investigate and construct, who recounts the impressions of a moment and may thereby become 'unreliable.'"[11] As we learned through Larsen and James, these blurry zones frame opacities in encounter as one recognizes what that site is without knowing what is inside.

To be sure, neither Spivak nor Glissant is concerned with the problem of mediation in an aesthetic register, nor do they appear to reflect on what qualifies as a "latent sign" of difference per se. Still, in both contexts the problem of mediation involves the interplay between the perception of behavior and the judgment of its expressions within the broader matrix of the relation. To speak more directly to Glissant's and Spivak's encounter with the other, the transmission of value-laden signs (which might well include affects, tone, facial expressions, offhand comments, and the like), despite the ineradicable tension of their faint purpose, remains available to the "work" (Spivak) of relation. There it becomes necessary to break off signs into essences in order to have transformative experiences with other people; or as Spivak states, "[f]ragments of essence to reckon with rather than preserving myself from essences."[12]

At the same time, it is important to note that these tactics around containing opacity are ones that enable relation to *remain* as one of difference.[13] Glissant's and Spivak's awareness that the other behaves in generally unreflective ways yet are purposeful to a point—content as/without

[11] Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*, 109.
[12] Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 21.
[13] Glissant writes: "I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity to him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to 'make' him in my image. These projects of transmutation—without metempsychosis—have resulted from the worst pretensions and the greatest of magnanimities on the part of West." *Poetics of Relation*, 193.

essence—finds form in their interpretative approach to the other: observation without judgment, scrutiny without inference, watchfulness without presumption—so that the person may feel "seen."

Working through Glissant and Spivak's most salient points, what would happen in the particular situation where "the other" were a character defined by the *compelling* content of her microexpressions, yet the interpretation of her inscrutable qualities were stalled by a complex system of social relations that imposes "limits to absolute truth"? And what if these redolent signs were not necessarily carriers of the other's "truth"? This would appear to challenge the sheer will of an observation to modulate into problem-solving mode, that is, to grant purposive energy to what was previously un-agential—in Spivak's words, to endow "that kind of a miraculating agency, a history, a culture, a position, an institutional position" to "that you…speaking in unmediated identity."[14] And how is this further complicated by an author whose own approach to his fictional other appears *explicitly* driven both by careful attention and an absence of judgment? How is this problem intensified when a novelistic encounter with difference seems *consciously* limited by the author's lived experience with racial others, creating a situation perversely suited to Glissant's and Spivak's attentively hands-off approach to opacity?

The problematic figure in question is an obscure character that exists but once in William Faulkner's writing. She is a little girl that appears in *The Sound and the Fury* whose ambiguous race and strange gestures set her in a register of difference separated from Faulkner's thinly interiorized black characters. At the same time, her presence brings Faulkner's interpretative difficulty under the pressure of racial difference. In one key way, the interpretive problem the girl poses is dissimilar from Spivak's and Glissant's: she does not cue up the question of abstraction's relation to essence

[14] Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 6.

but rather the indeterminate multiplicity of particulars to a whole. Yet in both cases, the other is treated as an object that bears the form of a mystery to be solved.

In my readings, the girl will come to encapsulate the largest questions of the project thus far: the uncertainty of attribution; the suspension of the movement between the micro and the macro; and the loaded operations of noticing affect. Keeping them in mind, this chapter will focus on the choice to take someone into a signifying system. Indeed, I argue this move begs the question that encounters are made up of signs and that people's behaviors are signifiers for something else. In what ways is this understanding of relation already mapping out a mediation? After turning over the aesthetic purpose of the little girl in the narrative, I examine the usages of what appears to be Faulkner's *deliberate* uncertainty around mediating the identity of the other who is barely there.

Difference without opacity: the little girl

> "The recognition of the area of shadow in or around the work is the initial moment of criticism […] Although the work is self-sufficient it does not contain or engender its own theory; it does not *know* itself."
> — Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*[15]

In *The Sound and the Fury*, on the day before his suicide, Quentin Compson crosses paths with a little Italian girl who follows him around in silence. Like Picasso's portrait of his art-dealer, the child shows Faulkner taking his artistic medium to its limits. Descriptions of her momentary acts serve to underscore her inscrutability:

> The little girl said nothing […] she gave me a flying black glance…[16]
>
> The little girl looked at me, secretive, contemplative. (126)

[15] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2006), 91, 93.
[16] William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Random House, 1990), 126. Further citations are inside the text.

She was eating the gnarled cake…She gave me a black still look, chewing. (128)

She just looked at me, serene and secret and chewing. (129)

Faulkner's representation of the girl consists of no further elaboration or explication within the first-person narrative. That the text sustains her inscrutability through the aid of understated racial connotation reinforces this character's markedly mysterious thematization: "She looked at me, black and secret and friendly" (135). Her vague presentation clearly exhibits a process of discernment. For one, while the description operates within Faulkner's minimalist register for depicting non-white others, their appearance always limited to and by central protagonists' perception, her blackness is not racialized so much as race-coded; at one point the story compares her face to milk mixed with coffee. It is therefore important to delve into how an already difficult novel establishes a *different order of opacity* without sociological concepts through an ultra-minor character who is ambiguously racialized.

The Sound and the Fury tells the story of the slow decline of the Compson family through four characters' overlapping perspectives. The family's former Southern-aristocratic status unravels as they gradually sell away their land previously seized from indigenous owners during the Reconstruction period. Their demise symbolizes the turn-of-the-century downslide of a white-Southern claim to political and economic autonomy that Faulkner explores, but does not discuss openly, in the microcosm of one family's attrition. Across four chapters, characters' subjective experiences of the same story are pressed across non-linear plotlines and first-person testimonies of three Compson children and a final account focused around Dilsey Gibson, the family's black domestic servant, told from a semi-omniscient, third-person point of view.

Compared to Faulkner's maximalist style and technique to convey a relatively simple story, the girl is described within a pinched economy of words: "secret," "chewing," "looked at me," "black," and sometimes "friendly." As noted across generations of critics, the roles and contexts of

Faulkner's non-white characters are conditioned by the central activity of white protagonists. But while the personal details of Dilsey, her husband Roskus and their children Frony, Versh, TP, and Luster, are flashed into the narrative when it is relevant, the girl's interior life is *implicitly* absent. In this way, her persistent silence likens her to another "black-and-white" character in Faulkner's universe: Lucas Beauchamp, who, Glissant observes, is "never interiorized by Faulkner; he is described entirely through postures and gestures, a silhouette filled in against a horizon."[17] The omission of Lucas's psychology, compounded by his silence, stalls interpretation, thereby portraying Lucas's staunch refusal to be reduced. As Glissant writes,

> Lucas's silences do not conclusively deepen the mystery; rather, they emphasize his implacable personal opposition to all attempts at explanation, assistance, comprehension, and reconciliation. The silhouette (not a puppet but a person viewed perspectively) is Faulkner's distinguishing feature. He does not pretend to offer an opportunity for exploration, at least not in depth.[18]

Read in this way, the girl's inscrutability participates in a Faulknerian poetics of opacity. As with Lucas Beauchamp, she is able to move within strictures of racist authority that organize Lucas's interactions with white characters without being legible to or through them. Yet, the little girl is created in an importantly different paradigm of racial difference. As an Italian immigrant, her ethnos is tied to the "old country" of European ethnicity that bears an abject relationship to the "new world" of American heterogeneity. This provides a ground on which to see her singularity. However, despite her obdurate secretiveness, the girl appears to have no depths worth plumbing. She is simply *there* in the story until she isn't. Invoking and thwarting interpretation, the girl's thinness thereby poses a challenge to the available means for reading racial opacity in Faulkner, especially because her minimalism sets her apart so that she may be looked at.

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[17] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 66.
[18] Édouard Glissant, *Faulkner*, *Mississippi*, trans. Barbara Lewis and Thomas C. Spear (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 89.

Quentin finds her in a bakery in a southern area of Cambridge populated by locals and immigrants. When Quentin arrives, she is already waiting, having appeared from thin air and without tangible presence. Given that her difference is not readily available, the diegesis emulates that indeterminacy by failing to register her entrance while producing an atmospheric mirror image of her appearance:

> When you opened the door a bell tinkled, but just once, *high and clear and small* in the *neat obscurity* above the door, as though it were gauged and tempered to make that *single clear small sound* so as not to wear the bell out nor to require the expenditure of *too much silence* in restoring it when the door opened upon the recent warm scent of baking; a little dirty child with eyes like a toy bear's and two patent-leather pigtails.
>
> "Hello, sister." Her face was like a cup of milk dashed with coffee in the sweet warm emptiness. "Anybody here?"
>
> But she merely watched me until a door opened and the lady came […] with still and unwinking eyes like two currants floating motionless in a cup of weak coffee Land of the kike home of the wop. (125; my italics)

The girl remains silent as Quentin helps her buy bread and buns from the shopkeeper who initially refuses her service, noticing she is Italian. Quentin notices it too but, significantly, the focalized discourse does not identify her as such. Instead, her eyes, hair, and skin trigger a stream of erratic thoughts that contracts into xenophobic slurs. The movement between Quentin's observation of her bodily effects and her racial identity is both indexed and elided by the passage's last sentence. She is what might be called "ethnic looking," an ambiguous stamp of difference.

The ambulatory gaze of the scene's focalization registers that which cannot be admitted into the diegesis: the encroaching proximity of the foreign Other. Hortense Spillers refers to the girl as an object that sticks to Quentin "like a second skin."[19] Her secretiveness is specified by her watcher. Descriptions of Quentin's observations, which center on how she sees, how and what she touches, and the sensations of that witnessing, can be read as a way of airing out, without verbalizing, the fear

[19] Hortense J. Spillers, "Faulkner Adds Up: Reading *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 356.

of racial contact and the miscegenation which Quentin knows runs through his family. Like a symptomatic expression of this anxiety, while the coffee simile delimits her ambiguously racialized aspect to a neatly contained indeterminacy, it also figures her tendency to seep into the things she touches:

> She extended her fist. It uncurled upon a nickel, moist and dirty, moist dirt ridged into her flesh. The coin was damp and warm. I could smell it, faintly metallic. (126)

She metonymizes into the money she hands to Quentin at the bakery, her fingers "damp and hot, like worms" (127).[20] Later in their episode Quentin notes that the bread he helped purchase has decomposed under her touch: "It looked kind of like rats had been eating it now" (138). The girl imprints on things while containing little matter herself. All the same, Quentin is highly sensitive to the fleeting gestures that render her perceptible: her stares, silence, and the way she eats. However, if the girl imprints on Quentin, not once does he recoil. His disgust with their closeness, if it be that, is never registered by the narrative.

The crudeness with which Quentin reduces the girl's person to a few unsettling effects reflects how indistinctness poses an interpretative problem for a reader where it excessively elaborates random attributes—moistness, staring, chewing, swallowing—yielding a visual of an other who is both underdeveloped yet hyper-articulated. Paradoxically, the few details that render the little girl nondescript are already too much to bear. The weak form of disgust that she provokes adds only to the overall phenomenological quality of her indistinctness. This is illustrated by two key aspects: first, the girl becomes less intelligible the more Quentin watches her. Second, even as the text issues

[20] One can also read the little girl as a token of exchange (empty and indifferent to its transaction) that constitutes the underlying conflict between Quentin and the shopkeeper. That Quentin defends the girl could be read as protest of the shopkeep's mistreatment of migrants, himself being one, and simultaneously an appeal to the clemency he knows he will receive as a white Southerner. The way Quentin slips on the mask of the deferential gentleman is just one aspect of the strange power dynamics of the bakery scene.

more details about the girl's behavior, it does so *without intensifying any desire or urgency to understand.* This explains the strange suspension in which this encounter with difference is held. They leave the bakery and Quentin tries returning the girl home, all the while feeding and watching her. We may note that due to the lack of a textualized response to the girl in the form of a feeling, tone, or explication, more contingent elements may be incorporated into the encounter, which, remarkably, continues for several pages. In the end of the chapter, I discuss how the juxtaposition of these elements gives solidity to underlying emotions that are visible *through* under-parsed links.

We have established that the linguistic and semantic thinness of Faulkner's descriptions renders the girl as a highly non-psychological character in the novel. To take another example of her limited responsiveness, at moments when Quentin gives her food, her demeanor does not necessarily change but shifts through minute affective adjustments. Focalized through Quentin, the text proceeds to center on her staring *and* chewing.

> She was eating the gnarled cake . . . She gave me a black still look, chewing. (128)
>
> She swallowed the last of the cake, then she began on the bun, watching me across it. (129)
>
> She just looked at me, serene and secret and chewing. (129)
>
> She looked at them blackly for a while, her jaws moving steadily. She swallowed without ceasing to chew. (130)

Compared to the previous listicle, the text hasn't strayed far from its descriptive formula. The little girl remains inscrutable, but at one point she looks more responsive with the appearance of new food: "She just chewed, but it seemed to me that I discerned something affirmative, acquiescent even if it wasn't eager, in her air" (131). The incremental slowness at which her surface mutates prompts Quentin to pay closer attention; hers is an opacity that beckons interpretation while at the same time imposing formlessness. It complicates the relationship between affect and comprehension through a character that challenges what makes an atmosphere explicable versus apropos of nothing. The lights are on and someone seems to be home, so to speak, but the receptors for a stable

connection are faulty. Despite this, she and Quentin begin to establish a pattern of communication through verbal and nonverbal cues. When Quentin points to a house that could be hers, "[s]he nodded her head rapidly, looking at me, gnawing into the damp halfmoon of the bread…The little girl had the crust edgeways in her chewing mouth" (131). The house is the wrong one.

Ultimately, Quentin does not find her home. He does not decode her expressions. They exchange no words and achieve no shared sentiment. They simply wander the neighborhood in a state of mutually detached responsiveness. Portraying an encounter between others in real time, Faulkner shows Quentin and the girl improvising their own terms and threshold through which to engage the other. Through their mutual opacity, the encounter is a contingency for the problem of mediation set up at the start of the chapter. While Glissant and Spivak foreground a link between opacity and irreducible particularity, here the dispersed details of the little girl re-assert a relation to opacity that is not meaningful but still unfolds. This is formally enacted by the text's accumulation of disgust-coded details without the expected increase in responsiveness, emotional or intellectual. Presented with an opportunity to state, let alone parse, Quentin's affective reaction to the girl's affects, the discourse falls mute. However, that Faulkner foregrounds the affective dimension of an encounter with the other *without analysis* is indicative of a different kind of reflexivity, one that mobilizes story and discourse to conjure a mutual opacity the keeps differences in place.

What is missing, of course, is the transformative step of the encounter defined by Glissant and Spivak where, despite non-identification, particularities meet and become mobile through exchange. Quentin's attention renders the girl studied, but not seen. Nevertheless, as gender, race, class, and other orienting markers "ooze away" (Spivak) from the little girl in her grossly secretive aspect, her state remains accentuated as one of concealment. That Faulkner endeavors to make her appear *extra* vague cannot be overlooked: the girl is silent but also "secretive" *and* "contemplative." The absence of diegetically orienting cues in the encounter is what leads Faulkner critic Pardis

Dabashi to read the little girl "as an accidental occurrence that Quentin absorbs into his narrative of sibling incest," and this chapter to read her as existing in a no-signal zone inside the story by contrast.[21] With her dirty dress and impenetrable stares, the girl could well be an allegory for Quentin's absent sister, similarly characterized in her compliant remoteness. However, I argue the little girl enables Faulkner to posit an encounter marked by racial and power difference *without* a code. Representing a *singular* opacity in Faulkner's universe, the girl is a device to explore the opacities of race, and gender, at the outer edges of understanding—a limit case of which the narrative seems aware. For one, it is possible that her indistinctness is shaped by the mutual indifference of the two characters, a comportment that resembles what Claudia Rankine calls a "polite form of unintelligibility" and what Glissant calls "pitiless impartiality."[22] While their racial difference no doubt establishes this shared impartiality, in their brief time together these differences actually "ooze away," only to leave behind more unknowing—unmasking opacity to reveal opacity once again.

Faulkner thereby prompts us to think anew the problem of mediation through a unique device of the significant-insignificant little girl. The text's exaggerated effort to make her nondescript and yet adhesive to observation illuminates a new aspect in Faulkner's representations of racial others as well as his poetics of secrecy, the two being intertwined. The dominant critical model of Faulknerian difficulty reads his works' opacity through a novelistic technique that Glissant dubbed "deferred revelation."[23] The structure of Faulkner's novels points to, without explicating, the inadmissible secret of the illegitimacy of the white-Southern claim to racial and economic

[21] Pardis Dabashi, "The Compsons Were Here: Indexicality, the Actuality, and the Crisis of Meaning in *The Sound and the Fury*," *Modernism/modernity* 24, no. 3 (September 2017): 541.
[22] Claudia Rankine, *Just Us: An American Conversation* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2020), 46. Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 65.
[23] Glissant, *Faulkner*, *Mississippi*, 9.

sovereignty. It would be reasonable to read the opacity of the little girl as a touchstone of Faulkner's guiding aesthetic technique. Her tacitness encapsulates what Faulkner scholar Richard Godden calls the novel's "penurious habit of *secretion*," a pun on "how Faulkner's language most habitually 'conceals and makes secret' while at the same time 'producing by means of secretion,' discharging from its virtually invisible secrets, matter in the form of a 'sub' or 'anti' semantics, essential to the functioning of the linguistic body."[24] In other words, her inutterance makes her *hyperbolically* Faulknerian; her insistent presence and paradoxically distinct obscurity are literally announced in the text. In her unfamiliar plainness, barely perceptible in its workings, the girl would ironically call up the cognitive state of being inside *The Sound and the Fury*. In taking us to the very limits of Faulknerian difficulty, she is its epitome.

In reading the girl, we could say that she both embodies a Faulknerian secret and does not. While the two are related, I however argue that she does not epitomize the "deferred revelation." Put otherwise, she is an anomaly that is not necessarily a revelation of a hidden structure. Unlike a secret with identifiable content that is never enunciated, she is like a blip in the story that exists within it. Her unbothered existing prevents her from being metabolized by the maximalist framework of the secret. Rather, she acts as a vehicle for the interpretative difficulty this project has been rotating: the uncertainty that appears through encounter and remains in suspension. She therefore stalls the move between her microexpressions and a larger "secret," rather compelling us to linger in the amorphousness of encounter.

In sum, although the girl seems forged through the poetics of deferred revelation, she is also irreducible to a narrative form that reveals in order to conceal: she has nothing to conceal. If readers struggle to select a code with which to understand her, the girl can be said to challenge the

[24] Richard Godden, *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South's Long Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4.

"problem" of her mediation conceptualized *as* a problem. Where an abundance of codes elicits a weak interpretative drive, Faulkner's girl poses how we might understand difference without concerted engagement let alone a transformative experience. In the next section, I proceed with my explanation of the ways the protracted uncertainty of the girl stages the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of assigning concepts to racial difference—and in that, the question of whether something is denotative of difference is to already have a concept of what that is. I consider how this recursive inquiry might incorporate Faulkner's own limits in parsing its difficulties.

Faulkner's purposive uncertainty

Xenophobic slurs, refused service, groundless accusations—these are blatant forms of bigotry that are easier to detect and react to. The dissonance created by a highly caricatured yet impassive Other is harder to pinpoint. Because the girl models the figure of the racial or foreign outsider, yet her personal traits do not cohere to support either a positive or negative reading of this, she takes interpretative difficulty to its limits. Indeed, she fulfills an affective conception of social identity whereby a person alters their behaviors *when* they become associated with a classificatory trait, such as "immigrant" or "quiet."[25] She occupies the negotiated space of what Glissant calls "the hard line inherent in any politics and the questioning essential to any relation."

Indeed, the irresolution that marks her role in the novel is generally where Faulkner's novels land. Their inquiry into the grounds upon which whiteness is built is both driven and inhibited by a concealed desire to not see this process through, which would all but kill its author. With a tenuously held line to the plot, the girl's appearance in *The Sound and the Fury* is connected to the quest, in

[25] See Christine Averett and David R. Heise, "Modified Social Identities: Amalgamations, Attributions, and Emotions," in *Analyzing Social Interaction: Advances in Affect Control Theory*, ed. Lynn Smith-Lovin and David R. Heise (New York: Routledge, 1988), 103-132.

which Glissant finds himself entrained in *Faulkner, Mississippi*, "to understand, that is to imagine for yourself, *in the extreme purity of abstraction*, what led the writer William Faulkner, with such savage tenacity, to hide everything while revealing it: the deferral of the South's damnation."[26] The poetics of deferred revelation maintains an ongoing relationship to abstraction in order to raise a secret without unfolding it, to linger without delving in, to observe without judgment—and, we may finally add, to minimally engage with racial difference *mindfully*. If we advance that the girl's ontological slimness stems from Faulkner's own interpretative difficulties around opacity, then it is worth centering *this* minimalism inside his maximalism. I venture a critical reading of this as the author's self-sanctioned de-compensating around racial representation and study the ways it contributes to the work's powerfully unsettling and moving aesthetic effusions.

From a place of inner conflict, as Glissant observes, Faulkner "arranges his work in the shadow of questions to which he gives no answer—that is to say, nothing didactic or definite—nonetheless, in his life as well as in his convictions, he keeps faith with the reality so questioned, even if doing so will cause injustice, and even if this injustice is what makes the reality unacceptable."[27] Had Faulkner "disassociated himself from the reality of the South" and had he "passed judgment and come to conclusions, the a priori question no longer would have made any sense, and his works would have been reduced to a 'realist' manifesto with no repercussions…the question would have died out, having received his answer."[28] The uncertainty that foments problems for the critic is born in these lightly laid tracks of meaning that are, too, the signal "agony" of the modern novelist. To return to Culler's literary theory of uncertainty: "Inexpressibility, therefore, once a property of feelings, mark of profundity, and possible source of pride, now becomes part of a

[26] Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 15; my italics.
[27] Ibid, 23.
[28] Ibid.

creative linguistic act and a source only of agony—the agony of the unending search for *le mot juste*. This agony has been an extremely important feature of modern literature," and no doubt explains the gravitational pull of the microsocial in its capacity to specify, delineate, and simply *become without explanation* life's most evasive phenomena.[29]

Rather than being a passive abnegation of responsibility, this drawn-out coming-to-consciousness, where one's hands are tied yet *searching*, cannot but amount to an instrumentalized insufficiency, which not only orders the modern novel but makes for great art. The work of modernist indirection works for Faulkner's case because, as Glissant writes with exceptional lucidity,

> he needs ambiguous disclosure as the basis for the development of tragedy. An emphatic statement about the "decadence" of the South would have interrupted forever the itinerary of disclosure in the work. It is in and through the articulation of the mysterious (in any event unspoken) disclosure that the first possible iniquity proves to be damnation: error brings forth tragedy. Literature matters more than making testimonies or taking sides, not because it exceeds all possible appreciation of the real, but because it is a more profound approach and ultimately, the only one that matters.[30]

The neat, whirring wheels of literary ambiguity transfigure Faulkner's dilemmas into something more profound. To call his indirection "avoidance" would be to package up too much. Rather, to take up Glissant's suggestion, perhaps Faulkner's evasion of the problem of white depravity is his only path through. In metaphorical terms, we might consider how the labored boxing up of a secret is also the means by which Faulkner divests himself of the responsibility to unpack it. The microsocial examination undertaken by my project enables revelations both surprising and less so: first, we witness the persistent centrality of a white perspective by which otherness is constituted, but at the same time a deterioration of that authority through a prosaic encounter with difference. On top of this, to highlight Quentin's rather feckless conduct is to consider that the process of attributing otherness from a self-identified position of the author's whiteness is inhibited easily by self-

[29] Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*, 13.
[30] Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 64.

incrimination. In the end, the episode of the little girl represents simultaneously a more precise way to approach race through nonce novelistic techniques and an expression of differences which are ineffable in the language of the work.

Yet I want to consider how a moment which seems sociological is also about the suspension of attribution in aesthetic terms. At many turns, the relational uncertainty under study in this project can open onto the problem of discourse in aesthetic judgment. How? To begin, the paradoxes of Faulkner's approach evoke a kind of purposive uncertainty in a Kantian sense. The perception of the girl establishes an aesthetic relation wherein the experience of amorphous difference has no concept attached. The girl is racialized without an "idea" of race—that is, a framework of which kind of difference she is. Therefore, in Kantian terms, the unknowability of the girl's motive or end depends on a perceptual construct where her particularities are indeterminately configured. To continue following this homology, the "purposeless purposive" state of the aesthetic object becomes place for the free play of the imaginative faculties. Because she is not part of a racial code, yet racialized, she is exempted from a stable purpose but still purposeful in her eating and stalking of Quentin. What is more, she is an object insofar as she is created through the comportment of Quentin's perception (attentive yet impassive). The reflexive unknowability of the girl's motive or end is set up through a perceptual construct whereby the aesthetic object's particularities are indeterminately connected as a whole. The low affective register of this encounter evinces Sianne Ngai's definition of the interesting to the extent that it is "an ambiguous feeling tied to an encounter with difference without a concept," yet one that does not trigger "a search for that missing concept," as illustrated by Quentin's lack of investment.[31] And yet, the novel proffers many concepts for reading the girl's difference: as a secret, as an inverted Caddy fantasy, and even as a Jamesian proxy figure whereby

[31] Sianne Ngai, "Merely Interesting," *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 139.

the author conspicuously interacts with his aesthetic theories and structures inside the work itself. Overall, the purposive uncertainty that pervades the encounter places into radical question what is going on, to the point where we are unsure if the encounter is really about difference. And if it is not, in what other mode does it operate? Indeed, to posit the little girl as a bare-bones aesthetic relation feels out of place in conversations about race. Yet I argue that the episode with the girl imperceptibly morphs its focus on occulted meaning from alterity to the *concept of an encounter*.

One finds a homology to Kant too in the social-discursive register of aesthetic judgment—that is, an act of evasion that knows that even an "ambiguous disclosure" of aesthetic preference is a form of self-disclosure ("error brings forth tragedy"). This equivocation over meaning mutates across the aesthetic work to its criticism. Next, I cite evidence for this not only in Faulkner's abstracted distance from a "damnation which cannot be expressed or consciously resolved" but also in critics' wavering over *their* aesthetic attachment to Faulkner.[32] I discuss the recuperative tendency that issues from these mixed feelings with Faulkner, which creates stronger ties to his work, ironically, through weak theory.

Faulkner falls short

"Falling short is less a sin than a spur to the work of others."
— Wai Chee Dimock, "Weak Network: Faulkner's Transpacific Reparations"[33]

As it were, the depiction of the little girl does not make Faulkner's bigotry into an explicit truth. Rather it is his ineffectualness—manifested in no imprecise terms—that shines through as part and parcel of its modernist-literary allusiveness. As Glissant reflects, "[i]t remains to be known—and *this*

[32] Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 69.
[33] Wai Chee Dimock, "Weak Network: Faulkner's Transpacific Reparations," *Modernism/modernity* 25, no. 3 (September 2018): 588. The sentence that follows it reads: "The codependency that results binds any given author to a large, self-appointed, and haphazard repair team."

is a literary question, not a psychological or moral one—whether William Faulkner, who so coldly yet passionately approached the infinite limits of his query, announced his answer (as I define it: 'to maintain the county at a distance from the world, in order to signify the whole world') or if, at every moment, he suffered its discomfort and torment."[34] Indeed, the stakes of Glissant's inquiry are not only made legible but consequential within the realm of literature. Whether Faulkner's contrite distance is an answer to or the evidence of his suffering, modernist ambiguity lends more immediacy to the question for its presentation as a mixed statement. The mystery over Faulkner's own level of detachment versus involvement in the episode of the girl redounds upon its meaning. The author and the narrator function having collapsed together, the essential equivocation of the girl's characterization can be phrased as the following question: is the narrator detached because the author is uncomfortably close to the issue of racial difference or remote *because* he knows he can't get close?

To lend the screw another turn, it is compelling just how much Faulkner's rhetorical dispassionateness shares in common with Spivak's and Glissant's approach to difference as it becomes situated in relations, if defined as an ethical approach to alterity that places engagement above understanding. Yet, we cannot deny that a distinct kind of reflexivity is at work around Faulkner's treatment of the little girl: she behaves as an example not of "deferred revelation" but of a "revealed deferral." Whether Faulkner's is *the wrong kind* of deliberate uncertainty—both approaches, and Glissantian opacity too, divest one of a responsibility to know the other more fully—begs the question of the situation, what I am calling the microsocial, where such value-assignment is arranged.

[34] Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 31; my italics.

That indirect disclosure is endowed with strong affective force, and on jointly aesthetic and social terms, is exemplified by Faulkner critics' responsiveness to his impassivity before racial difference. The blanket attitude of temperance that critics adopt towards Faulkner's infamous shortfalls in writing characters of color fixates on their race and their absence of thought, feelings, and other interiorized details. Replicating a version of this suspension, critics who cut through the ambiguities of Faulkner's ethos notably do not call him a racist or worst. Imparting an afro-pessimist approach, Joanna Davis-McElligatt writes that Faulkner "imagines Blackness and Black people to be abnormal and ontogenically inferior, and therefore structurally stigmatized, subordinated, and condemned to destruction"; the lack of interiority only further underscores this distinction and rhetorically condemns Faulkner as well.[35] In contrast, Thadious Davis and Glissant note that as semantically under-developed as black persons are in Yoknapatawpha County, the lack of introspection spares them from the problems interiority creates for whites. Glissant argues that Faulkner does not unfold the interiorities of black characters with monologue, memory, and other modes of subjectivity because Faulkner "admits in effect, that he will never understand either Blacks or Indians and that it would be hateful (and, in his view, ridiculous) to pose as an omniscient narrator or to try to penetrate these minds that are unfathomable to him."[36] According to Davis's thesis, the Gibson family deepens the formal innovation of *The Sound and the Fury*: they "add greater dimension to the symbolism, themes, and narrative form"; the Gibson's are "practical, 'common-sense variety' blacks whose individual and collective voices create an eloquent contrast to the white

[35] Joanna Davis-McElligatt, "Faulkner and Afropessimism," in *The New Faulkner Studies*, ed. Sarah Gleeson-White and Pardis Dabashi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 173.
[36] Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 68.

world and form, on a level of emotion and reason, a more viable approach to life."[37] Read in this way, they are saved from the mortal ills of tragic whiteness rather than being collateral to it.

If the interpretative move that mobilizes non-white characters' opacity to enrich modernist formalism might read as too placating today, it is in part because recuperating difference in the name of indeterminacy can itself seem limited as a political project. In *The Novel and the New Ethics*, Dorothy Hale argues that the historical and aesthetic formation of the modern novel is constituted *through* its approaches to the depiction of others. In Hale's definition, its ethics is demarcated through "the novel's narrative power to do justice to states of being different from the author's own." Aesthetic production consists of "certain features of novelistic narrative [that] offer the reader an ethical encounter with otherness, an encounter that begins with a writerly or readerly act of self-restriction."[38]

In a reading of *The Sound and the Fury*, "a work that positions its beautiful language in relation to a politics of social otherness," Hale avers that the description of Dilsey which begins the novel's final chapter is "an outside view, a view that begins with the description not of a deep mind but a semiotically saturated body. The limit that Dilsey presents to the novel's norm for characterological personhood not only racializes Faulkner's use of stream of consciousness but politicizes it by referring Faulkner's narrative technique back to the author's subject position."[39] That Dilsey's surface-level description is aesthetically beautiful indicates "how the aesthetics of alterity at work in *The Sound and the Fury* functions as a political critique of the lyrical language that accompanies Faulkner's shift to limited omniscience."[40] In his rendering of Dilsey, "Faulkner's turn to the

[37] Thadious M. Davis, "Faulkner's 'Negro,'" in *The Sound and the Fury: Norton Critical Edition*, edited by David Minter (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994), 395.
[38] Dorothy Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), xvii, xviii.
[39] Ibid 102.
[40] Ibid, 102.

beautiful style thus makes legible both the modern novel's expectation that characters should be rendered as autonomous persons with deep interiorities and the social fact that some social positions resist representation by the white, male novelist."[41]

Yet if "Faulkner reaches for the high style here as a compensatory act of descriptive ennoblement," the gesture is a highly ambivalent one for that.[42] Studies that take into account the positionality of Faulkner's artistic techniques for representing black characters do not address how whiteness enables this equivocation. With this varied interpretative spectrum in mind, we find that an ethical-criticism and an afro-pessimist paradigm are equally viable in combing through and combing over the paradoxes of Faulkner's limitations for representing the little girl. In the latter's refusal of ambiguity, she is the racialized other that exists in the margins of white-supremacist perception. But, taken in the former's indeterminacy, that the little girl receives *less* representational weight than other nonwhite characters raises the question of who receives conceptual solidity that matters in Faulkner's world. What the girl adds to my inquiry into her mean difference is this: given that the little girl's paltriness cannot even support her being "translated into moral debates," yet still makes her hyper-visible in her unsettling reticence, either notion can be taken as a sign of Faulkner's expansive nuance *and* his unresolved views on matters such as racial desegregation, one irreducible to the other.[43] Examined from both vantages, Faulkner seems to be consciously channeling this interpretative difficulty with his stories, and also that he is not.

Interestingly, this stance is mirrored by prominent critics' response to the interpretative difficulty of Faulkner. Attempts to hold space for the contradictions and ethical binds of reading Faulkner today give rise to methodologies and conceptual systems that focus on weakness,

[41] Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics*, 103.
[42] Ibid, 103.
[43] Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 69.

liminality, multiple points of entry, etc.[44] The allure to puzzle out Faulkner's uncertainty restates the problem of mediation as a problem for criticism that extends to how we read modernism. How does criticism move from the sensuous and the unmediated to concepts? Can this be said to highlight the critic's fantasy of mimesis? The emulation of Faulkner's approach to difference—defined as a weakly coded approach to treating difference or a representation of difference that is weak in its signs—brings out the fantasy that embracing opacity as an interpretative framework leads to clarity, equilibrium, or a "good faith" relationship with ambiguity. To what extent do indeterminate practices such as weak theory refuse too the ambiguity, say, of an approach that reads aslant heterogeneous positions?

With respect to the problem of mediating the little girl's identity, her minimalism could indicate that Faulkner is automatically rendering her as is, without his mark of lyrical amplification; or that he has intervened *already* in adjusting *his* approach to her characterization. Discerning between the two as, let's say, passive or active responses to difference feels consequential for an inquiry that *can go only so far* as to conclude that this bind exists for either paradigm. The more salient point is that Faulkner's equivocation is relatively easy to mask, as Quentin's innocent hang-out with the little girl demonstrates by way of analogy. That Quentin is later arrested for child abduction could be the narrative's way of calling out its main character's bluff of nonchalance, but without passing a verdict, so to speak, as Quentin is spared jail time.

The poetics of noncommunication—stiffened by a girl who doesn't speak or convey the author's personal motives—makes her easier to slide over and into an established aesthetic framework of racial opacity. But it does not seem, at least not to this reader, that Faulkner uses the

[44] For example, see Dimock, "Weak Network: Faulkner's Transpacific Reparations" and Dorothy J. Hale, "*As I Lay Dying*'s Heterogeneous Discourse," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 23, no. 1 (Fall 1989): 5-23.

abstraction of the little girl to nuance the gamut of racial types in *The Sound and the Fury*. That Faulkner absolves himself of the responsibility to deeply and mindfully represent the girl's interiority yields the same aesthetic outcome: a thin description of her particularities. One wonders if a thick description or a stream-of-conscious monologue delivered by the little girl—aesthetic compensation through *explicitness*—would be satisfactory. Faulkner does not push hard enough; he does not take responsibility to learn to write black characters deliberately. It is as though the world of the little girl cannot fit inside the novel's head. He falls short.

Instead of parsing this equivocalness, "found neither in a triumphal certitude nor in a detached indifference," we might focus instead on the effects of the lack of a universalizing, authorial presence that, through itself, disambiguates silent differences.[45] In Larsen's *Passing*, the tactful rotation away from difference that keeps difference from becoming a "scene," if being a novel of nothing but, demonstrates how narrative fiction ensures that there is a "looking away" by generating something more to look at. *The Sound and the Fury* draws on the same aesthetics of uncertainty to perform slightly the opposite: Faulkner baits his reader, without a fully extended gesture, to look upon the trauma created by and for the South's slaveholding legacy. What we then find inside the text is a modernist-microsocial form that attends to and looks away from microexpressions and affects that *seem* to hold an essential "truth." The blank space between Quentin's responses and his absent feelings or interpretation is one iteration. I conclude by providing additional instances of contingent affects that lack explication, operating as zones of blur constructed to conceal and reveal difference.

[45] Glissant, *Faulkner*, *Mississippi*, 23.

Zones of blur

Differentiating themselves as suspiciously vacant of meaning, zones of blur put into question if race, and also gender, refers to something about a present situation, and if that simultaneously blocks off other zones of meaning. The zones recall Spillers's points about *Absalom, Absalom!* regarding the "discomfiting fact that Faulkner, if not a racist in the classical sense of the term, took his cues about 'race' from his environment…But this truth about the story, inasmuch as we are circling and encircling it…and never reaching it, quite, suggests to my mind that perhaps there is something lurking behind the race piece that makes the sign of race both its surrogate name and its primary expressive vehicle." With this inflection, the careful preparations to read the encounter with the little girl as one of race work to further occlude her. Instead, for Spillers, "*repetition* is the problem that marks the obsession whose 'cover story,' let's say, is provided by the sign of 'race.' Because suspension and delay are primarily achieved here in the repetitive, the story of the novel opens widely to puzzle and uncertainty."[46] Here, "race" is a container for the disparate, murky problems within it but also do not constitute it as such.

In her investigation into the types of literary uncertainty that attract and shape aesthetic judgment and criticism, Namwali Serpell writes that: "We are so often blinded by the fact of multiplicity in novels that we have not often moved beyond what it represents—conflict, comprehensiveness, negative capability—to consider what it affords as an experience."[47] Serpell sharpens the claim's stakes through an ethics of reading experience, but I prefer to treat it as a reflection on the process of social phenomena as related to scenes of interpretation and criticism. Through her theoretical definition of "adjacency," Serpell opens up a mode of social analysis that

[46] Spillers, "Faulkner Adds Up," 348.
[47] Ibid, 131.

valorizes the discrete and the discreet, that is particularity ("discrete" in a numerical sense) and a diffuseness that moves through, without landing on, what is distinct and individuated (discreet). Discreteness and discretion make sure that the "thing described—an image, a character, an event—recede…but does not vanish behind the palimpsest of its descriptions."[48]

In comparison to the "unrecorded transference" that Richard Godden notes when Benjy Compson thinks "two discontinuous events, one event" without signal from the narrative, the Quentin section shows the workings of adjacency through what I call an "unprocessed transference" of memories, images, emotions, and compulsive associations.[49] We can begin by noting that the episode with the little girl is an "unprocessed transference" of Quentin's desire to sleep with his sister Caddy, an inversion of the incest fantasy that does not come to be. If the incest fantasy is more directly *the* secret of the novel (relative to the non-secret the child emblematizes), by bringing the secret "to life," the episode may represent a kind of reality testing of the sexual and racial obsessions that dictate Quentin's chapter and the entire book. It is as though Faulkner asks: what would happen if a dirty, little girl of ambiguous racial identity were to pop up in the story and hang out with Quentin? What their encounter provides is a glimpse of another version of Quentin as a bored babysitter, and perhaps even a counterfactual narrative where his affective attachments to his fears about difference are not defined by threat but by neutrality. The move to firm up a concept of what exactly their encounter means would be to concretize what differentiates them, a naming which tends to create great disruptions in the novel. Indeed, it is when Quentin is arrested as a predator and the little girl is reunited with her brother Julio that their encounter abruptly concludes. As it turns out, their broken chain of communication left their episode impassively open to take in more.

[48] C. Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 136.
[49] Godden, *Fictions of Labor*, 16.

Even if not stirring up a desire to know her, the girl's lack of a concept still exerts an analytical force to define her identity in the novel. While it initially appears that her function is to highlight the work's invisible structure, whatever revelation this discloses proves to be an illusory kind of transparency given her implicitly absent interiority. If taken as an allegory for the problem that Glissant and Spivak address, the girl serves to point out the assumption that the minor figures a broader, consequential meaning where it cues up a larger structure. It is perhaps this expectation of a secondary and truth-bearing meaning of the micro that prompts one to establish links between clarity and opacity, disclosure and transparency, for what is ultimately under-articulated. At the same time, where encounters are marked by some incommensurability (in age, appearance, the number of coins in one's pocket) which evokes an invisible structure of domination, Glissant and Spivak show that the drive to understand difference in these terms runs the risk of relying solely on the social categories that political knowledge adopts as a starting point. For all that, Faulkner demonstrates how the horizon of one encounter is its process of making up a relation.

Chapter Four

Living with Difference: Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and Raven Leilani's *Luster*

In previous chapters, modernist novels mobilized the microsocial detail to reveal and conceal differences which could not be concertedly discussed at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, indirection enables Henry James, Nella Larsen, and William Faulkner to engage these fleeting interactions as complex performances of something more, such as interracial contact, social climbing, young-adult sexuality, and racial and gender hierarchy. By placing these larger concepts in abeyance in order to focus on what's in front of characters—for example, taking a lost child home or gossiping about friends—their novels enable us to perceive what is unspoken as meaning-laden designations of how race, gender, and class move through encounter. As I have been arguing, the prevalence of this ambiguity is grounded in the texts' persistent microsocial observation of characters' moods, gestures, and cognitive processes. The uncertainty produced by a micro-macro duality that entwines itself with novelistic discourse is key to modernism's profundity; it is part of the story of why modernist novels are written in the way that they are.

Almost a century later, the value of such measured social perspicuity has run out. The attitude that if difference is to be represented, it must be done so indirectly, is now questioned in its political merit. In Anglophone narrative fiction concerned with the minutiae of everyday encounter, it is no longer true that noticing the hidden or opaque will necessarily further our understandings of partners, friends, or families. Super-subtle analysis acquires a different reputation in the context of a twenty-first-century Western cultural milieu defined by radical openness around difference. Now, fine-grained novelistic representations appear gratuitous, in part because the opacities portrayed in the modernist novel are obvious: that race, gender, sex, and class are inscribed everywhere on encounter, and their ubiquity is tacitly understood.

Contemporary novelists Raven Leilani and Sally Rooney channel and reflect on the gains of accounting for invisible forms of difference and domination in their stories about intimate relations. That the outcomes of microsocial analysis are subject to question, I argue, points to their expended utility in popular, middle-brow fiction which depicts characters navigating the difficulties of casual dating, office politics, family dynamics, and their acute awareness thereof. Known for its will to explicitness around sensitive subjects and others (income, identity, aging, health, etc.) the Anglo-American millennial novel is where we can see up close the depleted analytic of indirection in post-postmodernity. Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and Leilani's *Luster* (2020) place on display the gratuitousness of super-subtle readings for the millennial novelist. Their stories center on female characters—Frances and Edie respectively—who confront the inefficacy of their acute analyses of their relationships, professions, and upbringings for securing greater relational, material, and emotional stability. They enter into romances marked by blatant difference and proceed to spin their wheels decoding the microsocial behaviors of their partners, who are nonthreatening, financially comfortable, married white men. Recall in *Luster* when Edie finally recognizes Eric, the middle-aged man she's been seeing, in his most genuine form following a protracted *méconnaissance*: "Eric's fly is down and this current iteration, this soft, breathing haircut—*I can't say what it is*, but I get this feeling that this is actually his most honest form, and it really pisses me off."[1] Edie is exasperated when she realizes that her tendency to "ma[k]e everyone who passes through [her] life subject to a close and inappropriate reading" is not rewarded by her choice of object (Leilani 227). The overabundance of microsocial detail in these two novels—eye movements, gut checks, recalibrated attitude—increases the complexity of this gratuitousness. On top of that, characters' apparent recognition of the

[1] Raven Leilani, *Luster* (New York: Picador, 2020), 56; my italics. Further citations are inside the text.

redundant labor of such hyper-attunement, rendered through a novelistic discourse largely comprised of transient incidents that others fail to notice, *itself* produces an overly stacked set of concerns.

One literary-critical explanation for the exhaustion of microsocial observation is that the realm of the unsaid—here, the unspeakable concerns of race, sex, class, and health—has risen to the surface of the novel. As I explored through Larsen's tact, the two discursive levels scaffolded into the modernist novel have merged in contemporary fiction: the "sub-conversation" of non-normative thoughts that female characters obfuscated in dialogue now makes up the majority of middle-brow fiction, including Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* and Elif Batuman's *The Idiot*. The novelistic outcome of this can be assessed through the loss of the narrator's vantage in the "postfictional universe, in which," as Timothy Bewes writes, "it is no longer possible to distinguish the person writing from the person represented, the actions described from the act of description."[2] As the site of much opacity in the modernist novel, this elusive realm of meaning, transmitted through an arch relation between dialogue and discourse, style and narrative, character and narrator, and narrator and author, more boldly underwrites character development. Microaggressions, financial precarity, IBS, casual sex, and endometriosis are unavoidable subject matter. In *Luster*, Leilani takes to deconstructing, and in the same turn embellishing with vivid detail and humor, everyday scenarios where the hidden workings of race, gender, and class become apparent. In the course of being fired for a string of semi-public office sex, Edie registers with bathos that she, the company's "Grateful Diversity Hire," is being let go by two white women doing their utmost to manage the situation's optics (Leilani 72). In Rooney's *Conversations with Friends,* the soundless machinery of sex, money, intimacy and power is explicitly unpacked by characters with the aid of feminist and neo-Marxist concepts. Frances and her best friend Bobbi message about love in terms

[2] Timothy Bewes, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 43.

of "something other than an interpersonal phenomenon" but a "social value system [that is] both antithetical to capitalism…and yet also its subservient and facilitatory."[3] On the one hand, the lack of mystification around everything that remains mystifying, including being one of two black employees in a publishing firm or the impassivity of a romantic partner, could be read as a tongue-in-cheek recognition of a neoliberal alacrity for self-disclosure and publicity shaped by social-media communication. When Frances compliments her lover Nick on his expensive coat, he jokes about her commodity fetishism (Rooney 230); later he will share his insecurities about his family's wealth (250). Even if taken as conscientious audits of one's social affairs, the political high notes of such scenes can smack of a certain fatuousness. In Rooney, this effect is produced not only by an attempt to colloquialize Marxist and feminist jargon in the novel, which feels insoluble in the pool of literary discourse, but also because the gesture to thematize disparities is no longer the artistic or political event it once was. In the end, Rooney's and Leilani's frank portrayals of harms engendered by the propagation of capitalist, patriarchal, and racist forces by their partner or even one's own hands do not result in plans for change.

And yet Frances and Edie continue to scrutinize, to read symbolic significance into acts that don't rise to the level of the petty.[4] This chapter asks: what is the function of fine-grained social analysis in the millennial novel? And what does the exhaustion of super-subtle reading reveal about the function of the millennial novel for its writers and readers? If the abstract novel of indirectness makes sense for a modernist moment of articulating difference that can't be clearly, what is the value of holding onto an obsolete mode when now difference is not necessarily more commonplace but

[3] Sally Rooney, *Conversations with Friends* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), 180. Further citations inside the text.
[4] Thank you to Lauren Michele Jackson for this insight.

available for explicit discussion? Is the pleasure of reading subtle analysis in the millennial novel distinct from the modernist pleasure of reading things that are partially concealed?

To begin, it is important to note that the exhaustion of the microsocial both arises from and creates interpersonal difficulties in the novels themselves. We may ask whether Leilani and Rooney write women that are hypervigilant because they acknowledge the typicalness of this choice, or they take seriously the conditions and concerns that shape this sociopsychological state. The novels are fused with their protagonists' proclivities for social reading, just as these characters are in a way constituted through them. That the fleeting expressions of other people are palpable to Edie and Frances corresponds to their distinct experiences of the daily rounds of precarity and discrimination. Frances and Edie are women in their early twenties whose livelihood hangs in the balance of their checking account statement, chronic health issues, lack of family support, and under-paying jobs. Frances and Edie cannot help but come up with thicker meanings for thin incidents of hostility and invalidation.[5] For Edie, this attentiveness kicks into overdrive in office settings and on dates with Eric. At one point, Edie watches "the dissonance…finally dawning on" Eric when he sees her apartment, "this gentle horror in his eyes, as if it has just occurred to him—upon the introduction of this economic dimension—the mutual desperation involved in merging two people at opposite ends of life" (Leilani 36). The creeping realization indicates that which is invisible to the naked eye but not to Edie, who observes Eric as "he settles down on my futon, gingerly, like he's afraid the frame will not support his weight": "And while I never enter a room without wondering what personal adjustments need to be made, it is strange to see something similar happen to this friendly, white, midwestern man. It is strange to see him noticing about himself what I always notice—the

[5] A psychological reading of Frances and Edie might reasonably trace their hypervigilance back to their unpredictable family environments, however this interpretation on itself is insupportable in the novels, as I explain soon.

optimism, the presumption, this rarefied alternate reality in which there is nowhere he does not belong" (36). As their lives grow more enfolded, Leilani shows Edie and Eric managing the disparities that become more obvious to both. In this passage, the microsocial indexes not quite a moment of intersubjectivity, where characters are sensing each other's thoughts and emotions, but rather Edie reading Eric while his thoughts are kept hidden, possibly for her sake but more evidently for the sake of closing out the date.

In short, while the novels show that Frances's and Edie's tendency to "read into" situations is an extension of their subject positions, they appear to also complicate that inference by stressing the limits of their observational labors. Despite their highly keen, not to mention well-put, insights into the economic, racial, and gender asymmetries that affect their lives to differing degrees, Edie and Frances struggle to decode the behavior of those closest to them. Edie describes the gap between microexpression and meaning in the following terms: "If I'm honest, all my relationships have been like this, parsing the intent of the jaws that lock around my head. Like, is he kidding, or is he hungry? In other words, all of it, even the love, is a violence" (Leilani 206). Leilani and Rooney invite us into a world where microsocial sensing is warranted in order to navigate imbalanced interactions yet seems redundant because such disparities are obvious. At the same time, perhaps as a symptom of that redundancy, characters feel less authorized by their readings to make a change. Microsocial encounter can provide political concepts a context for examination, yet Leilani and Rooney lead us to ask: at which scale does microsocial reading become consequential? In close relations, does the noticing of nuance always lead to somewhere surprising or does it prompt discoveries of what is quite predictable?

If designed to re-establish concepts of difference that plainly obvious, such outcomes for microsocial analysis in the twenty-first century are unsettling in works where female characters buoy themselves up with anti-racist and feminist rhetoric highly studied in occluded power structures.

Their hyper-sensitivity does not reveal the revelation that these frameworks wish to achieve.[6] For many readers of Rooney, this presents a political fallacy. As cultural critic Katy Waldman writes, Rooney's novels create a "reflexivity trap" wherein characters "refract their obsessions with interpersonal power through a sociopolitical lens" yet that awareness goes only so far as a "kind of pained complicity…Rooney, like her characters, seems content to perform awareness of inequality, even to exploit it as a device, but not to engage with it as a profound and messy reality."[7] The objection is also laid before the neoliberal citizen of the world today, who has knowledge about injustice and yet does not know what to do with her complicity.[8] In this regard, the novels are definitively millennial: sex, race, health, and class are unavoidably constitutive of the everyday, yet inert for making a difference about difference.

From one perspective, super-sensitive reading stalls because to look to macro-concepts to explain personal problems is reductive; it is a disservice to read human interaction as a performance of larger systems. In Rooney and Leilani, the hesitation to understand behavior with these terms stems from a desire to not impose one's interpretation upon others. Indeed, the presence of tension alerts one to the absence of parity in perspectives. Yet while empathizing with Frances and Edie, one can wonder why they dwell on objects that are simultaneously self-evident and withholding; if

[6] Thanks again to Lauren Michele Jackson for this formulation.
[7] Katy Waldman, "Has Self-Awareness Gone Too Far in Fiction?" *The New Yorker*, August 19, 2020, last accessed June 19, 2023, https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/has-self-awareness-gone-too-far-in-fiction. Characters' self-awareness of social disparities yet inability to transform them also informs comparisons between Rooney and naturalist and realist traditions of social observation. See Brandon Taylor, "zola was kind of a zaddy, no?" *substack*, March 16, 2021, last accessed June 19, 2023, https://blgtylr.substack.com/p/zola-was-kind-of-a-zaddy-no
[8] Thank you to Brian Glavey for this point. Even more unsettling is that the end of both novels can be read as capitulating to established power dynamics: Rooney chooses heteronormativity; Edie becomes pregnant with Eric's child and his wife Rebecca not only takes care of her when she miscarries but helps her get back on her feet.

their observations leave them more confused; and if the equivocation has to do with the fear of being wrong or being gratuitous.

Confronting us with the inconsequentiality of trivial matters, the novels go on to show there is more to the story *through* their fixation on the micro. In this chapter I argue that what makes *Conversations with Friends* and *Luster* politically daring is less so their upfront representation of difference in the everyday than characters' uncertainty about its meaning pertaining to what to *do,* how to *act*, in accordance with what they observe. In the scenes I explicate, Edie will hesitate to assign racist cause to Eric's behavior; Frances will not stop feeling confused as to whether Nick is being impassive on purpose. What is emphasized throughout is a state of doubt, a hesitation over assigning truth claims to the behaviors of humans one wants relation with. In turning away from macro-level politics, Leilani and Rooney explore what distance from these frameworks looks like from an interior perspective.

Micro-microsocial theorizing

Before proceeding to the readings, a number of novelistic features are important to mention as we puzzle out the contemporary inefficacy of microsocial observation. First, relations in *Luster* and *Conversations with Friends* are defined by their open-endedness. Edie and Frances pursue romantic arrangements or, in today's parlance for unformalized relationships, "situationships." The open form of these romances, combined with a dread of vulnerability and lack of communication, prevents Edie and Frances from taking for granted what Lauren Berlant has called "love's debilitating fetish of implicitness."[9] What also makes implicitness a problem rather than a promise is that their

[9] Lauren Berlant, "Feminism and the Institutions of Intimacy," in *The Politics of Research*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan and George Levine (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 149.

attachments involve third-party members, which requires prodigious readings of subtle social print in order to balance shifting expectations.

Made more salient by ephemeral relationships, another significant feature in the novels is that feelings are hard to attest to as such. Affirming both their illusoriness and their mutability, Frances at one point thinks that "[f]eelings were just feelings, they had no material reality" (Rooney 169). However, Frances's theories run their course in the lived reality of her relationships. Her intellect is sapped of reason whenever she is left to decipher Nick's inscrutable texts. Following their first break-up, Frances rereads old instant-message conversations in search of concrete "evidence" that a relationship did indeed transpire, only to find "a few boring logistical messages about when he would be back in the house and what time I might arrive. There were no passionate declarations of love or sexually graphic text messages. This made sense, because the affair was conducted in real life and not online, but I felt robbed of something anyway" (Rooney 94). Frances's doubts over her capacity to see their emotional situation clearly, for what it was and now is, are triggered by a friendly yet vague post-breakup text from Nick: "It was so devoid of tone or meaning that it infuriated me. It was as if, our relationship having come to an end, he had demoted me right back to my previous status as acquaintance" (Rooney 94). Despite the formal lack of a relationship, Frances's reaction to her "demotion" reveals the presence of a relationship through negation. Indexing and vexing the vacantness of their affair, Nick's text not only symbolizes but constitutes the threshold that has been crossed, evoking Foucault's microsociality of the transgression as that which "crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration."[10] Much like Foucault's transgression, wherein a limit is generated by its very crossing only to disappear, the text message reflects the nonexistence of a relationship while simultaneously

[10] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 33.

indicating its degradation through a violation of an unspoken code, which, as it were, consists of not creating signs of intimacy. By turns of negative logic, Frances considers: "The affair might be over, I thought, but something being over is not the same as something never having happened" (Rooney 94).

And so, Frances finds herself in an emotional whirlpool whenever she drops into the microsocial to derive an understanding of a relationship. This difficulty stems from the perceptual, affective, and epistemological instability of attempts to see relationships as they are from within. This might require enough detachment to assess the dynamic, and one's role in it, in terms of a totality. As it were, something like cognitive saturation tends to make Frances's perceptiveness buckle under itself, even while the narrative "eye" remains stable in its scrutiny of an interaction, as I discuss later. This inertia of social perception, recreated by the continual running ahead of the narrative despite the depletion of the main character, is both the microsocial analytic's symptom and its originating cause. In other words, in the phenomenology of microsocial observation, the observer looks to the peripheries of exchange in order to figure out what's in front of her, but gets lost in the dim edges of encounter.

As unremarkable threshold-crossing, these "elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties which are immediately upset so that *thought is ineffectual* as soon as it attempts to seize them."[11] Rooney and Leilani flag characters' ineffectualism when making meaning out of microsocial expression within novels engineered, with stunning stamina and ingenuity, almost entirely out of what Foucault calls "nondiscursive language"—that is, the poetics of demoted status, unformulated codes, conversational behaviors, and in general regimes of encounter from which we make relational meaning that "is neither completely nor fully in control of itself, even though it is sovereign for us

[11] Foucault, "Preface to Transgression," 33-4; my italics.

and hangs above us."[12] In the world of Leilani and Rooney, something as anodyne as a text message encloses a second order of commentary that is both "meta-" and "sub-": its significance is contingent upon the interactions between two people, unfolding with each ensuing encounter, yet somehow remains independent of them. The brevity that is constitutive of the microsocial incident subverts, just as it fosters, the imperative to "read into" loaded interactions.

If observational labor is turned on its back by relation's torques, it is also what renders them so fantastically resistant to rational logic. While one's attempts to obtain a vantage on a relationship they're currently inside will ever be asymptotic, focusing on minor details can also place one in a strangely strategic relation to themselves.[13] Reading into the particular can risk the calcification of roles one may or may not have signed up for, as such. We see Frances turning over the powers of Nick's passivity (after they do so together[14]) while she watches him play the "role" of the intelligent

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[12] Foucault, "Preface to Transgression," 39.

[13] Not to mention that the analytical and affective overextension required to decode interactions with, and sometimes for, male partners risks re-establishing a power hierarchy where it has become apparent.

[14] Frances: "I knew I would have to be the one to kiss you, I said. And that you would never kiss me, which made me feel vulnerable. But I also felt this terrible power, like, you're going to let me kiss you, what else will you let me do? It was sort of intoxicating. I couldn't decide if I had complete control over you or no control at all.

And now what do you feel? he said.

More like complete control. Is that bad?

He said he didn't mind. He thought it was healthy for us to try and correct the power disparity, though he added that he didn't think we would ever be able to do it completely. I told him that Melissa thought he was 'pathologically submissive' and he said it would be a mistake to assume that meant he was powerless in relationships with women. He told me he thought helplessness was often a way of exercising power." (246)

After Frances and Nick discuss their power balance, we see Frances applying these findings in her observations of Nick's call with Melissa a few pages later (249). A similar dialectic between conversation and narrative event emerges after Frances writes a short story about Bobbi's "personal domination" of her (243), after which the discourse proceeds to refer, for the first time, to Bobbi as the love of her life. I take this to illustrate the dialogic operation of the novel: Frances discovers, refines, and applies analytical vocabulary to make sense of her relationships *through* interactions. She remains susceptible to the influence of others, which discloses new stages of intimacy that comprise the novel's plot points.

listener with his wife Melissa: "He was excellent on the phone that time. I had no doubt that Melissa was the one who'd made the call" (Rooney 249). As borne out in his texting style, Nick's tendency to be "pathologically submissive" is ironically what enables him to hold the upper-hand in his relationships, yet it is an upper-hand that he is apparently inept at managing in any premeditated way (Rooney 235). At the same time, Nick recognizes that "helplessness was often a way of exercising power" (Rooney 246), which Frances and Melissa know well enough, as their attempts to mirror or more actively manage Nick's passivity yield diminishing returns. Here, the microsocial instantiation of a power difference, which Frances is always around to catch, operates through paradox. Both judgments about Nick's passivity present themselves on the same plane of possibility—Nick knowingly and unknowingly wields his passivity; this behavior is unintentional yet programmatic to his relationships. And although collecting these microsocial gestures works to complicate Frances's interpretations, her observations of the couple's dynamic still provide insight into her relationship with Nick. In the microsocial we find a small bank of information. In this chapter, I will continue to draw out such ambiguities of the microsocial dimension and the difficulty of meaning-assignment to inchoate and well-worn social dynamics and differences. The vague symbolic registers of the microsocial stir up in Frances and Edie a consciousness of social disparity just as it invokes feelings of ineffectualism, one feeding the other.

An added host of complex factors further prevents the microsocial from being treated as altars of social insight, factors which are not specific to the novels but are important to enumerate. First, the microsocial is "micro" because, in the words of Emily Apter, what is "manifest at its most minute scale as a hum, a whisper, a mood, an atmosphere" is largely observed by women, people of color, individuals whose sexual preferences are deemed anti-normative, and anyone whose

experiences and viewpoints are deprioritized in the operations of everyday life.[15] Second, if taken from a hermeneutic standpoint, to quote again from Apter, the "microphysical or molecular or non-transcendent disarticulations of power" are so incipient that it is tricky to extrapolate from an isolated incident.[16] The interpretative problem presented by, say, "nanoracism" is scale or rather, as Apter notes, "its indifference to scale: the smallest gestures can trigger great trauma, thus placing quotidian blessures on the same plane as world-historical catastrophe."[17] As Lauren Berlant echoes: "Structural power is expressed in such incidents. Incidents add up to environments, toxic atmospheres…This is why keeping things 'in scale' is not possible: Many forces converge in the intimate encounter with structural power, and they're often not fully equivalent at the level of event."[18] Third, as I have mentioned, this already cognitively overburdened effort is further complicated by the sheer brevity of the microsocial, which, in these novels, is the keystone of genuine feeling. Leading Edie and Frances to double down their efforts, the combination of the brevity and plenitude of these emissions replicates a puzzle in face-to-face encounter that microsociologist Erving Goffman phrases in terms of "repleteness" and "correctness." Insofar as statements express intentional and unintentional information about the speaker, these communications transmit everything one needs to know. However, the "use of language or language-like signs" places into question the extent to which a speaker's expression adequately matches "the facts," that is what the speaker wants to disclose, or thinks himself to be disclosing.[19]

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[15] Emily Apter, *Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse, and the Impolitic* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 12.
[16] Ibid, 10.
[17] Ibid, 73.
[18] Lauren Berlant, "The Predator and the Jokester," *The New Inquiry*, December 13, 2017, last accessed June 20, 2023, https://thenewinquiry.com/the-predator-and-the-jokester.
[19] Erving Goffman, *Strategic Interaction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 5-7.

Add in "another issue…the relation of what is said to what is known by the sayer," and the search for clarity uncovers more impasses for the reader of the microsocial incident.[20]

Indeed, the uncertainty that precipitates and undermines the endeavor to infer mimetic meaning between genuine feeling (or lack thereof) and the transmitted information of statements, facial expressions, and text messages is precisely what blocks Frances and Edie from claiming they know their close ones well. They spend the narratives searching for buried links between what others say and what they believe themselves to be saying. When they find these links, they turn to the analytics of anti-racist, Marxist, and feminist thought, yet are surprisingly circumspect to reduce their interpersonal problems to these frameworks (I discuss how soon). And so, ultimately, we have a folding up of microsocial analysis—in other words, noticing followed by nullification, all the while noticing oneself noticing and nullifying.

Rumination without closure, process without progress, is built into the depiction of everyday encounter in both novels. Rooney and Leilani rotate the confrontation between structural analysis and microsocial detail and demonstrate the non-transferability of knowledge across scale, foregrounding points of mismatch. Connection goes into crisis when the novels draw out the microsocial and the macrosocial, and don't know how to move back and forth between the two. The novels flag both discourses and their breakdown at junctures where difference obtrudes onto conversation. To the extent that the difficulty of difference hinges on the status of our interpretations, Leilani and Rooney show their characters in the process of learning how, when, and *to what point* it serves to assign explicit meaning to oblique disparities in encounter.

[20] Goffman, *Strategic Interaction*, 6.

Reading mean difference in *Luster*

The question hovers in the background of the opening scene of *Luster* as Edie prepares for a first date with Eric, a library archivist in an open marriage. After a month of speaking on a dating app, they agree to meet. While eager to bed Eric following their extended courtship—"A month is too long to talk online"—Edie has her reservations (Leilani 8). While she has dated older, white men before,

> for him, this seems to be new territory. Not simply to be out on a date with someone who is not his wife and decades younger, but to be out with a girl who happens to be Black. I can feel it in how cautiously he says *African American*. How he absolutely refuses to say the word *Black*. As a rule, I try to avoid popping the dusky cherry. I cannot be the first Black girl a white man dates. I cannot endure the nervous renditions of backpacker rap, the conspicuous effort to be colloquial, or the smugness of pink men in kente cloth. (Leilani 7-8)

Cognizant of the racial and gender scripts that practically prefigure their IRL encounter, on the date Edie is more preoccupied with the *implicit* signs of their differences. For their first meet-up Eric chooses a theme park, a locale that makes the "potent drug of a keen power imbalance," once an aphrodisiac in their online conversations, a touchy subject (Leilani 7). Although "the age discrepancy doesn't bother me," wandering through the park Edie thinks: "It's hard not to be aware of an age discrepancy when you are surrounded by the most rococo trappings of childhood. The Tweety Bird balloons, the plastic, soulless eyes of the Taz mascot, the Dippin' Dots. As we enter the gates, I feel the high-fructose sun of the park like an insult. This is a place for children. He has taken me to a place for children" (Leilani 7).

Eric's choice, inscrutable for its lack of awareness, becomes the express signal of his acknowledgment of Edie's age. But surely that is not what is going on here. Edie scans Eric's face for "any indication that this might be a joke or a telling manifestation of his anxiety about the mere twenty-three years I've spent on earth" (Leilani 7). Finding no such sign, Edie continues in the unilateral task of parsing their difference as it arises contingently, such as while riding a rollercoaster:

"Of course, there is still the business of trying to look sexy while hurtling across the sky. Like most white people who eat beans in the woods undeterred by the fresh fecal evidence of hungry bears, Eric finds his mortality and soft meaty body a petty, incidental thing. I, on the other hand, am acutely aware of all the ways I might die" (Leilani 9). Soon Edie eases into the date ("After the first two rides I am enjoying myself, and not just because dying means I won't have to pay my student loans.") yet she continues to pick up on Eric's obliviousness to his own ease. He skips lines with pricey, first-tier tickets; he slips his business card to the ride attendant; later he will tell Edie he has never lied to spare anyone's feelings.

In this scene and the novel as a whole, the strain to mask, decipher, and manage the situated dynamics of difference drives and is driven by Edie's heightened attentiveness. The novel figures this affective overextension in racial and gendered terms. *Luster* records Edie clocking the effects of her behavior on others and vice versa in settings that range from the MTA subway to job interviews. And so, the fortuitous circumstances that have "allowed [Eric] to live candidly" highlight, in Edie's life, the "lies you tell to survive, the kindness of pretend…He has no idea how hard I'm trying" (Leilani 13, 14). Edie's observance of Eric's behavior can be ascribed to a construction of racial consciousness marked by hypervigilance, a state necessary for navigating everyday landmines of systemic inequality. The impulse to scan outward behavior for latent signs of harmfulness is exhausting, if not downright debilitating. The examples of "mean difference" that Edie registers underscore the psychic, material, and mortal gulfs that arrive on the scene of a first date.

One may wonder why the narrative goes to such artistic lengths to render the implicit signs of Eric's privilege when the differences are quite clear, if not glaring. The intensive attention to seemingly self-evident-to-the-point-of-nugatory instantiations of power imbalance rearticulates a question Heather Love poses of the political utility of microsociological observation, that "though it was well suited to describe social reality, microanalysis was not seen to provide the tools necessary to

conceptualize it—or to change it."[21] "Descriptively rich as it is," here the magnification of difference "raises the question of why we need this much fine-grained information about everyday life. Does such scholarship add to our knowledge of the world, or is it merely a reduplication of the world?"[22] These questions get to the heart of the hermeneutic process that draws pressing meanings from surface signs of difference. Notably, when cataloguing these nascent signs, Leilani refers to skin not as a physical attestation of racial difference but as a costume donned for social interaction. Edie contemplates unzipping her "skin suit" (10) to show Eric the real her, and on their second date notes that Eric is "wearing the same skin, but more tightly, as if something immaterial and supermassive spit him out at the mouth of the bar and he is just going with it, waiting for me to call his bluff" (29). An impasse is engineered narratologically: the microsocial details that Leilani uses to index subtle movements organized around power imbalance appear to implicate everything—from characters' surroundings and clothing to how they're feeling and reacting—without resulting in a deepened understanding of structures conjured by subtle notes. These details are not then transfigured into an explanation of Eric's behavior or a higher state of self-understanding for Edie. In reaching for the appropriate framework to explicate prosaic speech acts and other objects of difference, one may find oneself then weighing the under-articulation of their appearance, and what one can or ought to do with the information gleaned.

In Edie's case, the labor of observation involves bracing for a flash of "bad" difference (i.e. white supremacy) as supposed to just "mean." On their second date, this one at a wine bar in lower Manhattan, Edie remains on the lookout. Whereas "[s]ome men at least have the decency to guide

[21] Heather Love, "Small Change: Realism, Immanence, and the Politics of the Micro," *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (Sep. 2016): 423.
[22] Ibid, 428.

you immediately to all the things that are wrong with them" (Leilani 13), Eric is proving more elusive:

> It gets us loose enough to talk about politics, but as he talks, I hold my breath. I know we are in agreement on the most general, less controversial ideological points—women are people, racism is bad, Florida will be underwater in fifty years—but there is still ample time for him to bring up how much he enjoyed *Atlas Shrugged*. Even with good men, you are always waiting for the surprise. (Leilani 30)

Were it uttered, Eric's aesthetic preference for Ayn Rand, a moniker of conservative ideology, would disclose a side of Eric that an "open" conversation about politics would not. Eric's tastes in literature could serve as a scene of clarification, providing another vector for describing what has so far remained theoretical. In other words, *Atlas Shrugged* would be a smoking gun for the asymmetry that Edie has been witnessing, so far, in under-stated forms. The aesthetic judgment would cinch what Edie has registered diffusely: that Eric doesn't take the subway; his careful oblivion of the flirtatious waitress; and his overall inattention to their difference of which everyone else seems aware: "this look, this acknowledgment of our asymmetry, which even in New York is a stumbling block for waitresses and cabbies and which Eric is totally oblivious to, even as I am routinely making assurances that yes, we are going to the same place, and yes, it is a single check" (Leilani 35). The present scenario is a picture of a conversation around avowed political views, "less controversial" because their general consensus smooths over power interests, whereas the second, hypothetical version featuring Ayn Rand would involve a social agon through which Eric's ideology of racial dominance would spring forth.

It is important to note that the latter does not take place; the scene does not feature an actual statement of aesthetic judgment but an anticipated one. Why focus on a speculative insult? I suggest that the blurriness between "mean" and "meaning" here—the unsuspecting way Edie is hurt by her analysis—is precisely what makes states of uncertainty favorable for learning more about the dynamics of aesthetic exchange as a modality of social difference. Indeed, it is the equivocality of not

only the quality of Eric's utterance but its potential for what it could communicate that renders this imaginary micro-interaction not just about an aesthetic object but also one itself. While it would be nearly impossible to take issue with a microaggression before it happened, Edie feels uneasy: Eric notes she seems "a little tense" (Leilani 31).[23] In *The Transmission of Affect*, Teresa Brennan notes that "imaginary threats" are detectible to an ego whose "self-protective function has been distorted by imaginary factors. Thus, envy can result from an imaginary belittlement, anger can result from imaginary insults, and so forth."[24] Although by "imaginary" Brennan means "unphysical, just that the origin of the threat is misperceived and its force, often, accordingly overestimated," she goes on to describe the self-fulfilling capacities of exaggerated offenses: "there is also some necessary relationship between the fear of the threat and the materialization of that fear or threat…Fears, from this standpoint, can be the means for attracting what they fear—the aggressive drives that appear to justify the anxieties."[25] Brennan's back-and-forth analysis moves between a position that does not want to overstate affect's capacity to grant unique insight to a shared field of being and also does not want to downplay its diagnostic, even self-actualizing, power. To the latter point, it is curious when subcutaneous expressions prophesize certain patterns of behavior, which, if borne out or not, still grant the observer insight into an exchange.

The vacillation in Brennan's theorization echoes a reflexive state that appears throughout this project and generates more uncertainty: when microsocial attunement is left examining its own tail. The labor of interpretation does not yield clear-cut hermeneutical rewards for Edie.[26] Given this

[23] On occasion, Eric will register that Edie's affect is tense, "aloof," and "hard to read" (12). In *Conversations with Friends*, Frances is also described as cold and inscrutable by those closest to her. This illustrates the surprising consistency with which Edie and Frances conceal the psychological turmoil provoked by others' behavior, which others minimally detect, nonetheless.
[24] Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 111.
[25] Ibid, 108, 111.
[26] Social philosopher Ellie Anderson categorizes this type of emotional labor as "hermeneutic" in order to better define the kinds of symbolic activity shouldered by cis-women in intimate,

preponderant outcome, we might consider: does the work of interpretation provoke uncertainty, or is it a means for approaching ambivalent feelings that were already there, hence the need for continual inspection? In *Luster* this recursiveness happens when differences are being turned over and, in that turning over, provide information on the positional dynamics of a relation. The difficulty comes down to Edie's wavering among equally plausible explanations for the tension. As Garth Greenwell writes in his exposition of Leilani's style, "terms like affirmation and negation are too blunt to characterize the quicksilver ambivalent shifts of feeling between Eric and Edie that Leilani charts. Not just shifts of feeling; also, importantly, shifts of power."[27] Rarely does Edie's awareness of these shifts modulate into an authoritative interpretation. Despite the various tableaus of power in which she finds herself, and despite the chance of a racist insult always around the corner, the nadir of difference does not appear in full view. Rather, Leilani portrays Edie's examination of Eric's microexpressions in a subjunctive mode: they are inflected with the *potential* to provide a platform for inchoate and even preemptive feelings of injury.

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heterosexual relationships. In Anderson's investigation into hermeneutic labor, women's "relationship-maintenance expertise" for deepening and retaining mutual, vested interests in preserving a relationship is read as work that disproportionally benefits the male partner. Building on recent feminist discourse on the "micro-politics" of intimate bonds, Anderson argues for the necessity of distinguishing hermeneutic labor from emotional labor in order to isolate the unique harms that accompany the former in its "explicit processes of interpreting emotions (as well as desires, intentions, and motivations) through cognitive processes, such as deliberating and ruminating" (2). Interestingly, what singles out hermeneutic labor is the factor of uncertainty: Anderson purports that while the emotional laborer can recognize her "skills for evoking and suppressing feelings within themselves…Hermeneutic laborers, on the other hand, may simultaneously recognize their own expertise and *doubt it*: because they may doubt that their hermeneutic labor is even possible" (16-17; my italics). What creates doubt is the unilateral undertaking of this activity; its under-appreciated efforts; irregular opportunities for its expression and a missing framework for application; insecurity over positive outcomes; and resulting anxiety and depression. See "Hermeneutic Labor: The Gendered Burden of Interpretation in Intimate Relationships between Women and Men," *Hypatia* 38, no. 1 (2023): 1-21.

[27] Garth Greenwell, "On a Sentence by Raven Leilani," *The Sewanee Review* (Spring 2022): 202.

Indeed, it appears that what keeps meaning suspended in these moments is the awareness that calling out the interpellating activity of microsocial observation is pathologizing for both the observed and the observer. This is seen more clearly when overt racism does occur in the novel and Edie holds back. At a later point in their relationship, when Edie has moved in with Eric's family without his knowledge, we find her gathering some words to confront his wife, Rebecca, after she puts Edie in her place for calling out a racist slur spoken to her adopted daughter, Akila, by her math tutor. Edie comes ready with "an entire treatise on the conspiracy of oppression" and "that my intellectual labor should be subsidized and the onus is not on the oppressed to consider the oppressor," but drops everything when she sees Rebecca "lugging a bag of mulch across the yard and I feel guilty all over again…It becomes clear to me, how keenly she is alone" (Leilani 121). The confrontation is derailed by Edie's guilt, although the valence of that guilt is unclear to the extent that it's provoked by Rebecca's solitude. Rebecca has allowed Edie to stay at their home as Edie looks for a new job: "I creep around the house and try to be racially neutral" (121). Taken together, these examples of Edie registering difference are missing a follow-through. Microsocial analysis forestalls conflict—we might even say by displacing it—in part because its "findings" are tricky to instrumentalize.

Sparing perpetrators their comeuppance but not the ringer of fierce analysis, the passivity of Leilani's and Rooney's main character makes her a political liability. Edie's and Frances's detection is often missing the attendant gesture of calling out what they see. One iteration of their ineffectualness is the scrupulous analysis of differences which are blatantly obvious. Here we see another manifested through a mismatch of scales: the reluctance to verbally designate and *take action around* racism's "rhetorical hellscape. A casual reduction so frequent it is mundane. Almost too mundane for the deployment of the R word" (Leilani 119-20). On the one hand, the ambiguity of subtle expressions of difference is symptomatic of how existing power structures undermine

individuals' ability to interpret social interaction. This does not prevent Edie from penetrating the obscure dynamics of intimate relations, but it does keep her from wholeheartedly subscribing to them. Edie resists making a final judgment.

Luster's milieu encourages forthrightness around difference, if at least to recognize its omnipresence in office settings, dates, text conversations, and phone calls. Yet in both Leilani's and Rooney's work, one sees a disconcerting pattern of silence and avoidance. The aesthetic value that modernists found in indirection around opacities of difference is paralleled here through a state of uncertainty around how much weight to assign to micro-expressions and their deconstruction. To make sense of this in the 2020s, I will situate Leilani's and Rooney's depictions of hesitancy around difference in a larger paradox of neoliberal sociality. The structure of feeling found in millennial novels provides a key cultural context for Rooney's and Leilani's stylistic choices for rendering difference.

Other people's opacity in the age of transparency

Constellating a group of writers born between 1981 and 1996, the millennial novel is distinctive in its unapologetic foregrounding of difference and its disinclination to speak upon others' experiences. The source of this contradiction is condensed by one cultural commentator on the genre: "the idea that one writer or character can speak for so many in this fractured age seems delusional."[28] Triggers for the millennial "eyeroll" include "marketing taglines, tired hierarchies, male canons and influencers"; "labels, pedestals and the uncritical lauding of spokespeople"; and the "'too big to fail' rhetoric that led to 2007-2008's financial crisis, populist political movements, dodgy claims on the

[28] Olivia Sudjic, "Darkly funny, desperate and full of rage: what makes a millennial novel?" *The Guardian*, August 17, 2019, last accessed June 19, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/17/what-makes-a-millennial-novel-olivia-sudjic.

sides of buses and Fyre festival."[29] The aversion to maximalist thought is counteracted by the novelist's proclivity for foregrounding the particular and the individual. This surfaces in fiction by Ling Ma, Ottessa Moshfegh, Jia Tolentino, Patricia Lockwood, Carmen Maria Machado, Brandon Taylor, and others who trace the invisible forces of capitalism, white supremacy, environmental crisis, etc. in everyday conversation, relationships, and encounters. As Taylor writes on his *substack*: "the Millennial Novel takes as its central conceit that a person's life is bounded and organized by some superseding force or forces, and that through careful examination of the effects of that force in a character's life—as read out by relationships, psychic embodiment, social alienation, and on—one can begin to understand the shape of that force."[30] However, even as millennial novels center characters deemed marginal to society, they do not aim to speak for entire groups of individuals. This dichotomy surfaces when cultural commentators attempt to address the millennial novel in general terms: "The common project, which so much critical attention often misses, is not to describe a general condition of millennial womanhood, but to look at the broader structures and power dynamics that we are all part of."[31] An unflagging dedication to disclosing the effects of large systems on an interpersonal level, combined with a non-presumptuousness around generalizing about others' experiences, expresses itself in the millennial taste for controversy but not confrontation.

A complicated offshoot of hyper-attunement is a feeling of fraudulence which accompanies an awareness of power. The surfacing of difference coincides with a mollification of its analysts, who are torn between a desire not to dilute more serious political exploitation with comparatively trivial slights, and a strong belief that the contingencies of encounter are where one finds invisible

[29] Sudjic, "Darkly funny, desperate and full of rage: what makes a millennial novel?"
[30] Taylor, "zola was kind of a zaddy, no?"
[31] Sudjic, "Darkly funny, desperate and full of rage: what makes a millennial novel?"

prejudice in postmodernity. This dilemma could account for the bivalent tone one finds in the millennial novel: deadly serious yet frivolous, swinging between a feeling of rage against the machine and impotence in the face of achieving deep social transformation.

The coexistence of serious attunement and a noncommittal approach shows itself in Leilani's and Rooney's characters' hesitation to self-authorize and the narratives' under-determined accumulation of social detail. Symptomatic of a postmodernist apprehensiveness of totalizing thinking, the novels' aesthetics of hesitation evoke what political scientist Wendy Brown has described as "postmodern criticism's perennial authority problem: our heightened consciousness of the will-to-power in all political 'positions' and our wariness about totalizing analyses and visions."[32] For Brown, the crux of the issue is that the "impulse toward elusiveness and subterfuge, this refusal to speak authoritatively or consistently, even as we seek partially to overcome it," in order to overcome oppressive regimes, is not conducive to "the development of an oppositional politics within postmodern political conditions [which] requires relentless theorization of these conditions and at times at least, a global view of their movement."[33] However, our millennial novelists demonstrate that relentless thinking does not a coherent front make, and any attempt to claim a

[32] Wendy Brown, "Feminist Hesitations, Postmodern Exposures," *differences* 3, no. 1 (April 1991): 79.
[33] Ibid, 63. Brown critiques proponents of so-called "identity politics" for aligning themselves with an injured, political subject position that in turn weakens rather than legitimates the practical (i.e. legal) enterprise of liberation. In averring the actual experiences of women "without requiring profound comprehension of the world in which one is situated" (67), Brown states that identarian feminists lose out in the struggle to devise a coherent politics within a postmodern circumstance that unsettles metaphysical reference points (the sui generis nature of women's experience) and wherein power "flows on surfaces and irrigates through networks rather than consolidating in bosses and kings" (65). However, Brown does not address that such circumstances might not only disarm but also disincentivize a holistic understanding of one's situation, an impasse produced by the difficulty of comprehending said factors in an overarching way. Furthermore, Brown's polemic does not leave space for a politics whereby a subject position conceived as a "symptom of [postmodernity's] ruptures and disorienting effects" (67) might then have unique insight into power's workings.

global view would require both over-stating one's point and under-stating one's authority in order to take proper aim at power's inversions.

To grant Brown the point, characters tend to linger on distributed power rather than harness it themselves. To begin to account for this, one might note the prominent millennial anxiety over what Rebecca Wanzo terms the "shame" of "misrecogn[izing] the space she inhabits,"[34] which may stem from one's recognition of her situated and therefore limited purview that preempts the assignment of definitive meanings to invisible forces. Seeming to express a similar view, Leilani discusses her attempt at a non-generic representation of Edie through a turn to the ordinary: "It was important to me that I not come to this book trying to make generalizations about what Blackness is and should be. I wanted to tell a story about a Black woman living her life. I wanted to depict the quotidian moments — the moments where she watches TV and masturbates."[35] A tricky position emerges for an author oriented to the manifold social and historical cross-sections in which identity is constructed, but has reservations about speaking in general terms. Leilani continues:

> Still, I thought a lot about the presentation of Blackness in this book, and what my responsibility was in its depiction. Race is not irrelevant, and neither Edie nor I live in a world where this is just incidental data that has no bearing on our lives. Both her Blackness and womanhood affect her life totally — professionally, romantically, psychologically. I felt a responsibility to represent the brutality and absurdity and joy of living at this intersection, and to represent it in a way where she isn't made noble or virtuous for how much she can endure.[36]

We see this focus on intersections preserved in the liminal situations in which Edie finds herself, keeping with a comment Leilani makes about herself elsewhere that she "always look[s] towards art

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[34] Rebecca Wanzo, "Precarious-Girl Comedy: Precarious-Girl Comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics," *Camera Obscura* 92, 31, no.2 (2016): 38.
[35] Kristen McGuinness, "Raven Leilani Captures the Complexities of Relationships," *Shondaland.com*, August 10, 2020, last accessed June 20, 2023, https://www.shondaland.com/inspire/books/a33512864/raven-leilani-captures-the-complexities-of-relationships.
[36] Ibid.

that remains open in its moral gestures, that treats contradictions as valuable."[37] That *Luster*'s portrayal of difference does not serve broader arguments about these highlighted dynamics is a sense produced also by Rooney's representation of heterosexual romance: "Relationships, [Rooney] explains, can never be free from power struggle, and writing a novel full of them is 'about being sensitive to how important those power disparities are, but also understanding that it's not like they exhaust the complete experience of what it means to be a human being or to be with someone else.'"[38] The ethos of Rooney and Leilani converge to the extent that, for both, to generalize is to indiscriminately reduce the specificity of an ordinary life. To move away from declarativeness is to render expansive the inexpressible moments of being in relation.

It begins to make more sense why the protagonists of *Luster* and *Conversations with Friends* are characters who edge away in moments that require them to mobilize their observations of the super-subtle. Moreover, it is possible that Frances and Edie gravitate to subsidiary positions because it might feel unjustifiable to knowingly reproduce the power structures they are so affected by. This symbolic reproduction is at times tied to explicit naming. For Edie in particular, one risk of the proximity to marked, racial difference is that she is left to manage the discomfort of white characters following "the deployment of the R word" (Leilani 119).[39] On top of that, Edie's and Frances's

[37] Raven Leilani and Patricia Lockwood, "Sharp, Fragmentary Fiction," Edinburgh Book Festival 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiXaAAUc2xM

[38] Anna Leszkiewicz, "Generation Normal," *The New Statesman,* September 12, 2018, last accessed June 20, 2023, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2018/09/sally-rooney-interview-normal-people-booker-prize-bbc-three-adaptation-conversations-with-friends.

[39] Here is the passage in full: "there is no fluffy alternative word for what I'm trying to convey, no way to effectively explain violations that are not overt. It is a rhetorical hellscape. A casual reduction so frequent it is mundane. Almost too mundane for the deployment of the R word, as with a certain sect of Good White Person the accusation overshadows the act. *Racism!* I should yell, because I'm sure Rebecca will receive it in the uppercase regardless, and already I feel her seizing on the drama of its implication, even though racism is often so mundane it leaves your head spinning, the hand of the ordinary in your slow, psychic death so sly and absurd you begin to distrust your own eyes. So it has taken a long time for me to get here" (119).

precarious professional status contributes to their lack of self-authorization. Edie and Frances are employees of publishing firms (one is fired, the other is an unpaid intern), which don't provide a meaningful wage to characters with liberal-arts college degrees. The inability to properly commodify one's intellectual labor, while having the critical means to pinpoint one's precarity, distinctly characterizes their millennialism. This ambivalence is on display when Edie opts out of competing with her office subordinate, Aria, the only other black woman in the department. Though technically Edie is Aria's boss, she does not pull rank: "I could assert my seniority, but that would be embarrassing. The difference in our entire yearly salaries is one monthly student loan payment" (Leilani 22). Edie is also intimidated by Aria because she has found a way to excel in a career by inhabiting the racial scripts Edie has rejected: "[S]he's very popular around the office with her reflective Tobagonian eyes and apple cheeks, doing that unthreatening aw-shucks shtick for all the professional whites. She plays the game well, I mean. Better than I do. And so when we are alone, even as we look at each other through borrowed faces, we see each other. I see her hunger, and she sees mine" (22). Edie contemplates if she is not more agreeable to the "professional whites" and assertive around Aria because she "know[s] better" or because she is "weak and overly sensitive" (22).

The coexistence of both viewpoints may frustrate attempts to move knowledge to action. *Luster* is not a story that arrives at a coherent politics through a pattern of evasion. On the contrary, I argue that Edie's wavering of whether she is better or worse off than Aria encapsulates the affordances of *Luster*. The novel teaches us that hesitation is not necessarily equal to quietism but a realistic way of coping with a life dominated by qualifications. Edie realizes her defeatism may stem from her lack of drive in a rigged system, which Aria may have mastered through capitulation or the discovery of personal gain from within. As critic Kaitlyn Greenidge notes, "Edie sees Aria as the embodiment of respectability, a nonthreatening stooge. It is to Leilani's credit as a novelist, though,

that the reader understands that in reality Aria is merely professional."[40] The novel thereby produces numerous points of entry for understanding both characters' motivations. Furthermore, Edie's cynicism is counterbalanced by her dire desire to be friends with Aria. When Edie is fired and Aria is handed her job, Edie thinks: "it is impossible to see another Black woman on her way up, impossible to see that meticulous, polyglottal origami and not, as a Black woman yourself, fall a little bit in love. But we had nothing at all in common" (Leilani 80). Here again we see another qualification as Edie's resentment is shown to be tinged with admiration.

In light of the challenges of maintaining psychic distance from imposed roles in professional settings, where the search for genuine connection is couched in performance-driven terms, *Luster* channels that difficulty through perspectival shifts that reframe encounters of difference. Leilani shows one scene dominated by tension, then another scene where Edie softens. The novel also inserts microsocial details to qualify tone or mood if an interaction has become overly intimate or heavy-handed. Edie notices when Akila contradicts her "with an exasperated disdain that somehow brightens her face" (Leilani 106); she sees how "when Eric turns to look at me, whatever connective tissue is responsible for securing his eyeballs has been boozed to a mere suggestion, and because of the wind I can sort of see where he is beginning to lose his hair" (Leilani 33).

Undeniably, this qualifying ethos, which knocks Edie's credibility and a scene's affect down a peg, sets Edie's further adrift in social relations. This leads us to an additional reason that Leilani's and Rooney's main character finds herself at sea in her interpersonal life. The distortions detected in others' behavior are inextricable from the internal conflicts of the observers themselves.[41] If there is

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[40] Kaitlyn Greenidge, "Sex in the City: The Black Female Flaneur in Raven Leilani's *Luster,*" *Virginia Quarterly Review* 96, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 214.

[41] "I read his email again and again while I tried to decide. On one reading it might give an impression of devotion and acquiescence, and on another it appears indecisive or ambivalent. I didn't know what I wanted from him." (Rooney 277)

a parable in *Conversations with Friends* and *Luster* it plays out as follows: the strong suits that make Frances and Edie social watchers, and characters in their own right, are what make them emotional extraterrestrials.[42] We do not see these observers using their special insights to improve their social standing, but rather noting what they would have done or said had they been more vital to the conversation. Because Edie and Frances are unobtrusive figures who prefer observation to action, they are sensitive to the ways others effortlessly move through interactions. In a heated debate between Bobbi and their mutual friend, Frances is impressed when Bobbi does not flex that "she'd almost completed a history degree" to her opponent; Frances would have: "I knew it was the first thing I would have mentioned if someone belittled me" (Rooney 304). The reticence that makes Frances aware of potential blunders is also what makes her clumsy in improving her relationships.

Indeed, the way the millennial novel does not presume to speak for an entire identity group encourages attention to microsocial interactions embedded in highly specific settings. At the same time, Edie's and Frances's avoidant tendencies should not obscure the stakes of their social analyses. Keeping the microsocial in sight, I will now analyze a string of examples of averted conflict in the novels. In doing so, I want to suggest that it is through noting and swerving from tension that our inveterate readers acquire more information and traction in relations. Under-articulated differences and tensions gain visibility precisely *because* focalizers are conflict-averse. My aim is to show the ways in which indirection allows for the acerbity of analysis. The arc of my readings reproduces a progression that unfolds across both plots. In a social landscape where hierarchy feels ubiquitous, thereby rendering excessive attunement to interaction as just that, what we see over the course of *Luster* and *Conversations with Friends* are characters learning how to filter *out* information. If these millennial novels begin with female characters' irresolution, reflected by a medley of inessential

[42] Thank you to Dana Glaser for this phrase.

details that serve no real function for advancing the plot, both end with an uptick in resoluteness, a more grounded outlook—an evolution that we can trace through descriptions of the microsocial realm.

Living with difference

From a political standpoint, characters in *Conversations with Friends* champion the rigors of emotional labor that so often go unnoticed in the rapidity of face-to-face encounter. Yet, in the context of actual conversation, Frances's efforts to be attentive, albeit helpful, come off as bland, garnering her the label of a conflict-averse person and the role of a first-person narrator without distinctive qualities:

> When we were outside smoking and male performers tried to talk to us, Bobbi would always pointedly exhale and saying nothing, so I had to act as our representative. This meant a lot of smiling and remembering details about their work. I enjoyed playing this kind of character, the smiling girl who remembered things. Bobbi told me she thought I didn't have a "real personality," but she said she meant it as a compliment. (Rooney 19)

Here, Frances's identification with her role as purveyor of the fortuitous comment is precisely what effaces her. Much like Rachel Cusk, Rooney has taken a feature of first-person narration necessary to furthering a story—well-timed silence and interjection—and intensified its attributes within a character whose recessiveness highlights under-noted aspects of narrative discourse and encounter. As the passage illustrates, Frances is a lackluster center of the story who is highly susceptible to her interactions with stronger characters, such as Bobbi and Melissa. As though testifying to the extent to which she mirrors others' perceptions, Frances describes herself as "plain and emotionally cold" (83) and looking "bored and interesting" in a photo Melissa takes of her (9).

A flat identity can also be found in Rooney's style—infamous among readers and critics for being unmemorable—which expresses itself as a first-person narrative with high external focalization. In other words, while heavily inflected by Frances, passages mostly depict her recording

other characters' microexpressions, analyzing the meanings of their subtle shifts, and composing her response to them. So, it is precisely Frances's ineffectiveness as a dinner guest that enables her to perceive Melissa's flagging interest in her ("I couldn't specify why exactly…I knew the subtlety of this change would be enough for Bobbi to deny it later, which irritated me as if it had already happened") and to register herself checking out: "I was starting to feel adrift from the whole set-up, like the dynamic that had eventually revealed itself didn't interest me, or even involve me. I could have tried harder to engage myself, but I probably resented having to make an effort to be noticed" (13). The under-appreciation of Frances's applied effort to be interesting is stylistically re-dramatized. As Rooney says herself, the style of her novels is both "spare" but "hyper-aware": "a kind of spare prose that you could say is Hemingway-onward" and then there is also the "hyper-aware, culturally switched on thing…the style isn't just about paring back sentences. It's also about the level of awareness you're trying to incorporate into the narrator's vocabulary."[43] It is interesting that the novel's stylistic traits—blandness and open-eyed intensity—enclose a dynamic that filters down to the calculations Frances makes as she navigates herself navigating interactions.

Interesting, but perhaps unsurprising given that, as Rooney herself has affirmed, Frances is a protagonist not "completely separate from the consciousness of the author, where it's very clear what the author's attitude towards her is."[44] To this extent, *Conversations with Friends* supports Bewes's argument that the contemporary novel has upended "the explicatory qualities of some such subjective revelation…Connections, whether external (sociological, philosophical, ethical) or internal (narrative, subjective, ironic), whether intended (part of the artist's plan) or unintended (part of the work's ideology), whether 'represented' (named and established) or 'instantiated' (unnamed and

[43] Sally Rooney, "An interview with Sally Rooney," Michael Nolan, *The Tangerine Magazine*, 2017, last accessed June 20, 2023, https://thetangerinemagazine.com/print/interview-sally-rooney.
[44] Ibid.

unspecified), *are not the primary work of the novel*. They are not its endpoint, nor do they participate in the event of the work."[45]

Leilani's narration is similarly proximate to Edie. But while Leilani's prose is a livewire for Edie's libido, Rooney's narrative style does not fluctuate in tempo, clarity or precision even when Frances is upset, sick, high, or horny. What remains "switched on" is the narrative's microsocial observance—a witnessing of the implicitness of encounter—even when Frances is not physically looking.[46] However, despite the constancy of attunement in both story and narrative, the merits of a carefully calibrated and transmitted mental attitude do not amount for much in either realm. First of all, neither Frances nor Edie is rewarded socially for her acuity. If anything, its continual disregard by other characters furthers their isolation and resentment. As she watches Bobbi excel in conversation, Frances rues her own conscientiousness: "While she spoke, her eyes often pointed upward, at light fixtures or far-off windows, and she gesticulated with her hands. All I could do with my attention was use it on other people, watching them for signs of agreement or irritation, trying to invite them into the discussion when they fell silent" (Rooney 305).

In *Luster*, Edie makes reference to taxing small talk, drooping conversation, and more minor mishaps that make sociality something she must deliberately shift into and out of. In her publishing office, Edie thinks: "Now I am social. I show my teeth to my coworkers and feign surprise at the dysfunction of the MTA. There is a part of me that is proud to be involved in these small interactions, which confirm that I am here and semi-visible and that New York is squatting over

[45] Bewes, *Free Indirect*, 34.

[46] "Instantly *I looked away* and pretended I hadn't noticed him. *I could see* that he was trying to catch my eye and that if I returned his gaze he would give me a kind of apologetic expression. I found this idea too intense to think about, like the glare of a bare lightbulb." (Rooney 36; my italics) Frances's limited omniscience is expanded through this representation of her apperception. We find in *Luster* a humorous juxtaposition to Rooney's narratological overextension: "I think I see Eric on the other side of the room but it is just a lamp." (Leilani 53)

other people's faces too, but another part of me is sweating through the Kabuki, trying to extend my hand and go off script" (Leilani 21). While this awareness seems to win Edie some personal gains, as it helps her float through these situations, sometimes her studiousness of the microsocial dimension slips into vague realms of detail that serve no human or narratological endpoint. I am referring to accidents of perception in the course of conflict which are so incidental that they resist any steadfast meaning.

In one scene, Edie is speaking with Mark, an art director she has been sleeping with, their relationship marked by a mutual awareness of Edie's repeated failure to get hired by his department. She has come to his office to let him know she's been let go and to determine if he is at fault. Her attention alights on a painting: "'Muromachi era,' he says, and behind him is a large print of The Great Wave off Kanagawa, the tallest wave cradling the shiny crown of his head" (Leilani 76). The detail is so under-motivated as to be arbitrary, but it bears Leilani's stylistic signature of using small touches to punch up description, pull down mood with ironic tone, add recoil to pleasure—in sum, dropping narrative into qualifications of meaning.

Could the involuntary nature of Edie's observation be keyed to the deprived agency she feels is highlighted in Mark's presence? The microsocial touch in the discourse stands as sheer surplus but it also asserts Edie's ingenuity in a situation where it is undervalued. Yet, read from a different vantage, Edie's aesthetic skills—as linked to her perception of difference—are made to stoop down further in order to parody an easy target: a white male who appropriates Japanese kitsch for social capital in a small-press art department. At least by deflating Mark's superiority, the microsocial detail degrades Mark just as Edie feels degraded in letting him know she has been fired.

In many ways, the scene redirects our attention to all the interpretative difficulties this chapter has been charting in women's intensive focus on the awry features of out-of-balance interactions. Once again, it appears Edie is rerouting her discomfort around power difference

through the dynamics of aesthetic judgment. The mention of painting and books extends Leilani's focus on microsocial exchange to encompass an aesthetic issue. Sitting in a bath of tension may mean further avoidance of outright conflict, until Edie accuses Mark of getting her fired, which he denies: "'Listen, I have been on probation since the late aughts, okay? I have nothing to gain in telling anyone about what happened with us'" (Leilani 77). We see the essential bind of Edie's attentiveness: the demoted position that allows her to notice the "minor" constructions of difference impinges on her ability to change her situation.

So far, we have been examining microsocial awareness in terms of its departure from declarative thought, typified rather through a tendency for analyzing without generalizing, collating without synthesizing, inferring without asserting. Despite that, I want to suggest that these precise touches are actually incisive assertions that provide Edie and Frances with some traction in situations where this is *conflict* without *fighting*. Rather than illustrations of a perspective divided against itself, Edie's and Frances's deployment of microsocial observation not only helps them move through interactions without getting bogged down in surface tension, but also calls attention to revealing distortions in social exchange.

We grasp this complexity in *Luster*'s formal approach to representing the microsocial, the warp and weft of discourse that makes compositions out of disparate elements. As in the image of Mark's head merging with the wave, we also see this finely calibrated abstractness on the level of Leilani's voice, through its use of "humor and understatement against the hyperbolic environment that [Edie] lives in…a resignation that is necessary to survive."[47] A fusion of over- and understatement informs both symbolic and literal representations of hidden violence, for example when Edie quietly slices her hand with the katana in Mark's office. But it is also configured on the

[47] Raven Leilani interview with Brit Bennett, Harvard Book Store, August 6, 2020, last accessed June 20, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oc3vsqLXsbU

level of discourse. As Greenwell observes: "It might be fair to say that Leilani is a writer who, like Baldwin or James, shows her chops most fiercely in modification; the density of her sentences comes from their search for the right qualifications."[48] In being both focused and roving, these qualifications increase the ambit of analysis beyond fixed points of difference.

As a vehicle for this modificatory work, microsocial touches in the narrative tend to heighten or lower scenes' rhetorical effect through parataxis. Greenwell parses the intermingling of the parataxis of experience and the hypotaxis of analysis on the sentence level of Leilani's prose:

> The received wisdom of English-language prose is that hypotaxis, subordinated syntax, with its becauses and whereases and therefores, is the syntax of analysis; parataxis, on the other hand, the kind of syntactical structure that governs the large-scale movement of Leilani's sentence, is the syntax of experience. The sense it gives is of a consciousness overwhelmed by experience, a consciousness that hasn't yet been able to organize diffuse impressions or events into the logical and temporal hierarchies subordination establishes.[49]

Greenwell goes on to graft the hypotaxis/parataxis model onto the collapse of feeling and processing that defines the narrative. *Luster* proceeds through a deluge of experiences that Edie grapples to understand. Leilani's and Rooney's styles converge on this collapse of experience and analysis, "explod[ing] the *affective* distinction associated with that choice, between immediacy and analysis, undergoing experience and processing it."[50] Taken in this context, microsocial details help sharpen encounter, making it more fixed. But the contingency of the microsocial is then borne out in the uncertain connections between these details and the encounter at hand (consider Mark's head and the wave). To extend Greenwell's analysis, if parataxis means that which is "beside arrangement" it is also what gives rise to arrangement in-evidently. The paratactic poetics that allows

[48] Greenwell, "On a sentence by Raven Leilani," 195.
[49] Greenwell, "On a sentence by Raven Leilani," 207-8. For a close reading of the relation between Leilani's representation of psychological state and paratactic sentence structure, see pages 206-10.
[50] Ibid, 208.

qualifying asides to be unmissable parts of a scene is structured by the behavior of Edie and Frances uncertainly hovering around conflict.

The authors' use of microsocial touches that do not agglutinate in the discourse corresponds to their novel's open centers—characters that record but don't synthesize, that can't move from knowledge to action. But we can also say that this feature also harbors characters' faculties of discretionary judgment. We might reframe their "rambling" as dynamic thought in action and "indecisiveness" as their making a sweep of a scene, finding latitude in their constricted state through circumambient assessment. The texts' dependence on microsocial description would then challenge the idea that such observations make up a realm of inert discourse belonging to passive agents unable to impress themselves on situations.

This reframing would prompt further examination of Rooney's formal features within a critical conversation dominated by observations of her writing's "hyperflatness." It would also further highlight the technical impressiveness of Leilani's "remarkably fluid movement between fully dramatized scene and expository narration."[51] Such dexterity is matched only by the surprising success with which Edie and Frances keep their inner lives hidden from everyone they know. While neither Bobbi nor Nick is embroiled in the "sordid or mundane things" that attract Frances, it is not for nothing that they struggle to understand her on a deeper level (Rooney 228). After her second breakup with Nick, Frances is glad she held back her interior life: "I thought about all the things I had never told Nick about myself, and I started to feel better then, as if my privacy extended all around me like a barrier protecting my body. I was a very autonomous and independent person with an inner life that nobody else had ever touched or perceived" (Rooney 287-8). In a similar register, Edie reflects: "I was not popular and I was not unpopular. To invite admiration or ridicule, you first

[51] Greenwell, "On a sentence by Raven Leilani," 200.

have to be seen" (Leilani 44). To be sure, both characters share a desire for and fear of "being seen," expressed also in the millennial generation's avoidance of answering calls from unknown phone numbers and showing up solo to public venues.[52] To examine how such withdrawn characters find traction in encounters that misread and misappraise them, which the discourse intensifies through its indirection around their interior states, we must look to the interstices of encounter to see how the metacommentary held in the microsocial gives rise to insight and action.

Frances's lack of distinctiveness further plays out in Rooney's style of presenting Frances's speech or thought without clear demarcation from ongoing dialogue or observation of others' microexpressions (these two often appearing simultaneously, as we've established). Note here the tiny blur between Frances's indirect and interior discourse following Bobbi's comment: "Frances got sunburnt, Bobbi said. Actually I wasn't really burnt, but my face and arms were a little pink, and warm to the touch. I shrugged" (113). While initially it may seem that Frances voices her retort out loud ("Actually I wasn't really burnt") it quickly becomes clear that Frances has once again internalized her reaction. The shrug thereby registers both a decision juncture of choosing or forgoing conflict and its obfuscation.

It should be noted that these obfuscations are so under-determined that they could just as easily be the narrative moving along, business as usual. While the following example can also appear empty of tension, I argue it is a representation of conflict that has been rerouted. Here we find Frances and Bobbi traveling to France to vacation with Nick and Melissa:

> Bobbi was a nervous flyer, or she said she was, but I thought she played it up to an extent just for fun. When we flew together she made me hold hands […] Bobbi fell asleep for most of the flight and only woke up when we landed. She squeezed my hand while the other passengers got up to get their luggage, and said: flying with you is so relaxing. You have a very stoic disposition. The airport smelled of artificial air freshener, and Bobbi bought us two black coffees while I figured out which bus we had to catch. Bobbi had studied German in school and spoke no French, but wherever we went she managed to communicate

[52] Thank you to Michal Zechariah for her help with brainstorming examples.

> effectively with her hands and face. I saw the man behind the coffee counter smiling at her like a beloved cousin, while I desperately repeated the names of towns and bus services to the woman at the ticket desk. (Rooney 94-5)

Note the absence of Frances's response to Bobbi's "compliment" that she has a stoic disposition: the passage switches to a description of the airport. In a novel characterized by Frances's reactivity to what others say and don't say, her non-response is as mysterious as Bobbi's comment. First of all, the compliment is exquisitely underhanded: that Bobbi falls asleep on the plane can be a sign either of her emotional dependence on or indifference towards Frances, an ambiguity that is further underscored when Bobbi is attentive to Frances's lack of emotion (which could be a good thing for a supposed nervous flyer). As with all double-edged comments, the speaker's ability to surgically locate the nerve of a relationship places into question the lack of premeditation behind the observation. But it also carries some truth, reflecting Frances's "zen acceptance" of her best friend's tendency for showing affection in conflicting ways (Rooney 10).

I want to suggest that the concealed tension around Bobbi's comment pervades the passage's description of the airport. To quote Charles Altieri, if moods are "modes of feeing where the sense of subjectivity becomes diffuse and sensation merges into something close to atmosphere, something that seems to pervade an entire scene or situation,"[53] then the shift to removed description ("The airport smelled of artificial air freshener") can be read as a switch to an observational mood, a slight affective modulation that happens occasionally when Frances is over a situation. Indeed, this course correction evokes a similar blip in my chapter on tact, where Mrs. Jordan's comment that the telegraphist has "little imagination" triggers a switch from dialogue to discourse. By comparison, the tension is more elaborately concealed by James: recall the long, fuming paragraph following Mrs. Jordan's remark which takes over the diegesis and leaves their

[53] Charles Altieri, *Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of Affects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 2.

dialogue unfinished, as if the narrative were escorting the reader away from mounting conflict towards diegetic exposition, which in James famously appears in detours.

As with James's telegraphist, the pale surge of hostility prompts a reading of class difference. In Rooney, the account of Frances's and Bobbi's activities at the airport shows the two women rehearsing tacit roles of the friendship—Bobbi the effortless communicator, Frances the one who strains to be understood (and ultimately the more nervous traveler of the two). Bobbi's social ease with the coffee clerk becomes a trigger for Frances's feelings around their wealth disparity:

> Bobbi had a way of belonging everywhere. Though she said she hated the rich, her family was rich, and other wealthy people recognised her as one of their own. They took her radical politics as a kind of bourgeois self-deprecation, nothing very serious, and talked to her about restaurants or where to stay in Rome. I felt out of place in these situations, ignorant and bitter, but also fearful of being discovered as a moderately poor person and a communist. (95)

We can see the circuitous route of the stoic comment, now reborn in this analysis of class relations. Bobbi's ability to connect with people of all classes draws attention to Frances's out of placeness. Politics makes their difference apparent, but their friendship dynamic makes it legible: Frances's unbelonging ultimately stems from the lack of transparency around what she means to Bobbi. In the end, it was and never really was about the comment but what it deconcealed about the relationship. This pattern in the novel works to evoke the revolving door of the microsocial. From one vantage, the degrading, offhand comment is an all-encompassing encapsulation of a relation's ills, a fraction of its toxicity, the crucible of an endemic imbalance that flows through every encounter. And from the other, if taken at face value, the comment is just a comment, best dignified by moving on.

It is Frances's tendency to make strategic observations about Bobbi that also produces source material for her story about her best friend, which she writes and publishes without her subject's knowledge. The fallout from this discovery leads Frances to face up to the blind spots created by her microsocial attunement. It leads to an open conversation where Bobbi provides an alternate viewpoint for Frances: "You underestimate your own power so you don't have to blame

yourself for treating other people badly. You tell yourself stories about it. Oh well, Bobbi's rich, Nick's a man, I can't hurt these people. If anything they're out to hurt me and I'm defending myself. I shrugged. I could think of nothing to say" (Rooney 302). Taking the form of paradox and parataxis, the relation between the vehicle and tenor of a comment, gesture, and other throwaway expressions constellated within the microsocial realm inhabits the space between thought and feeling, experience and analysis, belief and reality, principle and execution. Indeed, for Rooney, the difficulty of reconciling these factors is the red thread that runs through her work.[54] *Conversations with Friends* and *Luster* depict their characters swept up in these concerns in scenes of under-articulated conflict. Rooney's and Leilani's "solution" is to hold multiple possibilities open: that Aria is being professional; that Bobbi is a "small-jobs person" (Rooney 229) who doesn't seek recognition. The affordance of the novel for millennial writer is its ability to represent multiple experiential realities from a limited purview. What is ultimately the concern of both novels is the socially binding capacity of interpersonal conflict and its formative possibilities for subjectivity.

Resoluteness without resolution

Although in the moment, their hyperawareness prevents a birds-eye view of interactions and relationships, the dial gradually moves over the course of the stories as Frances and Edie refine their

[54] "It's always difficult to make the language of theory, whether that's Marxist theory or it's philosophy or any language we use, to try and explain the human experience on an analytical or conceptual level, whatever you're drawn to whether it's Marxism or feminism or it's not political, it's philosophical theory. It's always so hard to make that idea make sense in your everyday, very mundane life, or in your intimate personal relationships. How do you apply that theory, how do you bring that down to that level, or bring it up to that level? So that for me is something very interesting, something that I'm interested in following like a thread through my work, like how do I take the beliefs, and ideas and principles […] that I believe to be true, and not make sense of them not in a broad, social or political way but in the very miniature way of people's intimate lives, of love stories." Sally Rooney, "Sally Rooney on 'Conversations with Friends,'" Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2019, last accessed June 20, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqWEiiELzfo.

self-awareness through confrontations that do and do not take place. By the end of both stories, we find them in a comparatively better place. While a conclusive position does not arrive, there is a notable shift towards decisiveness—a feeling of resoluteness without a resolution. For Frances, this looks like deciding to get back together with Nick, thereby choosing to live with the contradictions that have monopolized her attention for the duration of the novel:

> I closed my eyes. Things and people moved around me, taking positions in obscure hierarchies, participating in systems I didn't know about and never would. A complex network of objects and concepts. You live through certain things before you understand them. You can't always take the analytical position. (Rooney 321)

The closing of the eyes can be taken to symbolize Frances's cessation of her observational powers and her capitulation to experience. The shift is mirrored in the discourse's uncharacteristic use of the second-person address, directed at the reader or a generic stance on relationships that Frances now takes herself to be tolerant of.

Similarly, *Luster* concludes with a relatively stark transformation as the discourse moves into a decidedly metadiegetic register.

> It is not that I want company, but that I want to be affirmed by another pair of eyes…A way is always made to document how we manage to survive, or in some cases, how we don't. So I've tried to reproduce an inscrutable thing. I've made my own hunger into a practice, made everyone who passes through my life subject to a close and inappropriate reading that occasionally finds its way, often insufficiently, into paint. And when I am alone with myself, this is what I am waiting for someone to do to me, with merciless, deliberate hands, to put me down onto the canvas so that when I'm gone, there will be a record, proof that I was here. (Leilani 226-7)

As if acknowledging the practice of microsocial reading that characterizes the novel, the final paragraph of *Luster* announces the dawning of no small degree of clarity through a subtle shift in tense (from present to present perfect) and diegesis (from the paratactic to the expository). Not only does Edie reclaim the relentless analysis she has been conducting on others, but the proclamation is also stated in an extra-diegetical dimension, a negative space of the narrative occupied by the reader and/or no one in particular.

Stepping into a perspective that was previously unavailable, Edie and Frances now have more distance from a series of formative events. Their disparate observations progress towards a realization that others don't really warrant hyper-fixation; that there are other things to occupy one's attention with, like health and survival. Indeterminacy and uncertainty extend conflict and tension, but in the while, subjects come to learn more about the relation and themselves in relation. By tracking a feeling, Leilani and Rooney leave off their novels with characters deciding what to do about it.

Coda

This project has sought to explain the poetics of various troubled encounters with difference through the heuristic of modernist fiction. Over the course of four chapters, we have inspected snapshots of relations stilled to conflict around race, class, gender and sex, yet simultaneously organized around the dissimulation of some negative feeling or idea. Through Henry James, we learned of the loaded nature of noticing affects which are inaccessible to their owners and remain suspended in the text. Nella Larsen oriented us to the interpersonal complexities of indirection around registered differences through the form, critical comportment, and investigative tool of tact. Not only does tact try to hide its own obfuscation, but it has the potential to *re-conduct* ambiguity into relations so that what is sensed and what is interpellated remain in suspension. The deferral of attribution to difference in Faulkner tapped into the operation by which expressions become signifiers of difference and problems that require attending to. And finally, the continuity between feeling and interpretation provokes much tension and alienation in the works of Sally Rooney and Raven Leilani. However, in the course of inexistent conflict, characters learn to differentiate between what is flexible and what is fixed in relations. Along the way, we have gathered an assortment of speedbumps that impede the analytical move to assign concepts to inter-personal phenomena; these are the limits of microsocial observation, the problems of mediation, the agons of noticing, and the sensitivity around interpellation.

Readings bear out a hypothesis of the project that the microsocial is not merely a mirror of macro-systems but productive in its own right. For one, in encounters that have imprecise purposes and outcomes, we find a site, state, and opening where social value-assignments are made. Disparate examples have suggested that one's entanglement with others makes them liable to additional systemic issues. At the same time, we also find that in the vaporous indirection around difference, ideology, and political exchange are surprisingly rigid and repetitive social dynamics that are hard to

work through and walk back. Under a microsocial lens, ideological disagreement appears as the tip of the iceberg, rather than the solid base of asymmetry—the real "base" (although these encounters subvert top-down orders) is durable interactional norms, relational patterns, and instinctual observation which, to repeat this quote by Adorno, enact the "subjective reconstruction of objectively binding ideas."[1] Conflict and tension reveal these patterns and codes in their rigidity when the line of an interaction is disturbed. In certain circumstances, relational systems can shift, if momentarily, under the suasion of being with others. Moving back and forth between the micro and macro foments negativity, but it can also reveal what is rigid and what is amenable. In the words of Glissant, the work of Faulkner ultimately "measures what reversals must occur in sensibilities before new alliance—the new experience of the Relation—can become deliberate. Faulkner's work struggles toward this change of direction, not through moral lessons, but by changing our poetics."[2] Albeit ambiguous, the microsocial produces information about an encounter, a person, and a passage.

Modernist aesthetic techniques make these paradoxes of relation feel more immediate at times and ignorable in others through its maximalist stylizing, its obliterating attention to detail, and, in the words of Jameson, the "multiple sub-atomic languages of what we are pleased to call modernism itself."[3] In one respect, the "making a drama of mock-violence of every social relationship," to quote Wyndham Lewis, is part of the modernist project to aesthetically and rhetorically amplify that which is so incipient that it bests simple paraphrase.[4] In our own lives, we

[1] Theodor Adorno, "On the dialectic of tact," *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso Books, 2020), 39.
[2] Édouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, trans. Barbara Lewis and Thomas C. Spear (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 95-6.
[3] Fredric Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 226.
[4] Wyndham Lewis, quoted in Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 35.

might think only of the dramatic intensity and technical variation of speakers who share lean storylines about abrasions experienced at the supermarket, in a meeting, or on one's commute. Figurative and literary modes are adroit at textualizing these micro-incidents that absorb readers into novel aesthetic relations and positions. And in turn, the work of modernist uncertainty may also speak to our deeper affective investment in recounting our witnessing of difference as it came to the fore. However, as appealing for analysis as sordid details are, even the recounting of these abstractions, steeped in tacit orders of the everyday, can do away with the need for interpretation; indeed, as researchers of microsociology affirm, "focus on the interpretation of the situation, for example, tends to black box all those tacit, mutually agreed-upon understandings that make interpretive difference possible in the first place."[5]

In its own half-concealed trajectory in this project, modernist abstraction—particularly that of "revealed deferral"—becomes available for sorting out the complex pieces of the distinct microsocial incident wherein the sharing of an aesthetic preference utters something under the radar about the subjects and the relation at hand. This homology I am drawing to the ambiguity running through the transmission of aesthetic judgment finds that its frameworks are in absentia (and would certainty then come from an appropriate framework or from the people in the encounter?). In the modernist and the aesthetic-discursive context of interpretative uncertainty, the surface content is not necessarily a reflection of a deeper meaning. In both, burrowing into the utterance with sophisticated explanations and narratives—activity which would render what is passing into a "problem"—falls apart when one backtracks to find a simple sequence of events. Yet, to take a page

[5] Claudio E. Benzecry and Daniel Winchester, "Varieties of Microsociology," in *Social Theory Now*, ed. Claudio E. Benzecry, Monika Krause, and Isaac Ariail Reed (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 67.

from Faulkner, the situation is less a matter of the sequence of events and more of what is felt from within it—the more profound site of determination, indeed.

At the same time, the covert interpretations that go into aesthetic judgment, which draw on social skills of reading, can also create detours around embarrassment, disappointment, and other cesspools of uncertainty in relation. In this project, the appearance of a nascent duality is always also nascent of *something else* when an encounter comes to bear this structure. If the super-vision of and into situated manifestations of difference points to equally tenacious and tentative tendency to be attuned to and precise about uncertainty in our relations, it also comes with a strong urge to resolve it. The question that remains is: well, why not resolve it? Doesn't the lack of specification prolong the period of conflict, tension, and strain? Wouldn't addressing difference head-on and taking responsibility for our respective reality encourage further examination of the dynamics that shape asymmetry? What is the value of explicit explication?

Better yet, what would be the ultimate goal? It is interesting how a straightforward approach to difference feels inopportune in this cluster of novels marked by relations of slackened trust. However, to speak more generally, it is impossible eradicate the uncertainty of being-with others; some might say open dialogue introduces more misunderstanding. Indeed, the opposite of observation, indirection, and hesitation is not open conflict or authentically owning one's feelings. The attitude towards this question of explicitness varies across the modernist and contemporary works in this project. As Larsen's Irene well knows, Clare is a liability not only because she unsettles what Irene believes about race but what Irene felt herself to be in control of: her forbearance. Rooney and Leilani leave their readers in a more optimistic place. While their works begin with characters doubting the power of super-subtle sensing to make a difference, they end with the notion that it is through other people that we can change ourselves, whether or not they notice. For James, the entanglement is in the mystifying opacity of the structures and forms themselves; they are

not graspable by us, but we can shift within these constraints if on the most ambivalent of terms. In the end of the story arc with the little girl, Quentin sees her one last time when he's inside the backseat of a moving car. They regard each other silently across a widening gulf.

The difficulty remains in not knowing where to place the information gleaned from others and the behaviors they provoke in us. The surfeit that stays in the aftermath of microsocial analysis highlights the irreducibility of being-with others. In the words of Adorno: "The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such."[6] In weighing this uncertain knowledge among others, perhaps the idea is not whether one can let differences lie but which interpretation one will choose in order to continue living with them. This difficulty can fall most heavily on one's tolerance level for ambiguity, which encompasses managing the discomfort of manifold meanings and facing the encounter with oneself in relation.

[6] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 29.

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