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"You Will Hold This Book in Your Hands": The Novel and Corporeality in the New Media Ecology

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"YOU WILL HOLD THIS BOOK IN YOUR HANDS":

THE NOVEL AND CORPOREALITY IN THE NEW MEDIA

ECOLOGY

BY

JASON SHRONTZ

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

ENGLISH

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

2017

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

OF

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UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND
2017

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the relationship between the print novel and new media. It argues that this relationship is productive; that is, it locates the novel and new media within a tense, but symbiotic relationship. This requires an understanding of media relations that is ecological, rather than competitive. More precise, this dissertation investigates ways that the novel incorporates new media. The word "incorporate" refers both to embodiment and physical union. This dissertation asks: when the novel and new media are coupled, what is produced?

It answers this question through the close critical reading of four novels: *The Zero* by Jess Walter, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan, *Super Sad True Love Story* by Gary Shteyngart, and *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* by Robin Sloan. Each of these novels bears the markings of the tension between the print novel and new media. One of the ways in which this tension is evident is through innovative narrative structures. Jess Walter's *The Zero*, contains a schizophrenic narrative structure that includes frequent gaps and omits major plot components. Its structure emulates the novel's saturation of digressive media images that become the "wallpaper" of the protagonist's mind. The inclusion of an eighty-page power point presentation in Jennifer Egan's *Goon Squad,* for example, adopts new media reading practices for its own narrative purposes. The novels also frequently draw attention to corporeality and the physical fact of the print novel. The glow-in-the-dark cover of *Mr. Penumbra* imagines the coupling of the print novel and the computer screen. Both Sloan's and Shteyngart's novels explore the devaluation of the human corpus and the physical coupling between print and digital artifacts. Finally, each of the novels dwells

upon the shifting lexicon of tactility. The words used to describe connection—staying in *contact*, keeping in *touch*—no longer have anything to do with physical touch; rather, the language of tactility masks the absence of physical connection.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Naomi Mandel for her guidance and wisdom, not only in the capacity of this dissertation, but also in her counsel of being a teacher, an academic, and a writer. Thank you for your commitment to this project. Thank you for your enthusiasm and honest criticism. I would also like to thank Jeremiah Dyehouse and Ian Reyes for your willingness to be a part of this process at every stage. The development of this project is reflective of the hours I have spent discussing it with each of you in your offices. Thank you for being so giving of your time. Thank you, too, to Kyle Kusz for chairing my defense. My scholarship and personality as a scholar has benefitted from our conversations. I offer sincere thanks to Jean Walton, Kathleen Davis, and Valerie Karno. Your generous counsel in the early stages of this project had a major impact on its final form and focus. I would also like to thank Michelle Caraccia for her organization and endless support of the English Department's graduate students. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Stacey Shrontz. Your patience is not natural. Your commitment to this project, and your belief in me, sustained me when my commitment and belief were too exhausted to put on pants in the morning. Thank you, too, to our three children, Beatrice, Harper, and Hazel (who was only eleven weeks old on the day of my defense). Your energy is unfathomable, but it is necessary. Thank you for pulling me away from the screen when I needed it the most.

Table of Contents

Introduction

"You have found your way into a story that has been unfolding for a very

long time" (Sloan 173).

The Novel in Formation

On November 2, 2015, only five years after a remarkably grim decade of print

book sales that prompted the rampant closure of bookstores across the country, Amazon

opened its first bricks and mortar bookstore. Readers could visit the bookstore to

purchase, among other things, print books. The store stocks about 5000 titles, according

to an article in the Wall Street Journal (Bensinger). Furthermore, the cover of every book

is in formation, facing outward, like glowing screens, "making it easier for customers to

browse" (Levy). Picturing the bookstore, it is not difficult to conflate the rows of outward

facing books with that row of digital icons near the bottom of your Amazon Prime page,

which showcases the books that all the other, more dedicated readers are buying at that

moment. In a brief history of the book and consumer habits since 2000, it quickly

becomes clear that the media ecology, and particularly print, is in a state of transition.

Between 2000 and 2007, one thousand bookstores closed across the US (Reach). In 2011,

Borders, the mega-bookstore pioneer closed its last store, and Barnes and Noble

continues to close stores across the country. E-readers flooded the market in the mid-00s,

including Amazon's Kindle in 2007, which sold out only 5.5 hours after its release

(Patel).[1] By 2011, only four years later, *The New York Times* reported "Amazon sold 105

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[1] The first modern e-reader was developed in 1998, but it was the development of electronic paper—a
display that reflected light like regular paper and did not require a backlight—that propelled the e-reader

books for its Kindle e-reader for every 100 hardcover and paperback books," citing the evidence as "proof that [Amazon] has successfully leapt from a print business to a digital one, a transition that has challenged most companies that sell media" (Miller and Bosman).[2] These signs have not only been interpreted as evidence of the printed book's demise, but also as the end of a shared system of ambiguously defined values somehow associated with print. In *The New Republic,* for example, Nicole Krauss concludes an article with an alarmist's plea: "When you download an e-book, it is worth stopping to consider what you are choosing, why, and what your choice means. If enough people stop taking their business to bookstores, bookstores—all bookstores—will close. And that, in turn, will threaten a set of values that has been with us for as long as we have had books" (Krauss). Even though it was difficult to ever imagine the book vanishing from the media ecology, it was clear that something was changing.

Then, about a decade later, trends started to shift again. Since 2009, the number of independent bookstores has increased by more than 27 percent, according to the American Booksellers Association (qtd. in Heyman). A 2016 report from the Association of American Publishers stated "ebook sales declined by nearly 25% from Jan. 2015" (Publishers). The shifting industry trends and the paranoia of losing a set of values describe the volatility of the media ecology, but to what, or where, does this volatility lead?

The answer can perhaps be found in an unusual and unexpected place: the Amazon bricks-and-mortar store. On November 2, 2015, Amazon opened its first bricks-

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into a viable alternative to the book. Sony used the technology with two products in 2004 and 2006, but its most popular use was on Amazon's Kindle, which was released in 2007 and sold out in 5.5 hours (Patel).
[2] The article continues to report," Over all, e-books account for only 14 percent of all general consumer fiction and nonfiction books sold." This 14 percent, however, is rather significant, considering that Amazon

and-mortar bookstore in Seattle, Washington. By January of 2017, three more have opened with plans for at least eight by the end of the year, including a Manhattan location to be opened in the Spring of 2017 (Wingfield). The opening of these stores represents a unique moment in the printed book's precarious history since 2000, during which the practices associated with print, and those associated with new media, merge in unique ways. The merging of print and new media is evident not only in emergent media forms (such as e-readers, audiobooks, or hypertext novels), but also in the consumer and industry practices that develop around these media technologies. The bricks-and-mortar Amazon store is itself an amalgam of old and new media practices. The store sells Amazon's e-readers as well as a wide range of print books. The selection of these books are curated by data collected from their website. Like traditional bookstores that advertise certain books with reviews from bookstore owners, the Amazon bookstore also features similar printed signs, but the signs contain reviews from online customers (Bensinger). The store appeals to the tactile qualities of reading. The *Consumerist* describes the store for "New Yorkers who like the experience of thumbing through a book made with paper and smelling the fresh ink before they buy" (Quirk). Yet, it is no surprise that Amazon uses the store to conduct "other types of data collection" about customer habits and distribution (Bensinger). Furthermore, instead of price tags, customers use their smartphones to scan the books, and like their website, Amazon Prime members get the discount (Levy). The blend of print and new media practices and technologies describes media relations as ecological; that is, media technologies adapt within an evolving ecology of communicative media, rather than become displaced by or "killed" by

emerging technologies. As such, it presents one more chapter in the print book's long history, despite the well-documented story of its demise.

This dissertation focuses on the relationship between the book and new media. More precise, it searches for ways that the novel, as a literary form and a medium, incorporates new media. Before I describe what this means, I would like to be clear about what the incorporation of new media does *not* mean. It does not imply that the novel simply places a mirror to our contemporary media ecology. The novels studied herein certainly contain numerous references to new media objects such as the smartphone or personal tablets. The Internet and social media also make several appearances. I argue, however, that the references to new media within these novels are more than a reflection of our contemporary new media ecology. As such, I agree with Daniel Punday who claims in *Writing at the Limit: The Novel in the New Media Ecology* (2012), "in a significant portion of contemporary fiction, references to other media are more than just a backdrop or theme" (1). Additionally, uses of new media elements within the structure of these novels—for example, the inclusion of a eighty page Powerpoint presentation or long chat and email exchanges—are not merely attempts to include new media for the sake of rendering the novel as a multimedia object. Just as the book has historically gravitated toward emerging media technologies as ripe subject matter, it also has a rich history of multimediality. Besides, according to new media theorist, Lev Manovich, cinema and "medieval illuminated manuscripts that combine text, graphics, and representational images" were multimedia long before the media we now refer to as "new media" existed (51). Rather, the novel's incorporation of new media, I argue, is an

embodiment and a coupling. It is not an act of representation, but one of formation. In short, it is the mark of a medium that is evolving through its relation to other media.

The Novel Incorporates New Media

The chapters that follow discuss the print novel's incorporation of new media. Therefore, they hinge upon layered definitions of the word "incorporate." The Oxford English Dictionary defines "incorporate" as "to combine or unite into one body." The definition connotes union, both in a religious view of marriage, in which two distinct entities become one, but also in the sense of reproduction, during which two bodies unite to produce something new. Indeed, a subsequent definition of "incorporate" is "to unite so as to form one body; to grow into each other; to form an intimate union" and in rarer uses, "to copulate" (6a and b). To this end, this study of the novel investigates how the novel's union with new media marks the formation of a new type of novel, one that bears the long history of the novel and print media, but also is operated according to the logic and practices of new media, which are described below. This view of the novel's relationship with new media sees it as one of symbiosis rather than competition. In other words, the coupling of new media and the novel is productive. The coupling produces something new. In a rarer usage, "Incorporate" also means, "to furnish with a body." This dissertation probes into the different ways that the print novel, a medium that is characterized by the material form of the codex, embodies new media practices, which are often valued for their transparency and immediacy; that is, they are valued for the ability to mediate with decreasingly less physical obstruction. In its investigation of new media, the print novel embodies the various structures that organize new media: the vast

archival structure of the web and the networks of social connection. It does this by adopting new organizational and narrative structures that operate less according to a logic of linearity than to a logic of association.

From these definitions, it is clear that form and corporeality are central to the process of incorporation. After all, the Latin root of "incorporate," is "corpus," which refers both to "the body of a man or animal" and "a body or complete collection of writings or the like; the whole body of literature on any subject" ("corpus"). Corporeality is central to the formation of the new media novel in several ways. First, it reflects shifting views of the body. In the novels studied below, the body in the new media ecology is often viewed as cumbersome and a burden. It is a decrepit vessel, an outdated technology. This burden is transcended, however, through new media technologies that allow users to traverse incommensurable distances with a Wi-Fi hookup, to appear in multiple places at the same time. The body is no longer burdened by spatiotemporal confines. As the virtual self becomes increasingly prominent in the daily tasks of shopping, travel, work, and social relationships, the corporeal body is increasingly associated with the burdensome bulk of older media technologies. Throughout each novel, print media are tied to corporeal decay: burning and containing a rotting stench.

Second, the language used to describe social connection relies upon the lexicon of tactility—staying in *touch*; keeping *connected*—yet, those social connections no longer requires the tactile qualities they describe. This dissertation describes a shifting view of tactility in regards to social connection. The tactile language used to describe social relationships masks the fact that physical connection—touch and physical movement toward one another across the surface of the globe—has been replaced by wireless

6

connection. This shift beckons back to a larger devaluation of corporeal form. Finally, the formal elements of the novel itself reveal a logic that is increasingly guided by the organizing and archival structures of new media. Most of the novels discussed below employ unique narrative structures that are nonlinear, linked by association rather than progressive temporal moments. In three of the novels, large narrative gaps occur, due to lapses in electronic communication or character blackouts. These gaps are neither accounted for nor revealed; rather, they are simply recognized as features of the novels' media tapestries. The merging between the novel and new media, then, describe not only the formation of a new type of novel, but also a critique of the body and social connections within the new media ecology.

This investigation is conducted through the close reading and study of four recently published novels (from 2006 to 2012), each of which bear the markings of a media ecology in transition, and more pointedly, an evolving print medium. The novels include Jess Walter's *The Zero* (2006), Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), Gary Shteyngart's *A Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), and Robin Sloan's *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* (2012). Each of these novels, I argue, is a product of the tension created between print and new media within this transitioning media ecology. They depict this tension through formal innovations—elements that deviate in some way from the traditional text-based linearity of the novel—but also through recurring motifs and stylistic elements that reflect the tense coupling between print media and new media. In order to bring clarity to my argument, I analyze these novels alongside contemporary literary and media scholarship that theorizes the relationships between various old and new media, as well as the relationship between media and its users. Below, and

throughout each chapter, I elaborate on the ways that this scholarship defines central terms of my dissertation and elucidate key concepts that serve as the foundation for my own scholarship on the novel's incorporation of new media.

What are Media?

What does it mean, then, for the media ecology to be in a state of transition? Furthermore, what does this mean for the novel? In order to elucidate these claims, the terms that are central to this dissertation must be pinned down and defined. Media, for example, in all of its various uses, can be particularly complicated. This is, according to Lisa Gitelman, a result of naturalizing or essentializing media. She explains: "ceding agency to media is something that happens at a lexical level every time anyone says 'the media' in English, as if media were a unified natural entity, like the wind." This phrase, she argues, comes from "widely shared perceptions that today's news and entertainment outlets together comprise a relatively unified institution" like "Big Oil" or "NASDAQ." The essentializing of media also occurs, Gitelman argues, because "media are frequently identified as or with technologies, and one of the burden of modernity seems to be the tendency to essentialize or grant agency to technology" (2). In short, Gitelman describes, and challenges, the deterministic tendency to consider media as autonomous, self-driven entities that shape their users and environment merely by their existence. The attribution of agency to media distorts the real relationship between the user and media, in which media is a tool of communication and not, itself, a communicator. In its use of the word "media," this dissertation recognizes media as a tool to aid communication, but it also inquires of the ways that these tools foster social change in a coeval process with their

8

users. The uses that develop around media in varied social and cultural settings foster new communicative practices, and these practices certainly shape the way users communicate and perceive their environments.

To understand the relationship between media and user, my research leans upon Lisa Gitelman's definition of media from *Always Already New* (2006). Gitelman defines media as "socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation" (7). The media, then, are not only the technological forms and the hardware that enable and limit the technology (touchscreens, telephone wires, routers, etc.), but also the social practices and protocols that develop alongside the media (such as the abbreviated language adopted for text messaging or the effect of smartphone screens on sleeping habits). Gitelman elaborates upon this definition by using E-mail as an example: "E-mail includes all of the elaborately layered technical protocols and interconnected service providers that constitute the Internet, but it also includes both the QWERTY keyboards on which e-mail gets 'typed' and the shared sense people have of what the e-mail genre is" (7-8). Therefore, media are a hybrid of technological forms and sociocultural practices.

However, media are also dynamic. They are always in a state of transition. Gitelman writes: "their histories must be social and cultural." The protocols that define media derive from a variety of economic, governmental, and cultural sources. For example, according to Gitelman, protocols can be imposed by corporations that market and produce the technologies, and also by governing bodies that regulate their use.

9

Furthermore, they "emerge at the grassroots level. . . . discrete and fully formed, while many, like digital genres, video rentals, and computer keyboards, emerge as complicated engagements among different media" (8). Protocols are varied and fluid, and therefore, media are never static, or, as Gitelman would suggest, they are "always already new." To refer broadly to "the telephone" or "the computer" is "as much of a mistake" as referring to "the media" as a unified natural entity. It implies that media are "'immutable objects with given, self-defining properties'" (8). Drawing from this description of media, therefore, my paradigm of how the novel incorporates new media is informed by 1) the definition of media as a socially realized structure of communication that includes both technological forms and associated protocols, and 2) the notion that media evolve, in part, as a result of "complicated engagements among different media."

The Book in the Evolving Media Ecology

Like media, the book is also dynamic, and has historically undergone many changes particularly through its shared space with other media in an evolving media ecology. In this section, I will cast some light on the ways that the book has evolved— and continues to evolve—as a result of its engagements with different media. Furthermore, this section will also elucidate my use of the phrase, "media ecology," and explain how an ecological view of media relations illuminates the sociological and cultural matters that drive changes in media.

One such description of the book as an evolving media object exists midway through Robin Sloan's debut novel, *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* (2012), which is also the subject of this dissertation's fourth chapter. In this particular scene Mr.

Penumbra, an aging bookseller, and Kat, an employee at Google, sit at a hotel lobby bar sipping on a drink called "the Blue Screen of Death." Mr. Penumbra is part of a secret society of readers called the Unbroken Spine that has been working at decoding a cryptic text for five hundred years. Devoted bibliophiles and luddites, the society forbids the use of any technology besides pencil and paper. Kat, on the other hand, has just been promoted to Project Manager at Google, a company that has been in existence for fourteen years. Their meeting is, in part, to discuss a plan to bring the decoded text to Google to be scanned and cracked. Penumbra asks Kat: "Dear Girl . . . do you think Google will still exist in a hundred years?" After a moment, Kat answers Penumbra's inquiry confidently: "Yes, I do." Penumbra tells her a story about another member of the Unbroken Spine who had "founded a company of similar ambition. And he said exactly the same thing." After guessing at the company's name—"Microsoft? Apple?"— Penumbra reveals: "No, no . . . It was Standard Oil" (a company that was forcibly dissolved over a century ago). He continues: "You have found your way into a story that has been unfolding for a very long time" (173). At first blush, the statement merely recognizes the introduction of a new chapter in the long history of the book. But at a closer look, it begs the question: what does it mean for the story to have been unfolding for a very long time? What does it mean for Kat to have found her way into this story? Wouldn't this suggest that Kat's entrance into the story was always part of the story itself, always imprinted somewhere on the pages of this story, yet to be unfolded until this moment in the hotel bar?

In this brief anecdote, Penumbra's description of the book as "a story that has been unfolding for a very long time," describes not a static entity, but an object in a

constant state of evolution. Yet, the secret society of readers exist in a world in which their attempt to preserve the book against new media technologies coincides with a contemporary society that decreasingly values print media. Penumbra's motivation for merging the book with Google's technologies is rooted in the belief that the book's "story" is ever-unfolding and evolving through its shared space with other media. This has to happen in order for the book to evolve. In *How We Think* (2012), published the same year as *Penumbra,* N. Katherine Hayles echoes a similar view of all technical objects within the media ecology: "technical objects embody complex temporalities enfolding past into present, present into future. An essential component of this approach is a shift from seeing technical objects as static entities to conceptualizing them as temporary coalescences in fields of conflicting and cooperating forces" (86). Both Hayles and Sloan rely on the description of evolution as infinite folds that, for Sloan, endlessly unfold, and for Hayles, contain within its folds all past, present, and future iterations of the technology. It is through the engagement with other technical objects, Hayles argues, that media evolve.

This is essentially a portrait of the media ecology. The ecological view of media relations emphasizes the role that the interdependency of media technologies plays in shaping individual technologies. In *Writing at the Limit: The Novel in the New Media Ecology* (2012), Daniel Punday states: "the language of media ecologies emphasize multiple relations among media at any one time." He continues: "the ecology metaphor reflects the desire to find more sophisticated ways to talk about tensions between media" (12). The ecological view of media often runs counter to a field view of media, which places media in competition with each other, during which one medium is often pushed

into obsolescence from other media (e.g. photography killed print narrative, film killed photography, or video killed the radio star). Within an ecological view of media relations, however, the tension between media are often described as productive and result in the reconstitution of older media forms. Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz describe the productive nature of media relations in *Reading Matters: Narratives in the New Media Ecology* (1997). They refer to an argument made by Niklas Luhmann, when they state: "an enlarged media environment leads not only to 'differentiation'—a definition of each medium's alterity from other media—but also to a productive ecology, a reciprocity between media that ensures the continued presence of older, less advanced storage and communications technologies" (9). Quoting Luhmann, they explain: "New technological achievements do not necessarily mean the forceful negation of older media, but rather their recombination" (qtd in Tabbi and Wutz 9). Each chapter of this dissertation examines a particular way in which this productive tension between the book and new media manifest in the contemporary novel. Just as Tabbi and Wutz surmise, "as the scene of writing changes, the book will not be left behind—but neither will it be quite the same in its new context," this dissertation reveals the unique ways that the contemporary American novel has already begun to incorporate new media (2).

An ecological view of media relations does not simply describe changes in media, but also describes social and cultural changes based on a view that recognizes the media ecology as an environment in which humans interact. Ursula Heise explains: "based on the assumption that media are not mere tools that humans use, but rather constitutive environments within which they move and that shape the structure of their perceptions, their forms of discourse, and their social behavior patterns, ecology typically focuses on

how these structures change with the introduction of new communication technologies"

(qtd. in Punday 13). It is important to note, however, that the technologies themselves are

not the agents of social and cultural change. In an article titled, "Media Ecology and the

Future Ecosystemic Society," Ruotsalainen and Heinonen explain that,

> "The media ecology tradition perceives media as a structure in which
>
> society and culture evolve—as an environments where people act and live
>
> their lives, and through which reality is perceived. Culture and social and
>
> societal relationships are created through human communication. This is
>
> why the media technology of each era—i.e., the means through which
>
> people communicate—significantly sculpts culture, ways of thinking,
>
> values, social and power relationships; in short, human existence. To be
>
> more precise, it is not the technology that sculpts culture but the
>
> communication which takes place in certain media. (9)

The media ecology, therefore, constitutes the structure through which all human

communication occurs. The novel, as a medium, but also as a realist representation of

humans communicating within a specific spatiotemporal moment, is uniquely positioned

to describe the nuances of this social change; that is, to describe how communication and

language and social connections bear the markings of a media ecology in transition.

Throughout the dissertation, each chapter relies, then, upon a novel with a unique

temporality that draws awareness to a media ecology in transition. For example, the first

chapter looks at Jess Walter's 9/11 novel to investigate the notion of media change

against a significant historical rupture. Similarly, both the second and third chapters look

at novels that contain a striking new media presence, but also span temporally from the

early days of computer media well into the near future in order to illustrate how new modes of communication foster new methods of communicating. Chapter four, which closely reads *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore,* examines the future of print media through the coupling of print and new media. Furthermore, each novel utilizes the novel's unique form as a tool for not only representing these cultural changes, but for embodying them through formal and structural innovations.

As such, the book has always been dynamic and has historically undergone many changes through its shared space with other media. Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz's collection, *Reading Matters*, places the novel's continual evolution within a historical perspective. Examining the novel alongside many early inscription machines, they describe how the novel's existence has been marked by repeated adaptations to technological innovation. They refer to Freidrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks* when they explain that, for the novel, "the movement into the modern period involves a coming together of many separate developments and a changing relation among various media and the institutions that connect them with people" (4). While much is made of the impact that new media has on reading and print narrative—which is the subject of my third chapter—Tabbi and Wutz explain that emerging media have historically had this effect on print time and time again. They describe how "writing and written narrative in general were displaced from their erstwhile centrality and forced to compete with gramophones, kinetoscopes, and their technologically more advanced successors in the marketplace of inscription." In fact, drawing from the work of Walter Benjamin, they argue: "pressured by an array of postprint media, print indeed facilitated its own demise; it put itself out of print, as it were, not because it failed but because it succeeded too well

in creating in readers a taste for the real that only nonverbal media could satisfy. And it continues to do so" (5). Yet, as this claim illustrates, the demise of print is always confounded by its profound adaptability. Tabbi and Wutz describe the encyclopedic novel, for example, as a response to the mechanical ability to record everything. They explain how several authors "engaged the pressure of filmic, photographic, and phonographic accuracy by assembling congeries of facts, figures, and data streams that, in their self-conscious overabundance, were presumed to be uncontainable by these new media" (6). Similarly, the self-consciousness of the high modernist novel emerged from its shared space with visual and auditory technologies. They claim: "Once visual and auditory recording technologies had released the alphabet from its burden as a *storage* technology, print could be recuperated as a medium with distinct physical properties, a complex of material signifiers." Through the revival of small and artisanal presses, "the physicality of the letter—its material appearance on the space of the page—became a crucial component of meaning construction" (8). They continue: "Such a material understanding of language replaced the semiotics of semantics with a semiotics of print and endowed the word with an aesthetic tangibility and self-conscious heaviness meant to outlast the ephemerality of light and voice—the fleeting races recorded by camera and gramophone" (9). Tabbi and Wutz's collection provides a rich history of print and intermedial relations within the twentieth century. Yet, it is difficult to ignore the seemingly accelerated emergence of new technologies since this text's publication in 1997, which have opened up entirely new possibilities of mobile computing, massive data storage, and most modern manifestations of new media. By focusing on new media, this

16

dissertation strives to continue the work that Tabbi and Wutz initiated into the twenty-first century.

What are New Media?

In order to avoid the pitfalls of essentializing media—turning media into an autonomous unified entity—one must define new media cautiously, too. The problem with the term "new media" is that it is vastly encompassing. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich describes new media as the merging between media and the computer. "Media and computer," he writes, "merge into one. All existing media are translated into numerical data accessible for the computer. The result: graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces, and texts become computable, that is, simply sets of computer data. In short, media become new media" (25). Therefore, the term "new media" refers to media that developed as a result of the merging between media and computer—the internet, digital television, etc.—and also to the myriad analog media that could now be digitized and stored as new media, such as film, text, or recorded music. As such, the term distinguishes neither between various media, nor between the different uses of similar media. Such broad references, according to Gitelman, imply that new media are "'immutable objects with given, self-defining properties'" (8). Therefore, it is important to refer to new media specifically and to situate them within a historical and social context to avoid perpetuating a deterministic view of media. For this reason, I have organized each chapter to investigate a specific novel, and in that investigation, a specific new media technology. However, the term new media, in its broadest sense, can be a useful way to distinguish between the varying structural and operating logics of new

media and print media. The term recognizes that there is a difference between what is considered *new media* and what is not. A broad view, therefore, draws attention to distinguishing features of new media in contrast with other forms of media, and for the sake of this dissertation, it illuminates specific ways that these media merge within the novel.

Lev Manovich defines new media according to five "general tendencies of a culture undergoing computerization." The first two tendencies have to do with the material make-up of new media. First, all new media objects "are composed of digital code." This means that they can be represented numerically, and as such, are subject "to algorithmic manipulation." Manovich writes, "In short, media becomes programmable" (27). Second, new media objects are also characterized by their modularity. They are "represented as collections of discrete samples . . . . These elements are assembled into larger-scale objects but continue to maintain their separate identities" (30). He uses the World Wide Web as an example, which is "completely modular. It consists of numerous Web pages, each in its turn consisting of separate media elements. Every element can always be accessed on its own" (31). Because of the material makeup of new media, they are capable of certain functions that further distinguish them from older forms of media, such as the print novel. For example, Manovich describes the third and fourth tendencies of new media as automation and variability. With new media, certain manipulations can be completed without technical knowledge of the media. The shading of digital photos can be adjusted, for example, without requiring knowledge of the numerical codes that identify shaded regions of the photo. Manovich explains: "the numerical coding of media . . . and the modular structure of a media object . . . allow for the automation of many

operations involved in media creation, manipulation, and access. Thus, human intentionality can be removed from the creative process, at least in part." As a result of automation, "the computer user modifies or creates from scratch a media object using templates or simple algorithms" (32). The user, then, becomes in part the creator. Furthermore, because of automation processes, the media object "can exist in different, potentially infinite versions" (36). This is what Manovich means by variability.

These emphasize two important ways that new media are distinguished from other types of media, such as the print novel. First, the print novel is characterized by its mass production, whereas new media is made-to-order. Manovich explains: "modern media follows the logic of the factory . . . on the level of material organization" (29-30). Features such as "type design and fonts" are standardized. He continues: "modern media systems also followed factory logic in that, once a new 'model' . . . was introduced, numerous identical media copies would be produced from this master." New media, on the other hand, follows "a quite different logic of post-industrial society—that of individual customization, rather than mass standardization" (30). Once printed onto the page, the physical components of the novel (the arrangement of the text on the pages, the arrangement of the pages within the codex) do not change. The fluidity of new media tends to emphasize the static qualities of print media. Even in experimental novels, such as Tom Phillips's *The Humument* (1973) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010), in which the original source is manipulated by blotting out words or excising letters, the "new" text is identical in every published version. In other words, these experiments produce *a single* variation of the media, rather than enable infinite variations. That variation is fixed into its delivery technology through publication. The

fixity of the media within a delivery technology is another important distinction between new media and the print novel. Because of its numerical representation and modularity, new media can be exhibited across myriad devices, whereas the novel is fixed within a single device. As a result, the interface of the codex—the use of ink on pages, the necessary task of flipping the pages, its linear organization, etc.— becomes a more central part of the media experience than the delivery technology of a new media object, which could be a wide range of devices, each with unique interfaces. For this reason, tactility plays an important role in reading, both in turning the pages, but also, some studies suggest, in increasing reader retention by associating passages with certain physical quadrants of the page (Jabr). This may also be why books are so often noted for their physical features, such as their smell, their covers, or the texture of their pages.

As the novel and new media merge, however, novelists find new ways to represent variability. In some extreme cases, novels contain supplemental features that are accessible through a smart phone or hidden online, such as in Marisha Pessl's *Night Film* (2013) or Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007). Depending on the ability to locate these features, the narrative include some limited variability; limited, because the texts are still a long ways from being automated. The user cannot create content, but only discover supplemental content outside of the text. Other novels, such as Lee Siegel's *Love and Other Games of Chance* (2003) and hypertext fiction popular in the mid-90s such as Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* (1994) and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995), allow the reader to choose the narrative paths—amongst many possibilities—yet, once again all the possible paths have all been created by the author. The reader does not create the content. The novels in this dissertation, I argue, deal with variability by

pocking the narratives with long and painfully frustrating gaps. In contrast to the

encyclopedic novels of the late nineties, such as David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

(1996), Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997), and Don DeLillo's *The Underworld*

(1997), which attempt to include everything, the novels discussed below omit central plot

elements. The reader is left to imaginatively construct the missing parts. Since the novels

end in a state of epistemological uncertainty similar to their beginning, imagining the

gaps is not a matter of reconstructing what was has been hidden; rather, it is an act of

imagining possible variations of human experience. In Jess Walter's *The Zero*, for

example, the plot is driven by the desire to learn to what extent the protagonist is

involved in a terrorist scheme. The only problem is that the point of view is limited to the

protagonist, who suffers from associative identity disorder, and blacks out anytime

something nefarious is about to occur. Similarly, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon

Squad* contains thirteen chapters that describe distinct moments between 1973 and the

near future. Since all the gaps between these moments are unaccounted for, the characters

are on this fruitless mission to learn "what happened between A and B" (101). These

gaps often contain some definitive plot element—a decisive character action or an

omitted catastrophe—that haunts the narrative, but is never disclosed, thus allowing

readers to endlessly reconstruct the gaps, often communally within the comments section

of social book review sites like Goodreads.com or from fan-based websites.[3]

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[3] The comment thread for *The Zero's* Goodreads page contains much banter about what happened during
the protagonist's many narrative gaps:
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/22195.The_Zero?from_search=true. The following is a fansite for
Egan's novel, which attempts to reconstruct the novel's confusing timelines:
http://goonsquadtimelines.weebly.com/index.html.

Transcoding and Techno-Genesis

Finally, the numerical representation inherent in new media constructs an additional layer of interpretation between the user and the media source. Whereas layers of literary meaning are created and interpreted through the users' relationship to language and sociocultural experience, the layer of numerical representation corresponds to the operations and logic of a computer. As such, new media objects consist of two distinct layers. Manovich writes: "On the level of representation, it belongs on the side of human culture." This layer hinges upon the object's content and meaning. "But on another level," he continues, "it is a computer file . . . [that] that consists of machine-readable header, followed by numbers representing color values of its pixels." On this layer, it "enters into a dialog with other computer files" (45). This is the fifth tendency of new media, which Manovich calls transcoding. Transcoding is the idea that new media consists of at least two communicative layers—that of the human and the computer—that communicate with each other. He explains: that "because new media is created on computers, distributed via computers, and stored and archived on computers, the logic of a computer can be expected to significantly influence the traditional cultural logic of media; that is, we may expect that the computer layer will affect the cultural layer." Similarly, the human layer influences the computer layer, which is evidenced largely "on the level of the human-computer interface, which increasingly resembles the interfaces of older media machines and cultural technologies" (46). Through the tendency of transcoding, media become the site upon which the logic of the computer merges with the cultural logic of the human. As new media become increasingly embedded into a society,

this blended logic influences cognitive structures, while also becoming apparent in cultural forms other than new media, such as the novel.

In *How We Think* (2012), N. Katherine Hayles elaborates upon the blending of computer and cultural logic by first describing how media and humans evolve alongside one another. She writes: "we think through, with, and alongside media." Since such large quantities of our collective information and experiences are shared through media, it is not surprising that those devices impact our cognitive structures (how we organize, recall, and share information). Hayles describes minds that have been "formed by print, nurtured by print, and enabled and constrained by print" (1). The novel, for example, represents a way of seeing the world, but it also represents a way of archiving those experiences. Its organizational structures—dominated by linearity and traditional plot conventions such as conflict and resolution—both mimic and shape the way humans archive experience. As a dominant medium for nearly five hundred years, it is no surprise that cognitive structures have been impacted by the logic of print.

Hayles describes this process as technogenesis, which she defines as "the idea that humans and technics have coevolved together." To explain how technogenesis occurs in the contemporary moment, Hayles refers to two modifications. The first is the "Baldwin effect," which suggests that the spread of a genetic mutation "is accelerated when the species reengineers its environment in ways that make the mutation more adaptive." The second is the occurrence of epigenetic changes, which are "changes initiated and transmitted through the environment rather than through the genetic code" (10). The environment has a profound impact on human evolution; not only does it make genetic mutations more adaptive, but it also speeds up the process of evolution through

epigenetic changes. Hayles continues: "Because the dynamic involves causation that operates through epigenetic changes, which occur much faster than genetic mutations, evolution can now happen much faster, especially in environments that are rapidly transforming with multiple factors pushing in similar directions" (10-11). Epigenetic changes, brought about by changes in the environment, actually change the shape of human brains by fashioning new neural pathways. Hayles writes: "research indicates that the small habitual actions associated with web interactions—clicking the mouse, moving a cursor, etc.—may be extraordinarily effective in retraining (or more accurately, repurposing) our neural circuitry, so that the changes are not only psychological but physical as well." (2). She elaborates: "recent work in neurophysiology, neurology, and cognitive science . . . has shown that the brain, central nervous system, and peripheral nervous system are endowed with a high degree of neural plasticity. . . . even into old age." These changes frequently occur from interactions with digital media. "Digital media . . . embedded in the environment," Hayles argues "push us in the direction of faster communication, more intense and varied informational streams, more integration of humans and intelligent machines, and more interactions of language with code. These environmental changes have significant neurological consequences, many of which are now becoming evident in young people and to a lesser degree in almost everyone who interacts with digital media on a regular basis" (11). Essentially, Hayles argues that the neural circuitry of one's brains is transformed in part by the media ecology in which one resides. This is, of course, true for print or new media.

What is so New about New Media?

24

Even though epigenetic changes speed up the process of evolution, these changes still occur slowly, and the changes do not of course, begin with media technologies; rather, the technological innovations reflect an already-shifting consciousness. Yet, as the media technologies become more pervasive in society—both as mediators and archival tools—their processes for representing and archiving accelerate the already-shifting consciousness that spurred their innovation. It is also important to recognize that different types of media utilize very different organizing patterns and modes of distribution and exhibition. Janet H. Murray writes about media in terms of how information is archived and the profound impact that these archives have upon human consciousness as humans and media coevolve. Introducing a volume of essays about new media, she writes: "The problem that preoccupies all of the authors in this volume is the pullulating consciousness that is the direct result of 500 years of print culture" (Murray 4). In this passage, she describes both the sheer abundance of information that has been produced in the 500 years of print culture, as well as the structures in which this information has been organized. The evolution of these archival structures, from print to new media, according to Murray, are a result of "the increased complexity of human consciousness and the failure of linear media to capture the structures of our thought." The linear nature of print no longer reflects the way we think. Over time, the archive of recorded human knowledge (books and other recorded artifacts) has grown to a quantity beyond what can reasonably navigated.

As early as 1945, computer scientist Vannevar Bush was dealing with the problem of having to sift through too much information. In an essay titled "As We May Think," he drafted the plans for a desk that archived massive stores of information using

microfilm and a keyboard. The desk operated according to structures very similar to those of the internet (it is user-indexed, searchable, and organized according to cross-references that foreshadow the logic of the hyperlink). Bush explains that "publication has been extended far beyond our ability to make real use of the record. The summation of human experience is being expanded at a prodigious rate, and the means we use for threading through the consequent maze to the momentarily important item is the same as was used in the days of square rigged ships" (Bush 38). The toll of centuries' worth of print culture and abundant stores of information slowly nudged human consciousness to adapt new methods of organization. Evolving from structures imposed by print media, nonlinear and networked structures (e.g. the internet) render information more accessible through digitization, search functions, and algorithms that create networks of artifacts based on reading habits, content, and other qualifying characteristics.

These changes profoundly impact not only structures of cognition, but also one's relationship to the world. In *How We Think*, Hayles explains, "The ability to access and retrieve information on a global scale has a significant impact on how one thinks about one's place in the world" (2). When we consider the role that the environment has in propelling forward epigenetic changes (changes that occur as a result of environmental conditions rather than genetic mutations), two things become rapidly apparent: first is how deeply engrained five hundred years of print must be within human consciousness. Second, paradoxically, is how pervasive and forceful of an impact new archival structures can have when they have evolved alongside of human consciousness and when they have been widely adopted across the globe.

Finally, it is important to assert the neutrality of the different archival structures of print and new media. It is never a question of print *or* new media. Each of the novels discussed in this dissertation challenge this competitive view of media relations. Print and new media contain different features, and each of these features is useful depending on the task. Print is not obsolete; in fact, its structures still provide useful ways of organizing information that limit some of the detriments of new media structures, just as new media structures introduce models of human-media interaction that render the abundance of print media unnavigable. In fact, these novels illustrate a hybrid of print and new media technologies, operating within symbiotic relationships in order to eliminate binary oppositions. Distinguishing between the structures of the bookshelf and that of the computer, Janet H. Murray envisions a merging of the forms that will capitalize upon each of their most useful features. She writes: "The library shelf and the chaptered book create both overview and close-up and allow us to move between them without losing our place. What the computer offers us is a more capacious shelf, a finer grained division. The engineers articulate a vision of a new meta-book, a navigable collection of books that will carry us gracefully to the next level of information control and systematic thought, just as the invention of print did 500 years ago" (4). Perhaps the stocked shelf at Amazon's bricks-and-mortar stores, with each title facing outward, ready to be scanned by one's smartphone, curated by user habits, thumbed through, and sniffed, is only one vision of this capacious shelf in which the practices of print and new media merge. The novels discussed in the proceeding chapters articulate other ways in which these media merge, as well as express embody the anxieties, tensions, and possibilities of this coupling.

The Products of an Evolving Media Ecology

This dissertation argues that the novel's incorporation of new media is a tense, yet productive process. The novels described below embody this tension through narrative form. For example, each of the novels describes an inability to adequately archive and retrieve experiences. This emanates in a deviation from linearity and includes frequent, narrative gaps that are never resolved. Thematically, the novels employ recurring motifs of the human body in the process of decay. This decay coincides with emerging media technologies that allow the virtual body to transcend spatial and temporal confines through the screens of computers, smartphones, and tablets. As social connections are increasingly relegated to computer and tablet screens, the body becomes burdensome, a weight to be transcended. At the same time, however, the language used to discuss social connections, such as staying in *touch,* utilizes the lexicon of tactility to mask the fact that touch is no longer required. Each chapter of the dissertation focuses on different aspects of new media; yet, they all share similar anxieties about this evolving media ecology.

The first chapter of this dissertation describes the anxiety and tension that emanates from a media ecology in transition. Reading from Jess Walter's *The Zero*, I investigate how this tension is incorporated by the contemporary novel, focusing primarily on the novel's dual roles as a medium and a representation of a media ecology. Set in the days after 9/11, the novel is filled with images of burning paper and defunct computers. The protagonist, Remy, suffers from dissociative identity disorder, which results in large lapses in his memory. Just as the loss of paper following the 9/11 attack presents a rupture from the past—as the city rushes to collect all the paper scraps in order

28

to reconstruct the past—Remy's lapses in memory describe an inability to connect his own experiences within a discernable and linear narrative. These tensions between memory and mediated experiences describe an ecology that is in transition. This transition is manifested through physical ailments, suggesting that one's perception of a media-constructed reality (over a reality constructed through the human sensorium) impacts the corporeal body.

The second chapter focuses on the impact that social media has upon human connection. This chapter reads Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2012) to describe how the migration toward social media shapes the way that humans connect with each other, particularly as it implicates notions of time and tactility. The novel focuses on the roles that time and space play in establishing, maintaining, and losing connections. Furthermore, it examines ways that telecommunications and web-based social media distort those connections by creating a permanent present moment, and by truncating perceptions of geographical distance. Central to this novel is also the act of inscription, and how one's inscriptions work towards identity construction. Like in the other chapters, this chapter also focuses on the impact that social networks have on perceptions of the body. Egan uses a number of remarkable formal elements to investigate evolving modes of social connection. Through alphabetical arrangement of her characters' names, she imposes a social network upon the alphabet and provides her reader with a spatial depiction of her characters' relations. The shifting points of view, nonlinear arrangements of chapters, and inclusion of nonliterary elements such as an eighty-page PowerPoint presentation also serve to describe the evolving roles of human connection within the new media ecology.

In chapter three, this dissertation reads Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* as a tense portrait of the media ecology in transition. This novel describes a media ecology that lacks diversity. In the media ecology of *Super Sad*, the obsession with this single device fuels a culture that devalues media content that does not speak the same "language" as the äppärät. The pressure to be "media"—Shteyngart's verb for media savvy—quickly evolves into a vitriolic prejudice *against* what are considered old media cultural habits, such as reading, talking (verballing), or physical (non-virtual) lovemaking. Verbal communication erodes and cultural diversity vanishes. Furthermore, the end of the print book, in *Super Sad*, parallels the end of the organic human body: biological functions are replaced with tiny machines and questions of identity migrate to media devices and online profiles.

Finally, chapter four investigates Robin Sloan's *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* (2012) to ask the question: when print and new media are coupled, what is produced? The novel describes the merging between the codex and the computer in unique ways. As such, it explores new forms that arise from this coupling: forms that possess the tactile elements and deep focus of a novel, with the archival breadth and navigability of many new media platforms. This chapter focuses on archival grids in an attempt to understand how the shift from the linear-structured bookcase to the networked-structured Internet reflects a shift in human consciousness. Like the chapters above, this chapter is also concerned with how the coupling between print and new media impact perceptions of corporeality. Finally, this chapter asks what it means for media to remain in a perpetual state of transition.

In the conclusion, I examine new other ways that novels have incorporated the practices and structures of new media through more aggressive and experimental forms. It examines several novels that embody the coupling between print and new media by integrating new media technologies—such as smartphones and web browsers—into the reading experience. Finally the conclusion explores the relationship between the novel and new media, while also asking looking back to see how the novel uniquely represents its earliest iterations.

Chapter 1

"A Thousand Technological Miracles Later":

Anxiety and New Media in Jess Walter's *The Zero*

"Remy felt a jolt of déjà vu, anticipating each muted image before it

appeared, and it occurred to him that the news had become the wallpaper

in his mind now, the endless loop playing in his head" (Walter 8).

Near the middle of *The Zero* (2006)*,* in a section titled "Everything Fades," Jess

Walter describes what it is like to live in the frenetic, 24-hour glow of the post-9/11

media ecology, one that is inundated by flickering television screens and emerging new

media. The novel's protagonist, Brian Remy, is headed to San Francisco with his

girlfriend, April, and they are both attempting an escape: Remy, from his ambiguous role

as a counter-terrorist agent, and April, from the despair of her husband's and sister's

recent death in the 9/11 attack (the morning of the attack she learned they were having an

affair). But this isn't the only escape. Imagined during their time in San Francisco, and

central to the novel, is an attempt to get out from under the glow of the media ecology.

Shortly after their plane's descent into San Francisco, which Walter describes as "a

thousand technological miracles later," Remy and April sink low into a corner table of a

hotel lounge and fantasize about a tech-free future. April says, "We can wear wigs and

grow mustaches so no one recognizes us. And I'll learn to sew." But as April digs deeper

into the scenario, her imagination seems to short-circuit. "I'll sew all our food. We'll live

off the grid, in a cabin built from empty wine bottles" (237). Three times during their stay in San Francisco, April and Remy assume fantastically rugged identities, and each time their fantasies are thwarted by a failure of the imagination. Imagining a mysterious life as Steve and Monique, a defector from the Soviet Union and international jewel thief, April ends up introducing herself as Steve, and Remy as Monique (241). Later, they pose as ex-pat draft dodgers Dustin and Maggie, who live without "electricity or phone service," in "the shadow of a glacier where they carry buckets of ice for drinking water." The fantasy remains intact until Remy confesses that "we eat only roots. In the summer we're always naked. I have a pet moose." When the bartender asks if they moved to Canada to avoid serving in Vietnam, April answers, "No . . . Panama" (244-45). When they attempt to imagine a life outside of the media ecology, even the most basic human necessities like food, clothing, and shelter become incongruent and unimaginable. In *The Zero* a life disconnected from media is unimaginable.

The failure of the imagination in this novel is directly related to the ubiquity and influence of media technologies. No matter how hard the characters strain, they cannot tear themselves free, cannot escape from the screen's glow. In San Francisco, each attempt at imagining this life off the grid is preceded and succeeded by a session of television watching that seems more ritual than leisure. The television brings clarity; it restores and refuels the exhausted imagination, whereas the physical world outside of the television's illuminating clarity fosters uncertainty and doubt. The world off-screen is too broad and complex; the world on-screen is contextualized and situated within a simpler narrative. Back in the hotel room, Remy and April's attention to the screen is something akin to data streaming, as though they are downloading the "pictures from an older

33

America" only to recall them later. April runs "through the channels faster than Remy could register the programs," but he continues to watch "the screen flickering with transient images, and every once in a while he caught one." Not only do the images order their imaginations, but their vision mimics the (dis)order of the television as well. Remy looks away because the "fluttering television was too much like the disorder in his eyes." While the screen inside is "flickering with transient images," outside the hotel lounge Remy registered that "faces moved past like the flickering images on the TV" (235, 237). What they see, and how they see it, is determined by the "flickering" and "fluttering" screen, which the characters find "hypnotic," "intoxicating," and "mesmerizing" (235, 240).

In its exploration of the post-9/11 media ecology, *The Zero* emerges as an early and important novel in regards to new media; that is, it is a novel that is concerned with the current evolving media ecology and the relationships between various media forms. While the scene in San Francisco focuses particularly on television, *The Zero* is more broadly concerned with the shifting media ecology, which, in the days after 9/11, is rapidly evolving towards new media. The novel explores an ecology in transition. The inky pulp of print media, the ubiquitous screens of television and cell phones, and the digital world of computers all cast a wide shadow in *The Zero,* and the novel describes their relationships with some anxiety. This chapter explores the nuances of this anxiety, particularly in how it relates to the role of the novel itself as a print medium. As such, it is important not to confuse the anxiety with a fear of the novel's obsolescence. While some digital age novels certainly speculate about the novel's disappearance from a high tech society, such as Gary Shteyngart's *A Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) and Dave

34

Egger's *The Circle* (2013), others imagine a marriage of sorts between print and screen technology, such as Robin Sloan's *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* (2012) and Marisha Pessl's *Night Film* (2013). More recent novels, including *S.* (2013) by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, and Adam Thirwell's *Kapow!* (2012) even imagine a resurgence of the novel as a primary print media artifact. *The Zero* introduces the reader to the field of play: the frenetic media ecology of the 21st century. In doing so, Walter imagines a tension between various media that push them toward reinvention rather than obsolescence. The anxiety, in this case, is not a death sentence, but a description of evolving and converging media forms.

Building the Zero

> *"And that was the first time it crossed his mind that there might be another way to consider this problem, that there might, in some way, be two Remys, one he knew and the other he didn't, and that these two men might be as different as—"* (Walter 213).

Central to the novel's investigation of the new media ecology is the novel as a literary form. As a novel, *The Zero* utilizes its technology as a print media form to assert its own precarious position within this evolving media ecology. The novel's technology includes its physical components—covers, ink, pages—as well as the traditional literary components of the genre, including plot, structure and narrative arc, and protagonist. Unlike the televisions within the novel, which are ubiquitous, passively consumed, and a source of comfort for several characters, the novel is represented as textured and difficult. When novels do show up, they are "too diffuse, too hard to follow," or they are obscured

by nebulous details, such as the "shell-eyed" man in the emergency waiting room who reads what first appears to be a "blank book," but later he turns out to be "hiding a ratty paperback behind [a] hardcover" (168, 8). Like the novels it describes, *The Zero* is similarly difficult. Unlike the other media represented throughout the novel—television, newspapers, PowerPoint presentations, recipe cards, etc.—the novel is not organized to bring clarity; rather, the novel's difficulty is a stylistic choice that embraces complexity and requires an active participant.

The novel begins with a dreamlike vision of the 9/11 attack just after the protagonist, Brian Remy, shoots himself in the head, and it ends with a dreamlike vision from a hospital bed. Much of what happens in between, if it does in fact happen, is obscured by gaping holes in the plot. Remy is a 9/11 first responder who suffers from dissociative identity disorder, and the reader only has access to one of these identity's accounts. After 9/11, Remy is promoted to work as a counterterrorist agent responsible for uncovering domestic terrorist cells. He and his partner, and a host of other agencies— some private, some public—brutally interrogate suspects and recruit informants who may be able to link the agents to cell leaders. This process often requires them to convince/coerce their informants to participate indirectly in a terrorist operation. It is, after all, much easier to make an arrest when some (or all) of the suspects work for the agencies. During a major sting operation at the end of the novel, in which all the agencies are in the same hotel room observing and digitally recording their informants, Remy realizes that every single suspect is a recruit; the entire terrorist cell had been created by the agencies. Remy tries to break up the arrest. "They're all our guys," he says. "They're all moles. Every one of them. . . . They all work for us." His partner responds: "Ye-e-eah

36

. . . That's what makes it so perfect. What can go wrong?" (314). Since multiple agencies are at work, nobody is quite sure which mole reports to which agency. To further the novel's confusion, Remy's two identities are split between the counterterrorist agent who is a brutally decisive, cold-hearted mastermind (performing heroically in the barroom, the bedroom, and the battlefield), and a passive police officer who is never sure where he is or why he is there. The reader only has access to the latter. A typical scene begins in an unfamiliar setting, usually with some alarming detail (a handwritten note or a drop of blood on his shoe), and Remy struggling to understand the situation. Frequently, scenes end mid-sentence with ellipses, indicating the commencement of another gap.

The Zero, then, is not a conventional novel. In terms of plot, most of the key moments are omitted. Conflict, rising action, and crisis occur off the page. The protagonist is an anti-hero. It is easy to characterize Remy as a sympathetic protagonist—a victim of his unfortunate situation—but only when we ignore the brutal measures he has taken off the page. In *The Zero*, Walter only includes half the story; however, he makes sure the reader is aware that the other half of the story is missing (through the white space, ellipses, and visible gaps between narrative segments). This form accomplishes two tasks, and in doing so, expresses anxiety about the post-9/11 media ecology: First, the novel embraces the complexity of the story. It embraces the frayed connections, ambivalent suspects, and hazy motivations. Second, in its complexity, it belies criticism for a narrative process so polished and convincing that the viewer becomes unaware of complexity and omission. In other words, its blatant omission of edited content highlights the more conspicuously edited content of mainstream narratives, such as those on television or film, which are edited so as not to draw attention to the

37

omissions. Therefore, the form of *The Zero* is always in tension with the forms of media

within the novel, of which their seductive production conceals the fact that anything is

missing. The addictive narrative offered by the novel's many television screens, and the

authority of its PowerPoint displays, are so convincing that the reader cannot see, nor can

she exist, outside of it. As illustrated with Remy and April in San Francisco, their

imagination is too reliant upon the content of these screens. Due to his dissociative

identity disorder, Remy, like the reader of the novel, is in a unique position: he is keenly

aware of his gaps. He doesn't know what he is missing, but he knows he is missing

something. This is perhaps why the organization of the television always appears so

familiar to him: his mind edits content much like a television production. The other

characters of *The Zero*, inhabitants of the post-9/11 media ecology, are as equally

unknowing as Remy, only they do not share Remy's awareness.

Situating *The Zero:* Critical Context

There has been recent critical debate about where to situate Walter's novel. Until

2011 the novel was impressively (irresponsibly!) ignored by critics of 9/11 literature,

despite its central 9/11-related content and National Book Award nomination.

Furthermore, the novel was published in 2006, the same year that witnessed a surge of

9/11 novels including Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close,* Jay

McInerney's *The Good Life*, and John Updike's *The Terrorist*.[4] Within the last five years,

however, several critics have broken this silence by reading *The Zero* as an important

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[4] Important scholarly work on 9/11 literature, including Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn's
Literature after 9/11 (2008), Kristiaan Versluys's *Out of the Blue* (2009). Richard Gray's *After the Fall*
(2011), and Aimee Pozorski's *Falling After 9/11* (2014) were astonishingly silent about *The Zero*.

work of 9/11 literature.[5] Their arguments are convincing. After all, the novel begins in

the days immediately following the attack, and Remy was an early responder at Ground

Zero and counterterrorist agent. Though the narrative structure is unconventional, as it is

written from the point of view of a character who suffers from dissociative identity

disorder, the driving force behind the plot is an attempt to catch a suspect who was

believed to have been involved in the attacks. Given these characteristics, the initial

critical silence regarding the novel is at first puzzling. John N. Duvall, in a 2013 article

from *Studies in the Novel*, suggests that the omission may have been in response to the

novel's humorous and ironic approach to dealing with 9/11, despite the fact that this

approach may have been the most suitable. Regarding 9/11 literature, he writes: "What is

never called for is a ludic postmodern narration, one that blurs the boundary between the

fictional and the real. And that's too bad, because the Bush Administration's scripting of

the global War on Terror already blurred that boundary, which suggests that

postmodernism may be able to depict the post-9/11 geopolitical landscape and thus

facilitate historical thinking far better than realism" (281). This logic follows Duvall's

observation that, in response to 9/11, many critics hailed the death of irony.[6] Duvall

quotes Dick Cheney's assertion that "9/11 changed everything." *The Zero* goes against

the notion that, following the aloof 90s and the feckless threat of Y2K, a catastrophe such

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[5] See Anker (2011), DeRosa (2011, 2013), Duvall (2013), Duvall and Marzec (2011), and Hoberek (2011).
[6] A *New York Times* article from September 24, 2001 recounts the supposed demise of irony in the wake of 9/11. "The most prominent early prognosticator was Graydon Carter, editor of Vanity Fair," the article claims. Carter wrote: "Irony that is cynical and reactive and unserious and detached—I think all of these things will seem foolish and dated." Peter W. Kaplan, editor of *The New York Observer*, is quoted in the same article, stating: "irony is on the junk heap now" (Kirkpatrick). In a *Time Magazine* article from the same day, Roger Rosenblatt writes: "One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony. For some 30 years—roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright—the good folks in charge of America's intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously."

as 9/11 would turn the country away from postmodernism and toward seriousness (Duvall 281).

In an article from *Modern Fiction Studies,* Duvall and Robert P. Marzec argue that *The Zero* may not have fit the agenda of 9/11 literary scholars who called for narratives that engaged with tenets of trauma theory and cultural hybridity. In *Out of the Blue* (2009), Versluys writes that the 9/11 novel should "provide a context for what seems to be without context." Drawing from a tradition of trauma theory, he explains that "telling the tale is the first step in getting on with life, integrating what happened into a meaningful narrative" (14). Similarly, Richard Gray, in *After the Fall* (2011), explains that "fictions that get it right, as I see it, thanks to a strategy of convergence, rooted in the conviction that the hybrid is the only space in which the location of cultures and the bearing witness to trauma can really occur" (17). While John H. Duvall and Robert P. Marzec consider Walter's novel "one of the most nuanced novels on the subject" of 9/11 and politics, they explain that it may have been excluded because critics such as Richard Gray "are unwilling to look very closely at what 9/11 fiction sets out to do because they are both sure that they know what 9/11 fiction ought to be doing" (384). Kristine A. Miller, in an article from *Arizona Quarterly,* agrees, suggesting that the lack of a straightforward narrative in *The Zero* "questions the central tenets of trauma theory" (29).

Perhaps it is the complexity and difficulty of the novel that has elicited such debate. It isn't a stretch to see how the novel has been studied as 9/11 fiction, but following such a reading, there is still much to account for, including the back cover's description of *The Zero* as "A Novel of September 12."[7] More compelling is the author's

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[7] In a brief Twitter correspondence with Jess Walter on August 5, 2015, he stated that the description of *The Zero* as "A Novel of September 12" was "mine" (Walter).

note—"This Happened"—which is placed just before the epigraph, and between two looming, Sternesque black pages. This two-word sentence is the closest that Walter gets to any objective narrative, a rare declarative sentence in a tangle of epistemological uncertaintly. From this point, the novel's trajectory leads decisively away from 9/11. Whereas novels like DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* feature protagonists who spend significant amounts of time trying to uncover the details of 9/11—Keith Neudecker in his conversations with Florence Givens, and Oskar Schell in his compilation of media related to 9/11—*The Zero* begins with the statement "This Happened," and is then broken into 3 parts: "Days After," "Everything Fades," and "The Zero." The organization not only resists attempts to linger on the 9/11 attack, but suggests that the attack has been subsumed by the ensuing media and political response. Finally, what can be made of the novel's intense focus on pervasive television screens, defunct computers, and paper that is consumed and revived as something different? The guiding question of this chapter, then, is what can we learn by reading *The Zero* as a novel about the post-9/11 media ecology? This chapter investigates what can be learned about the role of print media within a media ecology increasingly dominated by screens and interminable data streaming.

 The Zero as a novel about new media is a tricky sell, just as it may be to convince readers that *The Zero* as a 9/11 novel is, at best, limited. The problem is that the primary form of media in the novel is television, a medium that, at the publication of the novel, was still widely broadcasted through an analog signal (Oxenford). The centrality and persistence of older media forms in the novel—the newspaper, the novel, and various print correspondence including memos, maps, and recipe cards—also push against a new

media reading of the novel. At the same time, the persistence of older media forms operating in conjunction with newer forms of digital media—computers, digital recording devices, video games, camera phones—illustrates a media ecology in a state of transition. *The Zero*, however, itself a novel and older form of media, was born out of, and in response to, this transitional space. I recognize that media ecology, by its nature of being an ecology—evolving and adapting to technological advancements and socio-cultural needs—is always in a state of transition. In the following paragraphs, I will try to explain why the media ecology of the decade preceding the novel's publication was particularly unstable. Furthermore, the anxiety and uncertainty expressed throughout the novel provides one (of several) popular views concerning the role of the novel in the new media ecology. Through such a reading, this chapter explores Walter's expression of the novel as a media form that resists oversimplification.

One of the reasons that *The Zero* responds to a new media reading is that it was published during a transitional time that witnessed many new media innovations. In *The Language of New Media* (2001), Lev Manovich writes that "we are just beginning to register its initial effects." Due to the effect that new media has upon "all stages of communication" and "all types of media," he predicts that "this new revolution is arguably more profound than the previous [media revolutions]" including the introduction of the printing press and photography (19). As Manovich defines the new media revolution as "the shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication," the key components of this media revolution were the technological developments in electronic computing and eventually the personal computer. The evolution of computing during mid-twentieth century led to widespread

adoption by mainstream users in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Though the first fully

functioning electronic digital computer—the Colossus—was built in 1944, personal

computers did not become widely available until 1977 with the release of the

Commodore PET and Apple II ("Collosus"). These primitive models were still cost

inhibitive and used primarily by governments, businesses, and hobbyists. The

International Telecommunication Union, an agency of the United Nations, describes the

unprecedented growth of personal computer usage in the 1990s to early 2000s. According

to their website, approximately 150 million computers were in use worldwide in 1993.

By 2003, that number grew to over 600 million (The "Missing Link"). Furthermore, the

number of personal computers shipped in 1977 grew from 48,000 to 125 million in 2001

(Kanellos). Smart phones also gained popularity during the early 2000s. Though the

iPhone did not enter the scene until 2007, in 2003 the Blackberry produced its first device

that could make phone calls, send emails, and browse the internet (Woods). Also,

according to web analytics company, Alexa.com, the largest US websites of 2015 were

already in existence well before *The Zero* was published in 2006, including Amazon

(1995), Yahoo (1995), Google (1998), Wikipedia (2001), Facebook (2004), and YouTube

(2005). Though it is common to associate new media with the newest media trends, the

popularity of these websites and dynamic growth of these particular media devices—

smart phones, personal computers, etc.—suggest that these trends and internet practices

were already widely established years before *The Zero*'s publication. Also revealing is

the shift from print to digital media forms during this time. For example, according to a

timeline of new media developments from Poynter.org, in 2000, "more than 1,200 North

American daily newspapers have launched online services" and 2000 was also the first

year in which internet subscriptions surpassed newspaper subscriptions (Shedden). The innovation and widespread adoption of smart phones and personal computers, as well as the development of what are still the top websites in the country, and among the top in the world, describes a shifting media ecology in the decade preceding the 2006 publication of *The Zero*.

       The Zero's portrayal of media reveals a turbulent transition into the new media ecology. Three statements can be made that describe the novel's reflection of this ecology: media is ubiquitous, media is varied, and tension exists between old and new media forms. This first of these characteristics relies heavily on the novel's perpetual sense of uncertainty. *The Zero* begins and ends with dream-like, semi-conscious visions, and the characters, especially Remy who suffers from short-term memory loss related to his dissociative identity disorder, rely on media to learn about the events of their world in the days after the 9/11 terrorist attack. The ubiquity of television in particular is established in the novel's early pages. Sitting in an emergency waiting room after shooting himself in the head, Remy's eyes fall upon the first television in the novel. Walter writes: "His eyes fell on a small television bolted to a pillar in the center of the waiting room, flickering with cable news. Remy felt a jolt of déjà vu, anticipating each muted image before it appeared, and it occurred to him that the news had become the wallpaper in his mind now, the endless loop playing in his head" (8). This feeling of déjà vu occurs frequently throughout the novel, especially when Remy is in front of a television. Not only are the images familiar, but so is the format, the rapid oscillation from "news to sports to music videos" (240). Due to Remy's gaps, he experiences his life as a fluttering of scenes, "much like the disorder in his eyes" (235). Even the positioning

of the screen establishes its primacy; it is elevated upon a pillar in the center of the room, flickering as though a holy object. As Remy describes the images on the screen—"dust-covered gray stragglers with gray hands covering gray mouths"—the images quickly become indistinguishable from the "threads of tissue, threads of detachment and degeneration . . . flaking into the soup behind his eyes" (9). The "macular degeneration" and "vitreous detachment" from which Remy also suffers continuously blur his vision with flakes and streaks (26). Remy repeatedly confuses these streaks with images on the television screen and "scraps of paper blown into the world" (9). The figurative description of television as the "wallpaper in his mind" is more literally realized when Remy begins to mistake his actual vision problems for televised images and scraps of paper. Moreover, Remy's perception is so thoroughly influenced by video images that the novel's opening description uses the language of cinema, thus further conflating Remy's eyes with the lens of a camera: "He was lying on his side, panning across a fuzzy tree line of carpet fiber. From this, the world focused into being one piece at a time" (3). The verbs "panning" and "focused," as well as the disorienting point of view—a sideways shot of the "fuzzy tree line"—affirms the influence that video mediation has over even the processes of Remy's vision and perception. In this opening scene, which is the reader's first glimpse of the world of *The Zero* through its protagonist's eyes, Remy has already internalized the processes of the camera, which is effusively trusted over vision and experience. This internalization teaches the reader how to read the remainder of the novel: media screens—the TV, films, computers, video games—are not simply motifs in the zero, they are a beckon of clarity and truth, idols perched on emergency room pillars that see the world and describe it back to the characters, unequivocally. Furthermore, the

processes of zooms and cuts, panning and focusing, largely influences the narrative structure of the novel. Television, and other media screens as the chapter will soon address, is ubiquitous not just because there are a lot of television screens in the novel, but because the novel is frequently organized by the language, technique, and structure of television.

One such character who seeks clarity from the TV screen is introduced early in the novel. In an early interview for his counterterrorism agency, Remy speaks to Ann Rogers in her apartment. This section, which follows one of Remy's gaps, opens with the sentence: "I watch a fair amount of television." She explains to Remy, "I haven't turned off my television since it happened. I was glued to the news coverage for the first few days. I even turned the TV so I could see it from the bathroom. I ordered out every meal and just went from channel to channel, watching it from different angles, listening to the newscasters and the public officials" (65-66). Ann Rogers's description of how television became the central fixture in her life after the attack—not just keeping her in the house but also affecting her eating and bathroom habits—describes the centrality of the screen. While many Americans felt glued to the television in the days after the attack, *The Zero* also describes how the characters who were in the attack sought the screen to provide clarity. Remy's partner, Brian Guterak, who was also a first responder at 9/11 confesses to Remy: "Sometimes I wish we'd just gone to a bar that morning and watched the whole thing on CNN. You know what I mean? I envy people who watched it on TV. They got to see the whole thing. People ask me what it was like and I honestly don't know. Sometimes, I think the people who watched it on TV saw more than we did" (85).

Therefore, the rare moments when television is absent creates an unsettled void, as though they missed out on the very event at which they were present and active.

While television is certainly ubiquitous in this novel, especially at the beginning, many other media forms fill its pages. In *The Zero*, media is varied. Frequently throughout the novel, after Remy recovers from one of his "gaps," he familiarizes himself with the setting by taking inventory of, and interacting with, the media in the room. After one particular "gap," he wakes up in an unfamiliar office. Walter writes:

> Next to his name was a phone, with buttons for five lines, none of them
>
> marked. He picked up the receiver, listened to the buzz of the office dial
>
> tone, and set it back. There was a computer, turned off. Remy pushed the
>
> button beneath the screen, but nothing happened. . . . Remy walked over
>
> and crouched to look at the books in the case, hoping they would provide
>
> some clue about what he did in this office. But the only thing in the case
>
> was a *World Book Encyclopedia* set from 1974 and two rows of faded old
>
> *Reader's Digest* condensed books that looked like they'd been picked up
>
> at a yard sale. (156)

In the absence of Remy's memory, he relies upon the media objects around him to reveal his place in his own story. After perusing the *Reader's Digests*, he finds a photo of himself, picks it up, and strains to remember when it was taken. He finds a stack of blank paper and a manilla envelope with his name on it; he "hefted the slender envelope, turned it over, set it on the desk, and stared at it" (156). It is not as though these objects are simply items to fill out the setting, however; Remy experiences the room through these objects. He interacts with each one. He tests the lines on the phone, tries to power up the

computer, examines the books in the shelf, studies the photograph, and handles the envelope and stack of paper. In the hallway outside the office, the setting continues to be defined by media and how they are being used: he hears "the tapping of computer keys, like rainfall" and the sound of a particular woman "hammering away at her computer keyboard, a telephone headset perched on her head, a plastic-sealed document in front of her" (157). The documents, books, photos, telephones, and computers in each room are described like a microcosm of the early twenty-first century media ecology. The sounds of a natural or urban ecology—rainfall and hammering—is replaced by the sounds of their media devices.

Remy's reawakening to the sounds of media is not at all anomalous, either. In fact, during a fleeting moment of clarity, Remy contemplates the noisy dependence upon media technology before accepting that this dependence is simply the way of life: the new normal. In other words, the gaps are a part of the system created by one's 24/7, inescapable exposure to the media ecology. He wonders what it means for life to have *"returned to normal."* Perhaps "normal," Remy concedes, "was a string of single moments disconnected from one another" (Walter's emphasis; 163). Earlier in the novel, Remy compares his gaps to "cuts in a movie, one on top of the other, with Remy struggling for breath" (96). In the comparison to film implies that the segments of life that Remy experiences are somehow linked, the scenes from a movie montage. Remy just lacks the context necessary to make the connection between scenes. Nearly two hundred pages later, however, Remy wonders if there ever was a link between episodes, or if the connections even matter: "When it came time to eat," he asserts, "it wouldn't matter whether you remembered *planning* the dinner. A meal doesn't care about the cook's

intention; it just gets eaten." He goes from viewing his life as a film that contains

thousands of interrelated frames to understanding it as the schizophrenic programming of

a television channel left on through the night as it skips from news to entertainment,

reality to fiction, infomercial to documentary. In a rare moment of clarity, Remy traces

this schizophrenic perception of the world to the global production of goods and the

commodity fetishism that separates the user of a media technology from the means of its

production. He explains: people "used cell phones and computers and a thousand pieces

of technology with tiny pieces collected from factories all over the world, in places

whose existence they could never be sure of, technology they couldn't begin to

understand. The news played whether they watched it or not. And none of them ever

stopped to say: . . . *Why this telephone takes pictures!* They answered their phones." He

compares life to a stone skipping across the water in which you are "enjoying yourself

when the skipping stopped, and spending the rest of your life in a kind of drifting

contentment, slipped consciousness, lost weekends, the flow from the television sets

warming placid faces, smile lines growing in the glare of the screen" (164-65). As Remy

contemplates the evolution of media from films to television, camera phones, computers,

the way he views his own life is altered. His life is no longer like a film—frames and

scenes connected by some central purpose or goal. Rather, his life is a series of

fragments, disassociated from any sense of origin, interminably interrupted by gaps like

commercial breaks until the screen of the television not only describes the distracted

fragments of his life, but also seem to incubate the life itself: warming the placid faces as

smile lines grow and the viewer ages in its glow. In other words, in this scene, media

technologies do not only provide the user with the details of her surroundings, but also teach the user how to see, hear, feel, and perceive her surroundings.

While media technologies within the novel are ubiquitous and varied, they are also dynamic. Media forms are in constant tension with each other. Print media are destroyed and replaced by images. In some cases, they are repurposed into images. Computers are broken, and offices are filled with outdated print texts. Televisual media is broadcasted from the corner of every room and every public space. The tension arises from the coexistence of media forms. It culminates in the persistent demise of print media to the seemingly inescapable glow of the television screen, and to the convergence possibilities of the computer, which operates within the novel as a video game and "communal computer experience," a source for downloadable images and research, a visual presentation device to explain the rules of post-9/11 victim compensation, and a database of terrorist activity (30, 37, 169, and 268). As certain media are destroyed or challenged or replaced, they frequently become repurposed and remediated; they take on new roles. This is a media ecology that is in transition. The anxiety and tension that accompanies this transition has a major impact on how characters perceive the world, and also how they interact with each other. Additionally, this novel is particularly conscious of itself as a media form. In its critique of the difficulty of novels—including the references to Kafka and Robbe-Grillet—*The Zero* itself is a difficult text. It is aware of the work it requires to stay engaged, and also of its dissipating relevance in the television-saturated ecology of *The Zero*.

The inoperability and destruction of media is pervasive throughout the novel, even, at times, entering into the vernacular of the characters such as when Paul Guterak

pronounces another character as "dead as an eight-track" (15). Yet, destroyed media rarely remains destroyed. For example, the opening paragraph of the novel contains a dreamlike vision of a sky filled with paper at the site of 9/11. Walter writes: "All the little birds were paper. Fluttering and circling and growing bigger, falling bits and frantic sheets, some smoking, corners scorched, flaring in the open air until there was nothing left but a find black edge . . . and then gone, a hole and nothing but the faint memory of smoke" (Walter's ellipses). The passage describes what was first thought to be a sky filled with birds, though the birds turned out to be paper. As the pages floated to the ground they are scorched by smoke and flames until they are completely consumed. Gone. And in the next sentence? Walter writes: "Behind the burning flock came a great wail and a moan as seething black unfurled, the world inside out, birds beating against a roiling sky and in that moment, everything that wasn't smoke was paper" (3). Shortly after, once Remy is assigned a position with the Documents Department, whose task is to recover all the paper lost in 9/11, he looks over the warehouse and "as far as Remy could see, these tables were covered with paper—notes, forms, resignations, and retributions, as if the whole world could be conjured out of the paper it had produced" (97). This is the repetitive cycle of *The Zero*: the destruction, repurposing, and reemergence of media forms. Newspapers, for example, have seemingly been replaced by televised news. At one point, Remy's girlfriend, April, admits, "I just assumed the newspaper would stop coming out" (145). Yet, while the newspaper did not discontinue, it is no longer read in the same manner it once was. Speaking about the *Times* "Portraits of Grief" section, April confesses, "I hate the way I read this page now . . . It's the same way I used to read the wedding announcements" (144). Later she describes the obituaries as becoming just

"another section in the paper. Like movie reviews. Or the bridge column (145).

Particularly interesting is the novel's treatment of computers. As the novel describes the destruction and rebirth of paper, the computer is also in a state of remediation.

Frequently throughout the novel, the computer is broken or inoperable. This is one of the ways that Walter describes the transitioning media ecology. Print and digital media are frequently depicted as unreliable and dysfunctional. In a scene described earlier, in which Remy wakes up in an unfamiliar office and interacts with each media device in the room, the computer doesn't work. He picks up the phone and listens to the "buzz of the office dial tone" and shuffles through the pages of the encyclopedias and *Reader's Digest*; he recognizes himself in the photograph on the wall and finds his name written across a manila envelope containing a report. The computer, however, is not only "turned off," but when Remy "pushed the button beneath the screen," nothing happens (156). Despite being the most advanced piece of media technology in the room, it is the least useful. The predilection of older media forms in the scene is underscored by their vastness and size. The amount of information contained in the room's printed matter is overwhelming. The series of 1974 *World Book Encyclopedias* contain enough information to imagine the entire world in 1974, and the "two rows of faded old *Reader's Digest*" contain a multitude of the world's literature in condensed versions. Yet, it should be noted that the Encyclopedias are outdated by a quarter century. Furthermore, when Remy picks up the "slender envelope," Walter uses the verb "hefted," implying that the envelope's weight is deceived by its thinness. In comparison, the computer is like an artificial shell, like a bowl of plastic fruit intended to make the office look more official. The novel is full of inoperable or destroyed technologies, or outdated media artifacts.

52

Even the novel's characters concoct stories about faulty computers and their unreliability. Shortly after the scene in the office, Agent Markham attempts to solicit information from a suspected terrorist's former lover. Posing as a flower delivery service, he asks for the suspect's whereabouts by explaining that "our computer was down when he called and my kid wrote the information on a piece of paper and then spilled Dr. Pepper on it" (198). Minutes later, the phone line goes dead—Markham hanging up on the woman—followed minutes later by Remy saying "This isn't even real," and throwing his headset into the grass" (199). Even in these hypothetical situations, designed to deceive the woman into giving away information, the unreliability of media devices— whether the computer, paper, or phone line—is exaggerated.

The computer in *The Zero,* however, is not just a broken device. It is also used to describe a different way to see the world, and to process those perceptions within the world. The computer repair shop, for example, that Remy encounters while searching for his son, suggests not a medium destroyed, but one in the process of being built or rebuilt (212). One of the more poignant scenes at the beginning of the novel scrutinizes the materiality of the computer. The scene considers the materiality of paper in contrast with that of the computer. Remy is cleaning debris from a dump near Ground Zero and realizes that "no matter how long you searched the gray mass you never saw anything normal, a telephone or a computer." All of these items, he surmises, have "liquidated into dust and endless tons of bits." His thoughts are interrupted, however, as trucks pass by "carrying loads of hastily stacked paper and *organic material*, jigsawed bits of people" (Walter's emphasis; 44). Walter uses this scene to explore how paper is transformed in the novel. Its transformation is contingent upon its materiality. The material makeup of

the printed page's informational content is remarkably different from that of the computer. While the computers have simply vanished, Walter compares the materiality of the paper to that of the bodies: tangible, locatable, and made from living matter. The difference is that both the bodies and the paper are in a state of decay; that is, they are in a state of transformation. They remain, but they are certainly not the same. A brief scene much later describes one of the ways that paper is transformed within the world of *The Zero*. While at work in the Documentation Department, an employee hands Remy a secure document. Walter writes: "The document looked just like Australia; in fact, in a way it was Australia, its edges burned into a perfect representation of the coastline." A note is attached, with a corresponding map of Australia: "Forward to SECURE. Isn't this uncanny? Doesn't it look like Australia?" Remy signs the document and from that point on, the transformation is complete. The document is no longer a paper that looks like Australia. It is Australia. "Before that day," Walter writes, "when it became Australia, the page had been a simple expense report . . ." (177). Surviving the destruction of the fire, the document has become something perhaps less useful: a small map of Australia with burn marks around its edges.

While the scene in the rubble of Ground Zero seems to tell a story about the persistence of paper and the fragility of new media, Walter's specific phrasing of the debris tells a different story. He writes that the computers and telephones were "liquidated into dust and endless tons of bits." Though perhaps a slippage on the author's part, his use of "bits" is peculiar within this context. Speaking of physical matter, it seems that molecules or atoms would be more appropriate. Since the "bits" have been distinguished from physical matter by listing it *in addition to* dust—there is dust and

54

there are bits—it seems likely that he is referring to an altogether different type of component. In the context of computing, "bits" more frequently refer to the digital counterpart of physical atoms. Bits are the digital pieces of information that a computer creates, organizes, and manipulates. This suggests that Walter is not referring at all to the physical matter of the computer, but emphasizing its immateriality, and therefore implying its persistence and ubiquity. In other words, even in the perceived destruction and absence of computers, the bits from the computers survive. Instead of describing a world in which paper and television persist and computers are inoperable (a sort of apocalyptic treatment of a new media blackout, vis-à-vis Y2K), *The Zero* tells a story about the inescapable atmosphere of media. The anxiety does not arise from the fear that new media will crash and fail, leaving a society without record of its history; the anxiety arises from the fear that media will never fail, will never disappear. One can never escape this mediated world. In *Being Digital*, Nicholas Negroponte also focuses on the materiality of information when he describes the transition from atoms to bits: "The methodical movement of recorded music as pieces of plastic, like the slow human handling of most information in the form of books, magazine, newspapers, and videocassettes, is about to become the instantaneous and inexpensive transfer of electronic data that move at the speed of light." Despite the optimistic description, he concedes that "The change from atoms to bits is irrevocable and unstoppable" (4). In the description of Ground Zero, the bits seemingly remain, whereas the paper has been transformed and rendered useless. This immateriality of the bits is in tension with the materiality of all the other debris, and in particular, with the scores of paper that flutter throughout Ground Zero and throughout the novel. This question of materiality belies a

more focused type of anxiety about media: the less the media is anchored to a physical form, the less it is inhibited by decay or destruction. It furthermore underscores the physical form of the novel itself, the one the reader is holding in her hands as she reads about the endless tons of bits. It ultimately situates physical media such as the novel or other print matter in tension with the immaterial digital information. While the paper is damaged, changed, collected and repurposed, the endless tons of bits remain.

The Zero also represents the dynamic nature of media in terms of who is using and creating the media. As such, the novel consistently associates various media forms with the youthfulness or seniority of its user. While television is ubiquitous throughout the novel, wallpapering Remy's mind and bringing clarity to Paul Guterak and Ann Rogers, new media, such as computers and video games, are relegated to younger audiences, Remy's son Edgar in particular. When Edgar is introduced in the novel, his mother interrupts him playing a video game. Edgar quickly corrects her: "It's not a *video* game," Edgar responds. "It's called Empire. It's a communal computer experience . . . like an alternate world. It's character-driven and action-reaction oriented. Just like the real world" (Walter's emphasis and ellipses; 30). This brief description ultimately provides a portrait of media that Walter describes throughout the novel: media that evolve, emulate the real world, and threaten to subsume one's experience of the real world. The identification of the media as an "experience" instead of a game deemphasizes its game-like qualities—competition, plot, fixed time limits, suspension of disbelief—and instead emphasizes the way the media experience eclipses real life. Note that Edgar first refers to the game as "like an alternative world," and immediately revises his statement to "just like the real world." The subtle distinction between an alternative

and the real world signifies the conflation between the simulated experience and real experience.

Throughout *The Zero,* the savvy computer users are always described by their youth. Edgar, for example, participates in the communal computer experience, and uses the computer to download images for a report (37). Computers appear elsewhere in the novel in the form of a lawyer's PowerPoint presentation. When April visits a lawyer to discuss "the basic facts of 'Applying for Federal Victims Compensation'" after losing her husband in the 9/11 attack, the scene begins with a description of the lawyer. Controlling a PowerPoint presentation on the wall with a handheld clicker, he is described as "like a kid showing off a new car to his buddies" in his "big-assed slacks" (168). During the entire meeting, which lasts nearly ten pages and describes each slide of the PowerPoint presentation, the lawyer repeatedly rubs at a rash that is described as "a purplish shaving rash the size of a tangerine" (169). The shaving rash also evokes youth as it plagues someone who's sensitive and youthful skin is not used to a razor. Much later in the novel, an FBI agent uses a computer presentation to describe a terrorist cell. He is described as "the tall thin agent with the braces." Once again, the braces attach a sense of youthfulness to the agent. Furthermore, he is described as "standing in the glow of the big computer screen mounted on the wall in front of them" (268). His diminished stature in the glow of the large screen connotes a child dwarfed by the disproportionately sized screen.

This association of new media technologies with the novel's younger characters is consistent with older forms of media, too. Though *The Zero* only references novels on two occasions, the first is being read by a "senior volunteer, a shell-eyed man with a dusting of white whiskers on his cheeks" (8). He is hiding a "ratty paperback behind the

57

hardcover." This reader is as old as Ailea Mendez is young. Ailea is a schoolgirl whose backpack Remy shuffled through only to find a book report that admits she "didn't like the book very much. She said it was too diffuse, too hard to follow" (168). Given that the young people in *The Zero* prefer computers to books, while the novel's senior literally double-fists novels, it is no surprise that the only writer in the novel happens to be a ghost. Remy's Boss is consistently followed by his ghostwriter. This writer is interminably silent and always follows the Boss around, a few feet in his shadow. He is always referred to either as "Ghostwriter," or more simply, "the ghost" (117, 118). At one point, Walter describes the writer getting into a limousine behind the boss: "The long car seemed to be a living thing, slithering, a long sleek black lizard guarding The Boss. He opened the car door and gestured to his ghost, who slid in the backseat" (118). The juxtaposing metaphors that describe the vehicle as something living, and the writer as a ghost—something decidedly *not* living—emphasizes the antiquity and otherworldliness of the actual physical book-writer in the new media ecology. The role of the ghostwriter in *The Zero* may also have additional significance. In an article titled "Reading and Writing the Post-9/11 Cop," Kristine A. Miller explains that "Walter was hired in March 2001 to ghostwrite Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik's autobiography, and he thus began chronicling before 9/11 life in the NYPD as the story of 'everyday heroes'" (29). It seems likely, then, that the ghostwriter in *The Zero* may stand in for Walter himself, or more generally, the novelist in a world decreasingly interested in the novel.

So far, this section has argued for reading Jess Walter's *The Zero* as a novel about the anxious relationship between print media and computer media. It has demonstrated that Walter's novel opens up to such a reading due to ubiquitous presence of media

within the novel, the variety of media, and its representation of a media ecology that is undergoing a drastic shift, toward new media, or media that is digital and computable. As such, the novel reflects anxieties about the rapidly evolving new media ecology, as well as concerns for its own historically precarious position as a media form: the print novel. This section has also highlighted the significance of the materiality of a media form and registers the increasing migration of media from tactile forms—printed matter such as books, films, photos—to media that exists in digital form and is accessed through screens. Much of the anxiety surrounding the new media ecology arises from tensions between various media forms. While the novel certainly embraces the negative connotations of anxiety, it also imagines, albeit with trepidation, the productive qualities of tension that push a media form toward remediation.

Feeling/Watching the Zero

> *"Brian Remy closed his eyes then and saw what he always saw: shreds of tissue, threads of detachment and degeneration, silent fireworks, the lining of his eyes splintering and sparking and flaking into the soup behind his eyes—flashers and floaters that danced like scraps of paper blown into the world."* (Walter 9)

Throughout *The Zero*, much focus is given to the corporeal body. Physically, Remy is falling apart. The ailments are frequently fantastical in nature. He's been shot in the head, his retina is detached, he's blown up in a terrorist attack, and he may or may not have back problems. They are, however, real injuries. He has definitely been shot in the

59

head, and the wound is more significant than a scrape or graze. After regaining consciousness in the opening scene, Remy discovers that "his hair was sticky and matted, as if he'd been lying in syrup." He touches it with his hand: "Sure. Blood" (4). When Remy answers the door after the gunshot in the opening scene, he stops first to grab a towel from the sink and braces "against a slithering jolt of pain" (4). During the conversation he feels "blood trickle down his neck and pool in the triangle of his collarbone" (6). When Remy "rubbed the stitches on the side of his head," the next day, it is clear that the wound required some medical attention (15). What is particularly extraordinary about these injuries is how cogent Remy remains. The injuries never seem to get in the way of his work. The Remy that the reader has access to is passive, or at best, reactive. The Remy during the blackouts, however—as far as can be determined from the bizarre predicaments Remy finds himself in upon gaining consciousness—is aggressive and reckless. In one scene, for example, Remy visits a doctor to have his retina reattached. The doctor explains to Remy: "I've never seen such thin, tattered tissue on a human being that wasn't a cadaver. It's like mobile home curtains in there, Mr. Remy. It's like the sheets in an old whorehouse" (266). He warns Remy to "take a train or a bus back to New York" because Remy's eyes are "as fragile as origami . . . . As fragile as a fat girl's confidence on prom night." Before leaving, the doctor writes on Remy's paperwork: "No flying." He adds: "you might want to cut back on the liquor. At least while you're on medication. You had a blood alcohol level of .039. That's four times the legal limit." The last line of the scene reiterates: "No drinking and no flying." Then, Remy blacks out. After some white space, the scene resumes: "The plane shuddered and jerked with the rattle of molded and fitted plastic and the grind of jet

engines . . . Remy opened his eyes, but only the right one opened, the left still trapped beneath the gauze. He had a small airplane whiskey bottle in his hand" (267). Remy's muted reaction is indicative of the equally fragile and fantastic psychological condition that causes the black outs.

The muted reactions of those around him are equally startling. The people around him act as if nothing has happened. His neighbor, after hearing the shot, tells him, referring to the sound of the gunshot: "If you're not hurt, then it's inconsiderate." Remy, who is standing at the door holding a towel to his bleeding skull, asks "'What if I am hurt?'" the neighbor "ignored him." She says, "'Just imagine what we thought that noise could have been'" (5). Later, his partner comments on Remy's recent hair cut. Remy explains: "I shot myself in the head last night." Paul responds: "Well . . . It looks good" (15). It is worthwhile, then, to consider what role these physical ailments play within the novel. The reactions to Remy's injury do not undermine the physical trauma he's experienced—although, the injuries are quite fantastic—rather, they emphasize the psychological quality of the injuries, as though the real injury occurred inside his skull, hidden from the other characters. This gunshot wound, though bizarre, is important because it implicates both physical and psychological faculties. Remy feels the pain, but his muted reaction, and the muted reaction of others, is more representative of a psychological condition. It is not just a physical one, but also one that affects his way of acting within, and perceiving, the world around him. In the following scene, when Remy is inundated by the flood of television images at the emergency room ("the news had become the wallpaper in his mind now, the endless loop playing in his head" [8]), Walter establishes a connection between the content of Remy's mind and his psychological

61

condition. Jess Walter uses the deterioration of Remy's physical body to describe how one's corporeal presence in this novel is impacted by these pervasive televisual images to which one is exposed.

The world in *The Zero* is frequently experienced through its mediated representations. Often, the line between the physical world and the virtual world, or between an event and a televised representation of that space, is blurred. Remy's son, Edgar, for example gets upset with his mother when she refers to his computer game as a "video game," when in fact, according to Edgar, it is "a communal computer experience . . . like an alternate world. It's character-driven and action-reaction oriented. Just like the real world" (30). Edgar experiences the "real world" through a computer screen. This way of experiencing the world is in conflict with the physical body, which relies upon one's sensory perception of the world. The computer or television screen distorts the physical qualities of the world by flattening its dimensionality and conflating the various sounds. Other senses, such as smell, touch, and taste, are no longer part of the experience. This is, however, the dominant way to experience the events and aftermath of 9/11 within this novel. Ann Rogers was mentioned above, who hasn't "turned off my TV since it happened." She describes being "glued to the coverage for the first few days," to the extent that she "turned the TV so I could see it from the bathroom. She "ordered out every meal and just went from channel to channel watching it from different angles, listening to the newscasters and the public officials" (65-66). Like the television situated in the hospital waiting room, this television is the focal point of Ann's living space so her experience of the world since 9/11 was almost exclusively channeled through the television, rather than through her sensory perceptions. In fact, when Remy enters Ann's

apartment, the "sound was turned down," implying that vision was her only sensory perception of the event (65). Even for those who were at Ground Zero during the attack, the televised representation is privileged over the sensory perception. Remy's partner, Paul, confesses that "Sometimes I wish we'd just gone to a bar that morning and watched the whole thing on CNN. You know what I mean? I envy people who watched it on TV. They got to see the whole thing. People ask me what it was like and I honestly don't know. Sometimes, I think the people who watched it on TV saw more than we did" (85). Through the physical decay of the corporeal body, Walter seems to suggest that the privileging of media representations over sensory perception has a profound impact on the body.

The relationship between the body and the inundation of media images becomes particularly clear when interrogating how the characters perceive what they understand as reality. Remy's injuries have to do almost exclusively with the organs that are responsible for his sensorial perception of the world. This is clearest with his eyes. In the novel's opening scene, Remy describes the "flecks in his eyes," and also how his eyes "streaked and flaked and finally jimmied open" (3). The issue with his eyes, however, doesn't seem to be related to the gunshot. At the emergency room, Remy goes directly from watching the television screen to his eyes. When he does, he "saw what he always saw: shreds of tissue, threads of detachment and degeneration" (9). Remy anticipates this vision issue when he closes his eyes. It is a pre-existing condition. Furthermore, the description of his vision problems are conflated with the images he sees on the screen. He describes the images as "endless gray, geysers of gray, dust-covered gray stragglers with gray hands covering gray mouths . . . and flocks of memos and menus and correspondence fluttering

63

silently and then disappearing in the ashen darkness" (8-9). Once he closes his eyes, he

sees "silent fireworks, the lining of his eyes splintering and sparking and flaking into the

soup behind his eyes—flashers and floaters that danced like scraps of paper blown into

the world" (9). In both instances, he sees scraps of paper floating across his vision. The

paper is important. First, paper is the medium that the Documentation Department uses to

recover "the record of our commerce, the proof of our place in the world" (19). So, the

pages in Remy's vision allude to the mediated structure that the Documentation

Department uses to rebuild the nation's record. Second, the image in his mind mirrors the

image from the television screen, which is also where the head of the Documentation

Department repeated his speech "every few minutes on cable news" (19). When Remy

says, then, in the passage prior to the description of his eyes, that the "news had become

the wallpaper in his mind," he literally means that when his eyes are closed, all he can see

are images from the news.

When the majority of one's experiences are filtered through the television, then

reality itself begins to seem like a television production. In *The Zero*, it is often difficult

to distinguish between real life and television. In one scene, Remy's partner, Paul, invites

Remy over to watch a commercial that Paul has starred in. While waiting, they watch a

program about a cop named Bruce Denny "who'd recently left the force because of back

problems." When he discovers that "Bruce Denny wore an eye patch," Remy "touched

his eye patch again" (283). Bruce Denny, whose name is a play on Brian Remy (who also

allegedly suffers from back problems[8]) also wears the same size shoes as Remy. When

Bruce Denny is asked about a crime scene in the show, "he couldn't remember. He said

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[8] When Brian Remy begins work for the counterterrorist agency, he has to file for disability with the police department. His boss asks him, "We'll need a story. . . . What do you want? Back? Disability loves backs" (55). Later, Paul asks Remy if he should, "Take disability for my back, like you?" (86).

he was having some kind of problem with his memory, that he was having 'gaps' (284). Due to the gaps, Denny asks his partner to "tail me." He explains: "I think I'm involved in something and I want to find out what it is" (284). Their conversation is nearly identical to a conversation Remy previously had with Paul, when he asked him "to physically tail me. Follow me around and see where I go. What I do. Keep track of it" (204). Remy tries to ask Paul about the show, but Paul shushes him and "pointed at the TV" (284). Like so many details of Remy's life, Walter lets the coincidence rest in opacity. Remy, who isn't sure if he is "hallucinating or if I'm really involved in something" remains unsure if his life is being made into a television show, or if the television show is just filling the gaps in his life.

As the characters experiences become more and more tangled in the events that they see on television, (remember the description of Remy and April from the beginning of this chapter, who attempt to live out the images they see on the screen), the expectations for "reality television" are heightened. April, who lost her husband and sister in the 9/11 attack, is asked onto a morning talk show to discuss her grief. She is noticeably uncomfortable when the producer takes her by the arms and says: "Look, April, I don't want you to do anything that makes you feel phony. That would be creepy. Do you know why we call it 'reality'? Do you? Because it's best when it's . . . *real*." She begins to coach April on how to show her grief naturally. "Just forget we're here. Just say *goodbye* . . . to your brother . . . whatever you feel like saying . . . that you love him, whatever . . . that it's just the two of you now . . . talk about your grief . . . and pretend we aren't here." She continues, "Just try to be as natural as possible. You know, give him a hug. Cry if you want to. The most important thing is that you act as if we're not here. Just

do exactly what a normal person would normally do . . . when seeing your last living sibling for the first time since your sister . . . dies such a horrible, unbearable death. This is reality; what we want is real emotions" (207). The irony, of course, is that in her attempt to coax April to "Act naturally," she continues to explain what acting naturally would look like. When they finally complete the scene, the produce suggests that they shoot April and her brother's "first meeting since 9/11" in at least two more locations so they can get the right mood. They plan to "run it over the holidays" (208).

Just as television is produced to conjure reality, reality is "produced" with television in mind. Early in the novel, Remy reflects on how he prefers to work on Ground Zero at night. He explains: "the work seemed less showy to Remy, the loss more personal, less produced than during the day, when everyone posed for photographers and TV cameras, when grief and anger became competitive sports" (36). The line between reality and a television production is continuously blurred throughout *The Zero*: everything is a production, polished for the camera. Later in the novel, Remy meets the mole who will eventually set off the bomb that nearly kills Remy. During a long monologue, he refers to America as a "public relations firm." He explains:

> Entertainment is the singular thing you produce now. And it is just another propaganda, the most insidious, greatest propaganda ever devised, and this is your only export. . . . You demand the propaganda of distraction and triviality, and it has become your religion, your national faith. . . . If they are barbarians knocking at the gates with stories of beautiful virgins in the afterlife, then aren't you barbarians, too, wrapping the world in cables full

66

of happy-ever-after stories of fleshy blondes and animated fish and talking

cars? (Walter 222-23)

Television, the man suggests, is America's religion. In this religion, the feelings of grief

and terror, and the sites of tragedy become sacred for their production value, and then

distributed alongside episodes of Baywatch and cereal commercials. When the man

speaks of entertainment as the path to the afterlife, he speaks, too, of the end of the body.

It is the belief in television that will carry its believers from their bodies to the afterlife.

Exiting the Zero

The televised dreams were especially clever the way they could skip away

from anything unpleasant, go from death to music videos, and pass on

information without informing. The way they could jump from channel to

channel, from site to site, from wrenching tragedy to absurd comedy, with

only the laugh track to differentiate them. (Walter 325)

The Zero is a novel about escape; more specifically, it is about the inability to

escape from the post-9/11 wallpaper of media coverage that now makes up the world

around Remy: the advertisements, magazine articles, newspapers, and endless cycle of

televised news and reenactments. The novel is full of failed attempts to escape these gaps.

"This was the problem," Remy considers as he scans the room. "These gaps in his

memory, or perhaps his life, a series of skips—long shredded tears, empty spaces where

the explanations for the most basic things used to be" (5). Following a dreamlike vision

of a paper-filled sky, in which the paper disappears and suddenly reemerges, Remy

wakes to find that he has shot himself in the head. He finds a suicide note that reads: "Etc . . ." (Walter's ellipses 5). The note is evidence that the gunshot was a suicide attempt. The ellipsis in the note is the same punctuation that Walter uses to indicate the gaps in Remy's consciousness. Furthermore, the "Etc.," like the ellipsis, suggests an omission. This is Remy's condition: a series of omissions that he cannot escape from. Because of the condition, however, he is unable to explain what it is he cannot escape from. Therefore, the note seems to be a humorous attempt to explain his suicide by attempting to describe what is, for Remy, indescribable. After the note, he remarks that "that was funny. He didn't recall being so funny. And yet there it was, in his own handwriting" (5).

Later, Remy is in the emergency room, in which the televised news is described as the "wallpaper in [Remy's] mind." In the waiting room, there is an old man reading a book. Walter writes: "there were only a few words on the page: *nothing more hopeless, than this freedom, this waiting, this inviolability. . . ."* He continues: "The old guy stared at Remy and refused to break eye contact, until finally he turned the page and Remy read the first line of the next chapter: *And he tore himself free"* (Walter's italics, ellipses). As Remy finally moves away from the old man's desk, Walter writes, "Remy tore himself free" (8). It appears that Remy has, like the character in the book, broken out of something. Yet, like the suicide before, and the trip to San Francisco with April and multiple tech-free fantasies to follow, we quickly learn that this is just another failed attempt to escape. More important, however, it is a description of how Remy's mind absorbs whatever media is placed in front of him. In this case, the words from the novel become his inner monologue, just as the news becomes the wallpaper in his mind. The lines from the old man's novel are from Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1926), in which the

protagonist, a man only known as "K" is stuck in a perpetual state of hopeless waiting. Buried by bureaucracy and paperwork (quite literally, during K's visit to the mayor's office), K can not tear himself free. He starts a life in the village in order to sustain himself while he waits for a response from the mysterious town officials, unseen behind the walls of the ominous castle. He gets married, accepts a job, and before long, he is a part of the society that accepts the bureaucracy as the basic way of life. The harder he works to break free of the bureaucracy, the further he becomes entrenched within it. Wherein *The Castle*, the characters are prisoners to the bureaucracy of the ruling class, in *The Zero*, the saturation of media images creates the structure in which the characters are trapped. This theme of being trapped is a recurring one in *The Zero,* and it is represented by the other books that are mentioned in the novel. Much later, Remy finds a book report for Alaine Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth* (1959). This novel is about a character who tries to deliver a package to an unknown recipient, but he is trapped within a grid of nameless and indistinguishable streets. Both of these novels portray the theme of being trapped within a larger system, one that is unnoticeable from close-up, and can only become visible the farther one is removed from it. Near the end of the novel, Remy has a dream in which he is "on his stomach, staring down from the sky as great seams opened and people vanished into the rips. He dreamed that people ignored the tears in the sky and went about their business" (323). In the dream, Remy sees the seams in the sky, which suggest that this reality is a construct with larger operations taking place behind the scenes. His vantage point allows him to see this structure and operations. From the ground level, however, it hidden, so people "went about their business, filed their taxes . . . [and] just go on with their lives" (323-24).

69

At times throughout the novel, Remy becomes aware of this unseen structure that he cannot break free from. Midway through the novel, in a rare moment of reflective clarity, Remy describes the structure according to a clock face. In this scene, Remy has just been given a watch, but disturbed by the way the "needle slid gracefully around the face, scratching away moment after moment," instead of "standing still, jittery and frozen, waiting for Remy to be jolted into the next moment," Remy gives the watch away. He exits the restaurant and from the street, immediately notices a "four-faced clock tower [that] loomed like a dragon." Walter writes: "He thought of the watch face. No zero on a clock. Around and around. No rest. No balance. No starting place. Just on to the next number" (96). Remy realizes a tension between his experience of time, and the clock's representation of it. The clock ticks continuously forward, regardless of the fragmented way that Remy experiences time. In this media ecology, Remy's experiences have become time-shifted; he blacks out and cannot account for the gaps. Like the organizing logic of televisual media, he experiences time through schizophrenic and disrupted narrative sequences: commercial breaks, scene changes, montage, etc. Yet, he is nonetheless governed by the structure of the clock. Even though he blacks out, time continues to roll forward. He realizes that there is no escape. His partner describes: "You can't race time. It's like trying to swim faster than water. No matter how fast you go, time is the thing you're moving in; it's the thing against which your speed is measured" (231). The image of the clock—its inescapable cyclical structure—is realized in the structure of the novel. The novel opens and closes with Remy's eyes squeezed shut. He is conscious, but there is a dreamlike quality to the descriptions, as though he is trying to convince himself that the outside world is only a dream. The occasion for each of these scenes is a

terrorist attack. In the first terrorist attack, March Selios is killed, and in the second

attack, her sister April is killed. Remy somehow survives both. The ticking off of the

months represented by the characters names—March, and then April (there is a third

sibling, too, named Augustus)—describes the nature of the clock: movement forward—

March, and then April—consists of small steps around the same 12 hour clock, the same

12 month calendar.

The novel begins and ends with a terrorist attack. The first attack, of course, is the

9/11 attack on the World Trade Towers. The second attack is carried about by an

informant who was groomed by Remy's counter-terrorist agency in order to catch

potential would-be terrorists who agreed to work with the informant. After each attack,

Walter provides a description of the sky during the explosion. The descriptions are almost

identical, with only a couple key variances. The repetition of the terrorist attack and the

nearly-identical passages at the beginning and the end of the novel reinforces the

clocklike structure of the novel. There is no beginning or end. There is no Zero. There are

only the repeated events, like news cycles played on loops, like history repeating itself,

like attack begetting attack, begetting attack. In other words, the Zero is a manufactured

moment: it is a constructed reality that implies the beginning or the end. In the first

passage, the rush to take control of the 9/11 narrative is immediate. Walter describes a

world recreated:

> Fluttering and circling and growing bigger, falling bits and frantic sheets,
>
> some smoking, corners scorched, flaring in the open air until there was
>
> nothing left but a fine black edge . . . and then gone, a hole and nothing
>
> but the faint memory of smoke. Behind the burning flock came a great

wail and a moan as seething black unfurled, the world inside out, birds

beating against a roiling sky and in that moment everything that wasn't

smoke was paper. And it was beautiful. (Walter's ellipses; 3)

The sky is full of paper, which is consumed by flames until there is nothing left. Then,

the world turns inside out and suddenly *all that is not smoke is paper*. The reemergence

of the paper is evidence of the Documentation Department's attempt to restore (or

recreate) "the record of our commerce, the proof of our place in the work, of the

resilience of our economy, of our jobs, of our lives" (19). Remy realizes that behind all

the paper is more paper. Seeing the sky filled with paper the second time is like peering

through a crack in the funhouse to reveal all the levers and pulleys. The funhouse,

however, is the Kafkaesque bureaucracy, in which the subject is imprisoned by a

construction of reality, one that is manufactured by the endless production of paper (the

documents, history books, slogans, and symbols of a nation that describe to the public

what that nation is).

At the end of the novel, after the second attack, the passage occurs once more. In

this passage, Walter describes a man recreated:

"and he was airborne, free, light . . . like paper, tossed and blown with the

other falling bits and frantic sheets, smoking, corners scorched, flaring in

the open air until there was nothing left but a fine black edge . . . then

gone, a hole and nothing but the faint memory of a seething black that

unfurled, that lifted him and held him briefly on the warmest current—"

(all punctuation is original; 323).

The passage is almost identical to the opening description, only that the paper is now a metaphor for Remy. It is "he" who was airborne "like paper, tossed and blown with the other falling bits and frantic sheets." Remy is the casualty in this attack. He is consumed like paper "flaring in the open air" until he is gone. Though the passage cuts off, like so many other passages that are indicative of Remy's blackouts, we know that Remy returns. There is no escape in this novel. He is "lifted" and "held . . . briefly on the warmest current."

If the first passage describes a world recreated through the painstaking reproduction of all the nation's paper, then this passage describes a man recreated. On a literal level, Remy is in the hospital burn unit where the skin from his back is being grafted and patched and regrown. At the level of his consciousness, however, it is Remy's mind, memories, experience of the world, and even his sensory perceptions that have recreated. His consciousness has been replaced by the incessant and pervasive print and televisual media content that replay the event over and over, spliced with entertainment, commentary, portraits of grief, advertisements, and even with some of Remy's own foggy memories mixed in. This is, as Remy observed in the moments after the first attack, "the wallpaper in his mind now, the endless loop playing in his head" (8). But it doesn't end here. The novel's representation of the anxious and frenetic media ecology in a post-9/11 media ecology does not simply describe the world back to its subject, it interpellates the subject; it trains the subject how to experience the world until the TV images become the wallpaper in his mind, and the schizophrenic manner in which news is exhibited—the endless loops, the fragmented views in emergency or hotel rooms—become the manner in which the subject perceives the world.

At the end of the novel, Remy is in a hospital room recovering from the burns he sustained during the terrorist attack. Restricted to his bed with his eyes bandaged shut, Remy registers everything as a dream. He dreamed of "Edgar as a baby, but with a tree trunk for a neck" and he dreamed of "imaginary doctors offering absurd treatments" (324). He dreamed "they gave him a roommate" and "a television that turned its own channels." He dreamed about a terrorist attack, in which "only one bomb was detonated . . . on a mostly empty train platform . . . killing only six . . . including the bomber . . . and severely wounding a retired police officer" (Walter's ellipses). (This is, of course, the actual attack he was involved in, and among the casualties was April.) He imagines that people visited him: Paul, Edgar, and The Boss (325). The dreams are a composite of television, fantasy, and real life. There is some freedom, for Remy, in imagining the world this way. At the end of the novel, when it seems as though Remy has recovered physically, the nurse peels off the bandages from his eyes and asks him to try opening them. Walter writes: "But he squeezed them as tight as he could, waiting for her to come" (326). His refusal to open his eyes is a last ditch attempt at escape. Much earlier in the novel, while listening to his son confess that he'd been telling friends at school that his father had died in 9/11, Remy had "squeezed his eyes tight as they would go, and then opened them again. *Still here*" (34-35). He is unwilling to make that mistake again. Keeping his eyes shut allows Remy to continue his dream. If everything is a dream, he no longer has to determine what is real and what is not real. This is the control he gains over his reality: the freedom to believe that April will return to him, and that the images of "grown-up child stars eating insects in an allotted amount of time," like the men who

visited him in the hospital to award him with a medal, and like the smell of burning

leaves and the sound of traffic horns outside, are the products of his own mind (326).

Chapter 2

"Losing Touch": Social Media and Human Connection in

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

The Days of Losing Touch

"The days of losing touch are almost gone." (Egan 203)

Late in Jennifer Egan's novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), in a chapter titled, "Out of Body," three characters stumble toward the East River, weaving between Avenues A and B. They have endured a night of excess: clubbing, ecstasy, and permanently damaging confessions. Yet, every detail in the scene speaks to the men's bond, Robert, Drew, and Bix. Their connection is a tenuous and essentially physical thing. When Robert tries to break free from the group, Bix tells him, "You can't! . . . You're central to the action." Robert can feel Bix's "love for his fellow creatures" on his skin. Drew tells Rob "you're our aching, pounding heart." Their connection is vital and viscerally felt. As they move toward the East River, their steps are described as "moving in tandem, like on a Ouija board," and Bix stands in the middle with his arm around Drew and Robert, forming a literal physical connection among them (202). Drew expresses a desire to swim in the polluted and icy river. It is fueled by the ecstasy coursing through his blood stream, and further reflects the desire for physical sensation. Finally, the revelry and sense of connection comes to an abrupt end. Looking across the river as "the sun blazes into view, spinning bright and metallic," Drew breaks the silence:

"Let's remember this day, even when we don't know each other" (203). His comment registers like a plea to cut loose from Drew and Bix, to acquiesce to time's eventual dissolution of their bond. A night has passed and it is now morning. More time will pass and soon they will no longer know each other. He acknowledges their fleeting connection stoically and chooses to focus, instead, on preserving the memory of the day.

Then, Bix responds to Drew: "Oh, we'll know each other forever. . . . The days of losing touch are almost gone." When pressed further, Bix explains: "We're going to meet again in a different place . . . . Everyone we've lost, we'll find. Or they'll find us. . . . We'll rise up out of our bodies and find each other again in spirit form. We'll meet in that new place, all of us together, and first it'll seem strange, and pretty soon it'll seem strange that you could ever lose someone, or get lost" (203). The social act of "keeping in touch" described here depends upon its users rising "up out of our bodies." Given the heightened awareness of bodies and physical sensation in this scene, Bix's description of a time when they will no longer lose touch seems remarkably out of place for its lack of actual touch. Clearly, Egan capitalizes on a double meaning of the word "touch," which describes a social connection and a physical sensation. In doing so, she identifies a shift in the lexicon of tactility, where the language of physical connection has been co-opted to describe social connection. The use of this language to describe social connection in the age of pervasive social media ultimately describes a devaluation, or the amputation, of physical touch. The claim that "The days of losing touch are almost gone," then, implies that one's social connections will remain forever locatable, inextricable from their social network. Simultaneously, it registers that these social connections will decreasingly

depend upon touch, or even physical presence. In other words, Bix describes a time when we will never lose touch, and when "touch" will have little to do with actual touch.

Egan's novel is about social networks and the passage of time. It describes the impact of social media upon bodies. This dissertation chapter, then, reads Egan's novel to investigate how the novel incorporates evolving models of social networks. The novel describes the migration of social networks to web-based social media platforms, utilizing such tools as Facebook, Google and texting, and this migration to the web profoundly challenges the way we think and speak about human connection. In this context, I speak specifically about the language that is used to describe this social connection, with phrases such as "keeping in touch" and "staying connected." The novel's timeline—which begins prior to internet-based social media and continues through the present day—emphasizes the evolution of social networks. Reading the novel as a critique of social media poses a couple important questions that this dissertation chapter seeks to address. It asks: How do these models of social media, and the language used to describe them, shape the way humans are connected? Second, if everyone is present in this social media space, as Bix describes, connection becomes a passive act: one's presence on a website. What, then, does it mean to keep in touch? Perhaps more important, what does it mean to lose touch? In other words, how is one's identity wrapped up in the records of social media? The formal innovations of the novel, including its narrative style, chronology and nonlinear arrangement, multiple points of view, and use of images, furthermore describes several ways in which the print novel registers the impact of evolving social networks as an emerging literary and narrative form.

A Visit from the Goon Squad, in both plot and form, is difficult to describe. David

Cowart, in his essay "Thirteen Ways of Looking" compares Egan to first-wave

postmodernists, citing the way this novel "augments their exhilarating formal and

ideational deconstructions of such vestigial metanarratives (of language, of history, of the

unconscious) as continued to shelter in the shadow of that great rock, modernism" (243).

The *New York Times* review of the novel questioned, "whether this tough,

uncategorizable work of fiction is a novel, a collection of carefully arranged interlocking

stories or simply a display of Ms. Egan's extreme virtuosity." In an interview with

Entertainment Weekly, Jennifer Egan stated, "I knew that the book's genre wasn't easily

named – Novel? Stories? Novel-in-stories?—and I worried that its lack of a clear

category would count against it." The difficulty of categorizing the novel is a result of its

unique narrative form. Each chapter reads as an individual story, to the extent that eight

of the thirteen chapters were published individually before the novel's publication.[9] One

of the novel's decentralizing features is that both the point of view and perspective

changes with each chapter.[10] There is no central protagonist; rather, the novel tells the

story of several characters across a span of nearly fifty years. Through an accumulation

of digressive and loosely connected narratives, Bennie, Scotty, Sasha, and Alex emerge

as focal characters in a novel that lacks a central narrative arc. In the 1970's Bennie and

Scotty were members of a San Francisco punk rock band, but in the early 2000's Bennie

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[9] "The Gold Cure" was published in *Granta*; "Forty-Minute Lunch: Kitty Jackson Opens Up About Love, Fame, and Nixon" as "Forty-Minute Lunch" in *Harper's*; "Ask Me if I Care," "Found Objects," and "Safari" in *The New Yorker*; "Out of Body" and "You (Plural)" in *Tin House*; and "Selling the General" in *This Is Not Chick Lit.*

[10] To avoid confusion, I use "perspectival" instead of "point of view" to refer to the character from whose consciousness the events of the chapter are filtered. Though this is typically referred to as a point of view character, I reserve this term for its stylistic definition; that is, to refer to 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person points of view. Since the novel changes its perspectival character and its point of view (stylistically), these features require distinct terminology.

is now a once-successful record successful producer in New York City, while Scotty is a down-on-his-luck school janitor who spends his days fishing in the East River. Sasha is a kleptomaniac runaway who spends time in Italy, briefly attends college, works as Bennie's assistant, is fired for stealing, and eventually starts a family in the California desert. Alex is a young transplant to New York who goes on a date with Sasha in the first chapter, and later emerges as a concert promoter for Bennie Salazar. With such a wide cast of characters, it is difficult to locate a central plot. While each chapter is driven by a conflict unique to its central character, all the characters share a general loss: of time and of social connection.

Recovering the Gap from A to B: Temporality, Spatiality, and Social Networks

> *"I came for this reason: I want to know what happened between A and B."*
> (Egan 101)

A Visit from the Goon Squad is characterized by the ubiquity of its narrative and formal gaps: the gaps that exist between seemingly disparate chapters, points of views, dates, and geographical locations. Thematically, the novel also exposes and implores these gaps in their various forms. For example, Sasha and her therapist, Coz, work to illuminate the gaps in her memory, Sasha and Jules separately struggle to reconcile the literal post-9/11 gaps in the New York City skyline, and young Lincoln Blake, Sasha's son, exhaustively documents and scrutinizes "rock songs that have pauses in them" (6; 12 and 123; 243). With its wide range of characters, the attempt to bridge temporal and spatial gaps is a conduit for investigating the novel's more central theme: social

80

connection, or the gaps between human bodies. Many critics, however, focus primarily upon the novel's treatment of time. Egan was, as several critics claim, reading Proust's *In Search of Time Lost* as she wrote the novel. David Cowart, in "Thirteen Ways of Looking," notes that Egan "has remarked that she worked on *Goon Squad* concurrently with reading, thinking about, and discussing Proust, and one discovers, as expected, a good deal of Proustian matter here" (243). He says of the novel: "Jennifer Egan stages and restages the doomed battle of youth with time, the 'goon' of her title" (241). Although Gerard Moorey describes the novel as "responding to recent changes in the music industry, not least digitization and the growth of the internet," he recognizes this response as a way to "explore themes of aging, mid-life crisis, obsolescence, nostalgia, and regret" (67). A prominent motif in the novel is the sequence from "A to B." Aaron DeRosa, in an incisive essay titled "The End of Futurity" suggests that this motif "structurally extends one of the novel's overarching thematics: making sense of time" (99).

It is clear why so much attention is given to the novel's portrayal of time. Its most prevalent motif and organizing principle—the sequence from "A to B"—is frequently used to describe the passage of time. For example, the novel is broken up into two parts, "A" and "B," and the first chapter of Part B is titled, "A to B." It is significant, however, that Parts A and B are pointedly *not* chronological, suggesting that the gap between A and B is not entirely temporal. Chapters ten and eleven ("Out of Body" and "Goodbye, My Love") are included in Part B, yet they both occur in the early 1990s, more than a decade before the novel's first chapter, "Found Objects," (set in 2006). The critical focus of time is likely derived from two conversations that occur in the novel: one in the final

chapter of Part A, and the other in the first chapter of Part B. In the first conversation,
from Part A, Bennie Salazar is visited at his high-rise office by a former band mate he
hadn't heard from in years, Scotty Hausmann. "I came for this reason," Scotty explains.
"I want to know what happened between A and B. . . . A is when we were both in the
band, chasing the same girl. B is now" (101). Scotty states clearly that "A is *when* . . . B
is *now*," (emphasis added). In the second conversation, from Part B, a publicist named
Stephanie, who also happens to be Bennie Salazar's current wife, works with a washed
up punk rocker named Bosco. Describing his new album, Bosco explains: "'The album's
called *A to B*, right?' Bosco said. 'And that's the question I want to hit straight on: how
did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about?'" (127). Later,
when Stephanie was "too startled to respond" to Bosco's question about what happened
between A and B, he continues: "Time's a goon, right? Isn't that the expression?" (127).
Within these contexts, "A" and "B" are relatively clear references to to time.

Yet, the gaps represented in the novel are not exclusively temporal. They are
spatial, as well. "A" and "B," for example, refer to physical locations within the novel—
parts A and B—which is not chronologically arranged. The novel fixates upon gaps
created by geographical distance. In chapter 6, titled "X's and O's," Scotty is repeatedly
drawn to physical landmarks. References to "a green glass building on Park Avenue and
Fifty-second Street," "the East River near the Williamsburg Bridge," "my East Sixth
Street apartment," and "the public library at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street" are
fixed like X's on a grid of Manhattan (93, 93, 96, 97). Each landmark, for Scotty, seems
to represent the arbitrariness of his station in life, compared to the stations of his former
acquaintances. Unlike the "out of body" experience that Bix describes in the passage

from the beginning of this dissertation chapter, in which "we'll rise up out of our bodies and find each other again in spirit form," finding oneself within a social network, for Scotty, is a markedly corporeal event. The landmarks around Scotty are physical objects, like barriers that exclude him from the networks in which he once existed. This causes him to fantasize about transcending that distance. In one scene, Scotty stands outside the public library watching guests enter a fancy gala. He reflects: "I considered the fact that nothing more than a series of atoms and molecules combined in a particular way to form something known as a *stone wall* stood between me and those people inside the public library. . . . I told myself there was no difference between being 'inside' and being 'outside,' that it all came down to X's and O's" (97). The X's and O's reveal a geographical context to the question of "what happened between A and B." Despite living in the same city as Bennie, Scotty is constantly aware of the physical distance that separates them. Visiting Bennie's office, Scotty "stood looking up, up, wondering how high Bennie's office might be" (93). Bennie now works on the 45th floor of a place that made Scotty feel like he was at the "Shinto shrine on top of the tallest mountain in Japan," while Scotty fishes at sea level near the Williamsburg bridge (100, 93). In the office, he imagines crossing the distance between him and Bennie. Bennie sits behind a desk that "looked frictionless, like you could slide a coin over the surface and it would float to the edge and drop to the floor," but after Scotty confronts him, he can only imagine "coming at Bennie across that desk and ripping off his head" (99, 102). So, when he asks Bennie "what happened between A and B," he refers not just to time, but also to physical space. Specifically, he refers to their transcontinental migration from San Francisco, where they were members of a punk rock band, to New York, where Bennie is

83

on top, quite literally, and Scotty is far below. Scotty refers to "A" and "B" as "when" and "now," but after he interrogates Bennie, he expands the temporal context to also consider space: "I felt myself pulling Bennie back—or maybe it was him pulling me— back to San Francisco" (101). The "back" to which one is being pulled no longer refers merely to a *when*, but also to a *where*. Elsewhere in the novel, "A" and "B" are described more literally as physical location, such as in the scene described at the start of this dissertation chapter, when Robert, Bix, and Drew wander down "Second Street" between "Avenue B" and "Avenue A" (200, 201, 202). The use of "A" and "B" to demarcate space, both within the physical novel and within its setting, expands the sequence of "A to B" beyond just temporality to encompass spatiotemporal coordinates.

The novel's fixation upon spatiotemporal gaps—and the attempts to bridge these gaps—is ultimately exhibited through its structure, which is similar to the networked structure of the World Wide Web. In *Media, Society, World* (2012), Nick Couldry explains that "the internet's fundamental property is an end-to-end architecture neatly summarized by Clay Shirky: 'the internet is just a set of agreements about how to move data between two points.'" Each chapter within the novel is also a point within a much more expansive grid. Every chapter contains a unique plotline, and though they fit within an overarching narrative, it is up to the reader to locate the agreements from point to point. Aaron DeRosa explains: "Suspended in a state of ignorance, readers of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* must anticipate, project, and imaginatively construct the connections between these nonlinear, multiply-focalized stories" (99). The chapters are linked by a web of interconnected experiences and social connections. They share common temporal and spatial coordinates within the grid, but little else exists to link one to the other. A

major character in one chapter may be referenced in another chapter. An object in an early chapter is stolen in a later chapter. The gap in the post-9/11 New York City skyline is called to mind much later, when a character speaks about the twin towers, pre-9/11. The reader fills in the narrative gaps by imagining the unspoken connections between these points.

The spatiotemporal coordinates, then, are markers that the characters use to locate themselves within a social network. It is through their existence within a social network that the characters understand, construct, and validate their own social identities. Therefore, using a structure that mirrors the point-to-point network of the World Wide Web, Egan asks readers to forge the connections between characters, just as the characters also attempt to forge their own connections. Each new path brings some aspect of a character's life into focus. For some characters, narrating or exaggerating these gaps help them to make sense of who they are in the present moment. For other characters, it helps them find a way out of the present moment. For others still, the fabrication of these connections helps them revise their past to construct new social identities. The chief crisis of the novel is not simply locating oneself within a timeline, but within a social network. This is because the characters understand who they are *in relation to other characters*. When the gaps in the narrative threaten their sense of identity, they strain to recover old connections, or to create new ones. So, when Scotty asks Benny "what happened between A and B," it is less an interrogation of time than it is of identity through his shared history with Benny. This is why, when he clarifies the question, he adds social context: "A is when *we were both in the band*, chasing *the same girl*. B is now" (101, emphasis added). He is attempting to locate himself within a network that includes Benny and also Alice,

the girl who both Benny and Scotty pursued in San Francisco. Scotty ended up marrying

Alice, but their marriage did not last. Reading the A and B as initials, the question could

just as easily be rephrased as "What happened between Alice and Benny?" After all,

much earlier in the novel, Egan describes them as "both fascinated by Alice, but it's

Bennie who entirely loves her. And Alice loves Scotty" (40). Scotty, therefore, searches

Benny and his relationship with Alice in order to locate himself within a social network.

Just as characters work to uncover the connections that have been obfuscated by

time and space, they also attempt to forge new connections. Often, as is the case with

Bosco and Sasha, this is an attempt to reconcile the disappointments of one's present self,

by creating a future version of oneself that has risen out of their present disappointment.

Bosco, for example, also constructs his identity around his fans. He asks his publicist:

"How did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about?" (127). The

assertion is not so much "I was young and now I am old," but "I was connected and now

I am not." When the contrasting accounts of his identity seem irreconcilable—a rock star

and a "fat fuck no one cares about"—he forces reconciliation by constructing a new path.

For Bosco, it is a comeback tour, in which he plans to "do all the same stuff onstage" that

he used to do, to "move like I moved before" (128). His publicist worries—rather, she

knows—that the excessive tour will kill him, but so does Bosco. He says, "Don't you get

it, Steph? . . . That's the *whole point*. We know the outcome, but we don't know when, or

where, or who will be there when it finally happens. It's a Suicide Tour" (129).

Furthermore, it is an attempt to arrive at the place he knows he will eventually end up at.

He knows the outcome, but in order for it to happen, he needs to learn how it will unfold.

His publicist is there to turn document it, to turn his death into "an attraction, a spectacle,

a mystery. A work of art" (129). The suicide tour, then, is an attempt to reestablish him within the social network that gave him his famous identity. In the novel's first chapter, Sasha faces a similar problem. She is Benny's assistant and compulsive kleptomaniac (who is eventually fired by Benny for stealing). She meets regularly with her therapist, Coz, in an attempt to deal with her kleptomania. Egan writes: "She and Coz were collaborators, writing a story whose end had already been determined: she would get well." In this scenario, Sasha and Coz already know the past and the future. She knows she is a kleptomaniac, and she knows she will get better. This recovery, however, requires her to reconnect within a social network. As a kleptomaniac, Coz recognizes that she is socially detached from those around her: she hides her age from everyone she knows and she is unable to "think about how [her theft] makes the other person feel." Her task, then, is to construct the middle part of the story in a way that will reconcile the beginning with the end, part A with part B. She must "stop stealing from people and start caring again about the things that had once guided her: music; the network of friends she'd made when she first came to New York" (6). Both Bosco and Sasha view the "A to B" gap as a social construct: one that Bosco bridges in relation to his fans, and one that Sasha bridges in collaboration with her therapist.

While these characters make plans for revising the present moment, other characters create fictions. They fabricate the past in order to situate themselves within a social network in which they never existed. In this way, they construct alternative versions of themselves. This is the case with Kitty Jackson, who travels with Dolly, the once-famous publicist, in the Chapter, "Selling the General." Early in the chapter, Dolly recounts the tragedy that ruined her career. At a celebrity gala that would "rival Truman

87

Capote's Black and White Ball," she decorated the ceiling with "translucent trays of oil and water suspended beneath small brightly colored spotlights whose heat would make the opposing liquids twist and bubble and swirl" (141). She didn't imagine, however, that the heat would cause the trays to warp and melt and eventually send "scalding oil onto the heads of every glamorous person in the country" (142). Several years later, while working with Kitty Jackson, Dolly notices "raw pink patches [that] marred the skin above one wrist. Scars" (149). Kitty corrects her: "Burns." Dolly remembers, however, that Kitty had never been on the list. Dolly is certain that Kitty had never attended the party. When she presses, Kitty admits: "I made them myself. . . . "Lots of people have. . . . You can't find a person who wasn't at that party . . . And they've got proof. We've all got proof" (150). In this case, Kitty burns herself to forge—literally, to falsify—a social connection that did not previously exist. The movie star, Kitty Jackson, therefore, like Bosco and Sasha, goes to dramatic lengths to construct a version of herself that is better than the various other versions that exist in magazine articles, the eyes of her fans, and even in her own mind. Bridging the gap between A and B, then, is not simply the act of recollection; it is an act of creation. Though the characters of Egan's novel claim several different professions—music executives, musicians, publicists, and researchers in the social sciences—all of them are, first and foremost, self-promoters. It is a prominent enough role that Egan has populated her novel with five actual publicists, by trade: Dolly, Stephanie, Bennie, Arc, and Alex. Those characters who are not publicists—the musicians and researchers—are no less invested in the promotion of their various identity constructs. This tough work of self-promotion, furthermore, is no easy business. Therefore, it is no small detail, as this dissertation will discuss further below, that Kitty

imprints her narrative onto her body in the form of burns. Before investigating how the body is implicated in these social connections, however, it is useful to see how these various connections impact the characters.

Entangled Particles and Subatomic Twins: Social Connection and Identity Construction

> *"All that can be said for sure is that in the presence of Kitty Jackson, the rest of us become entangled by our sheer awareness that we ourselves are* not *Kitty Jackson, a fact so brusquely unifying that it temporarily wipes out all distinctions between us."* (Egan 169)

Throughout the novel, Egan meticulously links characters together in a sort of twinning relationship, in which the actions of one character has a profound impact upon her twin. The network of character relationships, and the impact it has upon each character, is partially theorized in a unique chapter titled, "Forty-Minute Lunch: Kitty Jackson Opens Up About Love, Fame, and Nixon!" In this chapter, a reporter named Jules Jones attempts to interview the young celebrity, Kitty Jackson. The chapter's uniqueness is in its format. It is organized as an editorial article: the text is arranged in a narrower column than the other chapters, and it is peppered with footnoted tangents addressing the reader and the editor about indulgences and stylistic choices. Jules and Kitty meet in a crowded restaurant, and Jules notices how immediately the crowd reacts to Kitty's presence. He is astonished by the fact that those who are not even within sight of the young movie star seem suddenly aware of her presence. They become aware of Kitty, Jules writes, "with a

simultaneity that can only be explained using principles of quantum mechanics, specifically, the properties of so-called entangled particles, that same pulse of recognition reaches every part of the restaurant at once, even tables so distant from ours that there is simply no way they can see us" (168). In a footnote, then, Jules elaborates upon this principle of quantum physics that explains how everyone in the restaurant—even those out of sight—suddenly grew aware of Kitty's presence. Though dense, his explanation provides a key of sorts to understanding the relationship between the novel's vaster cast of characters. Jules explains that "entangled particles are subatomic 'twins': photons created by splitting a single photon in half with a crystal, which still react identically to stimuli applied to only one of them, even when separated from each other by many miles" (168, note 1). He asks: how do people out of sight from Kitty manage to react to her presence at the same time as those who are in her presence (in the same way that subatomic photons react simultaneously to stimuli, even though separated by miles)? After indulgently exploring several theories through a Wallace-esque footnote, Jules concludes that the simultaneous response is not a result of one photon communicating to the other—Hey look, Here is Kitty Jackson!—but that the photons, though split, are still the same entity. What happens to one, happens to the other, even though split and separated.

Jules continues with one more theory about how the individual people at the crowded restaurant suddenly become so uniform that they essentially become a simultaneous and instant "other" to Kitty Jackson. He writes: "All that can be said for sure is that in the presence of Kitty Jackson, the rest of us become entangled by our sheer awareness that we ourselves are *not* Kitty Jackson, a fact so brusquely unifying that it

temporality wipes out all distinctions between us. . . . So indistinguishable are we from every other non-Kitty Jackson in our vicinity that when one of us sees her, the rest simultaneously react" (169, note 1). While an identifying trait of Egan's novel is its large cast of characters, these characters are uniformed by their shared struggles for connection, one that is challenged by both the limitations of time and space. Like the guests at the restaurant, then, the characters within the novel are grouped together by those who are connected, those without connections, and those who are doomed. In the grand scale of the novel, those who are connected, like those who are doomed, are grouped together by their sheer awareness of themselves as in opposition to the other type of characters.

One way that Egan organizes these characters within the novel's complex structure is through their names. For example, as Jules describes twinning photons, it is worth noting that his full name is Jules Jones. He is one of the few characters within the novel whose first and last names share the same initials: J. In fact, in terms of letters, syllables, and pronunciation, his first and last names are remarkably similar; the only variance is the "ul" and the "on" from J*ul*es to J*on*es. The uniformity in his first and last name characterizes Jules as a twin with split parts of himself scattered elsewhere throughout the novel; he is indistinguishable from the novel's other writers and publicists, from the cell mates he served with while in prison, and most importantly, he is indistinguishable from all others who are not Kitty Jackson. Kitty's initials, on the other hand—K and J, which contain a variance from the letter "J"—identify Kitty's difference from this mass. She stands out. Throughout the novel, the characters are similarly categorized by their initials. Instead of using the repeated initials, as Egan does in this

chapter, she builds off the novel's prevalent "A to B" motif. It is a useful motif when describing characters because, as previously established, it is a reference to be space and time. More important, it serves as a blueprint for how each character is connected within the social network.

The characters of Egan's massive cast are connected through an array of complex relations. They intermingle with each other, and then they vanish, only to reemerge several chapters later, linked tenuously and unsuspectingly to other characters. David Cowart explains, "Like Proust, Egan assembles a large cast whose actions and social intercourse she searches for value and meaning" (245). Cowart recognizes the wide array of characters and their social intercourse as a central tenet of the novel.[11] The characters' social dynamic—which includes their individual growth and their interaction with other characters—is alluded to through their names. For a novel with thirteen chapters, each told from a different character's point of view, it is worth noting that over twenty-two characters have names that start with either "A," "B," or "C."[12] The relationship between A and B characters is one of the most intriguing elements of Egan's novel, and through their relationships, Egan explores the significance of social connection in establishing or promoting one's identity.

The first thing to note about this relationship is that "A" characters, including Alex, Alice, Allison, Arc, and even Ava, are subordinates in a power hierarchy with B characters. They are often portrayed as mentees of B characters; they are coached and

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[11] However, he dismisses it through his near exclusive concentration on temporality and how the novel reacts to representations of temporality from historical literary movements.

[12] "A" names include Arc, Andy, Alex, Allison Blake, Alice, Ava, Alfred, and Albert. "B" names include General B, Bennie, the Blake family (Drew, Allison, Lincoln, and Sasha), Bix, Bobby (who often goes by Robert), Bosco, and Beth. "C" names include Chris, Charlene (who occasionally goes by Charlie), Cara-Ann, Cora, Colin, Coz, Chronos, and Clay (who is frequently referred to as "Cardboard"). Also noteworthy is Crandale, the city that Bennie, Chris, Colin and Clay live in, as well as Bosco's band, The Conduits.

sustained by them. Egan establishes this important social construction in the novel's first chapter, which opens on a date between Sasha and Alex. Sasha is characterized as a B character through her last name, which becomes "Blake" after marrying Drew Blake.[13] In the scene, a wallet has been stolen (by Sasha, it turns out), and Alex is coaxed to help the forlorn victim while Sasha looks on, worried and embarrassed by his naïve tenacity. Sasha realizes: "He was angry, and the anger made him recognizable in a way that an hour of aimless chatter . . . had not: he was new to New York. He came from someplace smaller" (10). As the scene progresses, Sasha educates him about life in New York. Doing so forces her to examine her own arrival to the city more than six years ago. Taking him to her apartment, "she saw her apartment as he must see it—a bit of local color that would fade almost instantly into the tumble of adventures that everyone has on first coming to New York." By seeing the place through his eyes, Sasha also sees how she must look: "It jarred Sasha to think of herself as a glint in the hazy memories that Alex would struggle to organize a year or two from now" (14). Maintaining her role as the city's ambassador, she initiates sex with Alex, kissing him on the mouth and pulling him to the floor, despite his attempts to lead her to the bed. In all these actions, Sasha is the teacher; she prepares Alex for the calloused and erratic life in the big city. Yet, when she goes through his wallet afterward—she is, after all, a kleptomaniac—she finds a penciled note that reads: "I BELIEVE IN YOU" and imagines that maybe someone had once written her the same note: "*It must be yours, Sasha.* And maybe that's true. Maybe

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[13] Sasha is a particularly complex and anomalous character who falls within the categories of B and S categories (discussed below). Like the other B characters, she appears in several places throughout the novel, and she is also dynamic, whereas the A characters are often static and tend to appear only once before disappearing. It is worth mentioning, however, that Sasha is a "B" character through her married last name (Blake), and by the start of the novel, she has not yet married. Below, where I discuss the significance of S characters, I will explain how Sasha straddles and transcends the categorization placed upon the novel's other characters.

someone gave it to me years ago, and I forgot" (18). This mentor/mentee dynamic between Sasha and Alex exists repeatedly throughout the novel, all with A and B characters, and occasionally with some of the same characters. For example, in the final chapter, Bennie takes Alex under his wing as a protégé publicist. Even after several years in the city, Alex who is now a married father is still in a mentee role with a B character. Other examples of this hierarchical pairing throughout the novel include Sasha Blake's mentoring of her daughter Allison, Alice's backup role in Benny's band, and Arc's service to the genocidal dictator General B. This scene establishes the social connection between A and B characters throughout the novel. Though A characters are subservient to the more established B characters, the B characters understand who they are through their connection to the A characters.

Another way that Egan distinguishes between A and B characters is that the appearance of A characters are always fleeting. Of the eight A characters, only Alex makes a second appearance in the novel, and when he does, he is not a wizened New Yorker, but still an apprentice learning a new trade from another B character. In fact, severed from the B characters, the A characters fade, such as with Bennie and Alice,[14] General B and Arc, or even Sasha's parents, Beth and Andy. In chapter 11, "Goodbye, My Love," Ted Hollander tells a story about Sasha's parents that illustrate this claim. Egan writes: "Beth and Andy's marriage had died spectacularly the summer Ted lived with them on Lake Michigan. . . . Apart from the marriage itself, the casualties by summer's end included . . . Beth's left shoulder, which Andy dislocated twice; and her collarbone, which he broke" (218). Yet, like most of the novel's A characters, Andy soon

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[14] Alice is married to Scotty for four years, and is referred to once in Chapter 6 (103), but she is not present in the novel after Chapter 3, in which it is revealed that "it's Bennie who entirely loves [Alice]" (40).

vanishes, and Beth persists. After Sasha runs away to Italy, it is revealed that she

"disappeared like her father, Andy Grady, a berserk financier with violent eyes who'd

walked away from a bad business deal a year after his divorce from Beth and hadn't been

heard from again" (213). Though A characters tend to disappear after their brief

interactions with B characters, the alphabetical arrangement of these characters are

reminders of how identity is constructed through social connection. The novel's B

characters—Sasha Blake, Benny, Beth, General B—understand who they are—mother,

promoter, dictator—through their mentoring of, and social connection with, the A

characters.

Since the B characters understand who they are through their interaction with A

characters, it can also be said that B characters are dynamic, while A characters are static.

The alphabetical arrangement of the characters names, when considered in context of the

temporal significance of "A" and "B"—"A is when . . . B is now" (101)—suggests that

the B characters have some claim to the future that the A characters do not. Not only does

this claim ensure their posterity within the novel's chronology, but within the novel's

ideology, it concludes that social networks are entwined in experiences of time and space.

In short, "B" characters are dynamic and widely connected. Accordingly, in the world of

Egan's novel, these characters adapt and experience transformation and resurgence, while

the "A" characters fade out of the pages.

The relationship between Arc and General B, in Chapter 8, "Selling the General"

illustrates this idea. This chapter describes the attempt by a former public relations

virtuoso, La Doll (though presently, just "Dolly"), to restore the image of the "genocidal

dictator," General B (139). Arc is the "general's human relations captain." They are first

introduced in the following passage: "The general moved a lot to avoid assassination, but Arc was meticulous about faxing Dolly their updated information" (138). Later, when Dolly visits the General at his own compound, she is met by Arc, who tells her, "The general has had to make a sudden trip" (151). The General B is always on the move, while Arc remains fixed. The transition is not only represented through geographical movement, either, but also by their character dynamic. By the end of the chapter, after the image of the "genocidal dictator" has been renewed—the "extent of B's war crimes may be exaggerated, new evidence shows" (141), and he has been invited to "speak at the UN about his country's transition to democracy" (163)—Arc has remained static. Only ever described by the "silken monotone" of his voice and the "beautifully cut suit[s]" he wears, Arc is the same as when he was first introduced. Elsewhere, the novel's "A" characters are consistently paralyzed in time, incapable of changing and frequently deleted from the novel's timeline. Albert, for example, is the safari guide in Chapter 4. He kills a lion to save a tourist's life. Yet, Albert knows the shooting "will likely lead to his being fired: the latest in a series of failures brought on by what his mother, back in Minehead, calls his 'self-destructive tendencies'" (71). By fulfilling the prophetic failures of his past, Albert can only move backwards in time until he disappears from the novel. Following the shooting, Lou realizes that "he doesn't give a shit about Albert—Albert is invisible" (79). Each of the A characters are subject to a shared condition that is poignantly expressed by Alfred, a character whose entire appearance within the novel lasts less than a half page. On a telephone call with his father, he repeats "there's no time . . . Time is running out" (211).

Even Allison Blake, the perspectival character of the novel's longest chapter, seems to disappear before its end. Her chapter is structured as a nearly 100-page PowerPoint presentation. Following a walk with her dad, Allison crawls into bed and listens to her father speaking briefly with her "slightly autistic" brother, Lincoln (233). There has always existed a disconnect between them. The father, Drew, does not understand why Lincoln studies and charts so exhaustively the pauses in rock'n'roll songs. Following their conversation, there is a black, blank slide, which is reminiscent of infamous black page in Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, which followed the death of Yorick. Allison is then absent from the remainder of the slides, one of which is a blank graphic—five circles with no writing-- and the final four slides are detailed graphs of the pauses in rock'n'roll songs which note their "Haunting Power" and "The Persistence of Pauses over Time" (305, 308). It is as though Allison has vanished from the chapter and Lincoln has taken over. The blank slide announces her departure, and the empty graphic is indicative of a new voice, attempting to learn the medium. All that remains are the charts that illustrate Lincoln's research. The question of "What happened between A and B," then, is not simply a request for a timeline; rather, it is an interrogation of social identity. It asks: how am I connected, and how am I identified by my connections? The question implores one's identity; it constructs that identity through a social network that is linked with time and space.

In addition to the novel's A and B characters, there are also several C characters. The C characters are frequently children: Chris, Colin, Cara Ann, and Charlie. They hover close to their parents. Their parents project their broken lives onto them, like revised versions of themselves, living repeatedly in the future. In one chapter, Chris joins

his father, Bennie, on a trip to listen to a band he had recently signed. On the way, Bennie

lets Chris consume the flakes of gold that Bennie typically dissolves in his coffee as a

way to "ensure sexual potency" (21). He recalls his therapist, Dr. Beet's[15] advice to "stop

hectoring . . . Chris about the industry's decline and focus instead on enjoying music they

both liked—Pearl Jam, for example" (27). Chris plays a tambourine with the band, and

Bennie fantasizes about him being a part of the group, just as Bennie once played in his

own band (29). On the way home, Benny asks for Chris's opinion of the group, and only

after Chris remains silent does Benny realize that the band was awful. Chris is his

protégé; he is a conduit to Benny's future, but also a way for Benny to revolt against his

ex-wife. As Benny allows Chris to break his wife's rules—he lets Chris drink coffee,

takes him to rock shows—Bennie can't "resist the exquisite connection that came of

defying his ex-wife in unison" (24). Cara-Ann is another example. In an attempt to keep

Cara-Ann away from the spoils of handsets and mobile technology, her parents, Rebecca

and Alex make it clear that "Cara-Ann had never touched one, and . . . she would not

until age five. They used their own handsets sparingly in front of her" (313). Yet, only a

few pages later, when Alex is meeting with another publicist, Lulu (who happens to be

the daughter of the infamous publicist, Dolly), Alex lets Cara-Ann sit on his lap and chat

with Lulu through the handset: she "shrieked with delight and speared the screen with her

chubby pointer" (321). When Rebecca finds out, the discovery erupts into an argument.

She says, "You just changed the rules, all by yourself," and in the aftermath, Alex is

flooded by the lives he lives beyond his wife's awareness: his secretive deal with Bennie,

his previous date with Sasha (324-25). He seems even to conflate Sasha's story with

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[15] The advice of Dr. Beet—another B-name, unfortunately fitting for the therapist of a ex-rocker/rock-promoter—is peppered throughout the novel in the form of psychiatric diagnoses. He warns Bennie against "The Will to Divulge" and "Betrayal Bonding" with Chris, and (24, 35).

Rebecca's, claiming to have met his wife after an incident with a purse-snatcher (325). The children in this novel are conduits, connecting their parents to their past and future selves. Furthermore, they are ubiquitous throughout the novel, appearing across the vast timeline like Russian Dolls. As Alex describes them—"the sea of slings and sacs and baby backpacks, older children carrying younger ones . . . . An army of children: the incarnation of faith in those who weren't aware of having any left"—his interior monologue devolves into the text speech of younger generations: "*if thr r childrn, thr mst b a fUtr, rt?*" (330, 331).

The "C" names also appear frequently without reference to children. Yet, the effect is the same. The C names are conduits. Through them, characters connect to each other. Benny begrudgingly befriends his neighbor Clay, before sleeping with Clay's wife. One of Lou's musicians, Chronos—the novel's most transparent reference to time—is attacked by a lion on safari. The event leads to an affair between Lou's girlfriend and the safari guide. Cora, who is hired by Lou as a travel agent, travels with the group and becomes something of an interlocutor between Lou and his children. The most obvious reference, of course, is to the band that made Bennie a successful producer: The Conduits. The Conduits connect Bennie to his wealth, and Bosco to his stardom.

The A, B, and C characters are all connected within the novel's complex social network, even though that connection is occasionally severed (as is the case with the A-characters: Alice, Alfred, Albert, Allison, and Andy, who disappear from the narrative). The struggle to survive, for most characters, is a struggle to remain etched into that social network. This is perhaps why Egan establishes the network most arduously in the setting of Africa, where the real struggle of survival is conflated with the struggle of remaining

relevant on one's social network. In the novel's chronologically earliest chapter, "Safari," which takes place in 1973), Egan repeatedly draws awareness to the complexity of the novel's social relations by dropping clues about the characters' relations to each other. In one scene, a group of "warriors" appear to perform music for the tourists. In a slightly disruptive aside, Egan informs the reader about one of the warrior's future. Through this passage, nearly every character becomes locatable within the network, even though many of these characters never interact within the novel's pages. Egan explains that the scarred warrior will eventually die in a tribal dispute, and of his sixty-three grandchildren, one named Joe will study engineering at Columbia. Before Joe goes to America, he will inherit his grandfather's hunting dagger. Joe will "marry an American named Lulu and remain in New York, where he'll invent a scanning device that becomes standard issue for crowd security." The device is "the legacy of a childhood spent scanning the grass for lions" (61-62). Lulu, Joe's wife, is a publicist in charge of organizing large crowds for concerts. She is a central character in the novel's final chapter, during which works with Bennie and Alex to organize a concert for Scotty Hausmann. When Alex asks how Lulu knew Benny, she explains, "his ex-wife used to work for my mom." Her mom, it turns out, was a "publicist" who "left the business" (318). The reader meets this publicist—Dolly—several chapters back, when she travels with Kitty Jackson in her work as a publicist for General B and Arc. Through Dolly, Bennie's ex-wife, Stephanie, became a publicist for the ex-punk-rocker, Bosco, who was discovered by Bennie, who was mentored by Lou, the record executive who brought his family on Safari years ago, where several warriors joined them to play drums and sing. Even though each chapter is self-contained, most of the characters exist within a network that transcends the confines of

100

each chapter. The network is important because, as I previously discussed, it is through

their location within the network that characters understand who they are.

The struggle to survive, then, for Egan's characters, is a struggle to inscribe

oneself upon this network. This inscription can take many forms. It can be a mark on the

body, as seen with Kitty, or it can be the written account of an event, as is often the case

with many of the novel's writer-characters, like Jules or Allison. It can be a piece of art, a

stolen object, or an object passed on for generations. The inscription can also be a mark

on the city in which the characters reside, like the gap in the New York City skyline that

repeatedly disarms Sasha.[16] As each character is her own publicist, the inscriptions rarely

exist without the bend of exaggeration or falsehood. They are an attempt to place a

version of oneself in the world: a version of who one wants to be, or who one once was.

Bosco records music, and Ted Hollander writes about art. Lincoln critiques pauses in

rock'n'roll songs. Dolly's inscription is worn on the bodies of those who attended (or did

not attend) her gala. These inscriptions do not take root without a network to inscribe

upon; that is, the inscriptions need an audience to confirm or deny, propagate or rescind

the many versions of self that are inscribed therein.

Occasionally, the inscriptions take the form of a recited memory. The memories

are not simply a recollection, but a re-articulation of the past. The characters reiterate the

memory to construct a version of themselves in the present. In chapter two, "The Gold

Cure," which takes place in 2006, Bennie is plagued by a cacophony of shameful

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[16] The missing towers after the 9/11 attack haunts Sasha in many scenes. At once, Sasha explains that "she
hated the neighborhood at night without the World Trade Center, whose blazing freeways of light had
always filled her with hope" (12). Later, Bennie watches Sasha as she "looked downtown, and he followed
her eyes to the empty space where the Twin Towers had been" (36). The towers throughout the novel are a
motif that remind the reader of the many missing pieces of one's life, and also an example of a physical
inscription upon a geographical place.

memories. The chapter begins: "The shame memories began early that day for Bennie" (19). As he encounters a litany of past failures—the mismanagement of his record label, the dissolution of his marriage—the memories prevent him from altering the narrative of who he has become: an impotent, divorced father on the downswing of his once-fabled career, who now consumes eight thousand dollars worth of gold flakes every two months because he believes it will help him get an erection (which he tests regularly by staring down the blouse of his assistant, Sasha) (26). Bennie's doctor tells him to "write down the things he wanted to confide, rather than burden his son with them" (24). So, Bennie starts a list of his past humiliations. He recalls introducing a famous jazz pianist at an awards show as "incompetent," instead of "incomparable" in front of twenty-five hundred people (23). At the top of the list, he writes, "*incompetent*" (24). He has another memory of a meeting with the Mother Superior at a nunnery in an attempt to record some of the music from the young nuns. After securing the deal, he immediately lost it by impulsively leaping across the desk and kissing Mother Superior on the mouth. Under "*incompetent,*" he writes "*Kissing Mother Superior*" (24). Bennie was "caught in a loop from twenty years ago: lunging over the sill toward the Mother Superior like some haywire figure on a clock, again. Again. Again" (21). His memories grow increasingly grotesque. He remembers opening an email he had been "inadvertently copied on between two colleagues and finding himself referred to as a "hairball" (30). He adds "*hairball*" to the list "in hopes of exorcising the memory" (31). The exorcism is not successful, however, because to exorcise the memory would mean to appropriate it, to turn it into a story about a version of himself he preferred; but, there is no version of himself that he prefers. Triggered by the word "hairball," Bennie remembers taking his

102

son Christopher to the barber, only to be called over to examine the "tan little creatures the size of poppy seeds moving around on his scalp." The memories crush Benny. Egan writes: "God, it hurt him to think of this now—hurt him physically, as if the memory were raking over him and leaving gashes." But they don't stop. He remembers being at a party with "some delicious blonde" only to be "stricken with a severe instantaneous need to empty his bowels" after doing "several lines of coke" (31-32). In a "miasma of annihilating stink . . . the unlockable bathroom door had jumped open, and there was Abby, staring down at him. There'd been a horrible, bottomless instant when their eyes met then she'd shut the door" (32). After each memory, Bennie becomes increasingly aware of the "waves of shame so immense they seemed to engulf whole parts of Bennie's life and drag them away: achievements, successes, moments of pride, all of it razed to the point where there was nothing—*he* was nothing—a guy on a john looking up at the nauseated face of a woman he'd wanted to impress" (32). To the list he adds: "poppy seeds, on the can" (37).

At this point in the chapter, Bennie drops off his son and drives away with Sasha. He has one last memory. This one is of Lou, his former mentor. They were at Lou's extravagant house, surrounded by pretty girls and an extensive car collection, and Bennie recalls looking "into his idol's famous face and [thinking]. *You're finished*. Nostalgia was the end—everyone knew that." Charged by this memory, Bennie takes out his list of memories as though seeing in it the nostalgic death sentence he had passed on Lou. When Sasha takes the list from him and begins reading them aloud, Bennie "listened in agony, as if the words themselves might provoke a catastrophe. But they were neutralized the instant Sash spoke them in her scratchy voice." In hearing them read aloud in someone

else's voice, the memories are finally exorcised. They've been shared, and having been shared, their context slips away. Sasha only read a list of names: "Kissing Mother Superior, incompetent, hairball, poppy seeds, on the can." She mistakes them for song titles, and Bennie goes along with this reading. He asks her to read them again. "She did," Egan writes, "and now they sounded like titles to him, too. He felt peaceful, cleansed" (37). Once Sasha re-articulates the memories back to Bennie, they are obfuscated; their context has been reimagined. The memories are free to take new forms. In this way, he molds them much like Kitty Jackson burns her memories onto her wrist in order to appropriate her own past experiences. The social context of having the memories refashioned for Sasha allows Bennie to let go of them. He is peaceful, cleansed.

Not every character, however, enjoys the same fortune as Bennie. In Chapter four—Safari—Egan explores the process of rearticulating a memory once more. This time, she asks: what happens when a nobody is there to listen? The subject is a young boy named Rolph, Lou's son. The setting is 1973. A group of tourists sit around a fire as Rolph implores his sister with the chapter's opening line: "Remember, Charlie? In Hawaii? When we went to the beach at night and it started to rain?" Charlie doesn't respond. All the attention is on Lou, the evening's spectacle. He is a "record producer whose personal life is of general interest." Ignored, Rolph tries again: "Remember? How Mom and Dad stayed at the table for one more drink?" This time he is answered when his father says "Impossible," but his father is not speaking to Rolph. Lou is performing, "with a wink at the bird-watching ladies to his left" (59). Rolph tries once more: Remember, Charlie? How the beach was still warm, and that crazy wind was blowing?" Again, he is ignored. Egan writes: "But Charlie is focused on her father's legs, which

have intertwined behind her with those of his girlfriend, Mindy." Rolph tries a final time, and this time he is physical: "Rolph pulls at his sister's shoulder. He wants her to remember, to feel it all again: the wind, the endless black ocean, the two of them peering into the dark as if awaiting a signal from their distant, grown-up lives." This time, Rolph gets a response: "Yeah . . . I do remember that," Charlie says, but she is narrowing her eyes, focusing on the Samburu warriors who just entered camp to perform their ritual songs (60). She stands and begins dancing with them, no more listening to Rolph than their father was. Unlike Bennie's experience, in this chapter Rolph is actively searching for an audience upon which to inscribe his memories. Where Bennie's memories were assertions—ironclad recollections—Rolph's memories are interrogations, as though he is seeking for confirmation of the memory before it slips away. His attempts to confirm these memories are a refrain throughout the chapter, wherein Rolph's repeatedly asks: "Remember?" He is unable to hold on to even the most recent memories. After a startling lion attack, which left one of the travelers from Rolph's jeep mangled, he struggles to recall the scene: "His mind bends again and again to the jeep, but his memories are a muddle: the lioness springing; a jerk of impact from the gun, Chronos moaning during the drive to the doctor . . . . All of it is suffused with the feel of Mindy holding him from behind" (72-73). His recollection is simultaneously sustained and blurred by the physical presence of memory. They are sustained because he was able to share the memory intimately with another person; they are blurred because Mindy, who is his father's new girlfriend, has no previous role in his memories. Later in the chapter, Rolph and Charlie almost relive the memory he tried to get Charlie to recall at the chapter's beginning. They stand on a beach, under the shadow of palm trees: "'It's like Hawaii,' Rolph says,

105

wanting it to be true. The ingredients are there: the dark, the beach, his sister. But it doesn't feel the same. 'Without the rain,' Charlie says. 'Without Mom,' Rolph says" (80). They quickly realize that speaking the words into the darkness with nobody there to believe will not make it true.

There is one memory that sticks, however. Rolph walks with his father, listening to him lecture him on women. They are all crazy, Lou repeatedly asserts. He then "puts his arm around Rolph" so that they are physically connected when Lou realizes that "what he most enjoys in his son are the many ways he is different: quiet, reflective, attuned to the natural world and the pain of others." Rolph describes how in this moment, "the women fall away . . . leaving him and his father together, an invincible unit. At eleven years old, Rolph knows two things about himself: He belongs to his father. And his father belongs to him" (63). In this brief moment, they are inseparable: both physically and emotionally bonded. The scene foreshadows the scene I described at the beginning of this chapter, of Robert, Drew, and Bix walking toward the East River late at night, arms around each other thinking about how they would remember this night long after they forgot each other. In fact, Rolph thinks: "I'll remember this night for the rest of my life." The narrator adds: "And he's right" (63). The memory is cemented in their shared experience: that against the conflicts between all the other tourists, Rolph and his father share the same version of this story. This shared experience and their physical contact is what makes the memory stick. The tragic irony, however, is that Rolph's life does not last very long. By the end of the chapter, the omniscient narrator projects the future, when Charlie will be tasked with "trying to broker peace between Rolph and Lou, who will have stopped speaking" (80). It is important to recognize that Lou, as inattentive

to Rolph as he is, was also Rolph's only audience. He is the only collaborator and corroborator of Rolph's stories. It is not surprising, then, to also learn that "Rolph has shot himself in the head in their father's house at twenty-eight" (82). It is not surprising because the narrative that Rolph attempted to inscribe was never appropriated or affirmed.

This also happens to be the fate that Egan has determined for each character unable to locate herself within a network, upon which they can inscribe a version of themselves. Systematically, Egan demarcates these characters with "R" names. Rolph is only the first, but shares the initials with Rhea and Robert, too. Like Rolph, Robert is increasingly shut out of his social network. He loves two people. The first is Sasha. She tells him: "I'm in need of a fake boyfriend" (192). Robert plays the role so perfectly that it is easy for Sasha to fall in love with Drew, the other person Robert loves. He explains: "You want Drew to be your brother. Then you could have built the log cabin together and slept inside it . . . You could have slaughtered the elk and, afterward, slick with blood and fur, peeled off your clothes together beside a bonfire. If you could see Drew naked, even just once, it would ease a deep, awful pressure inside you" (198-99). When Robert confides to Drew about the only biographical detail he possesses—a story not about him, but about Sasha's prostituting in Naples—Drew tells him: you are really and truly an asshole" (205). Robert remains the outsider who is handled with kid gloves since everyone learned that he had recently tried to kill himself. At the beginning of the chapter, Drew enlists him to help register voters to the Democratic Party. Robert realizes that he "registered twelve team-playing Democrats . . . But you never registered yourself" (187). This premonition is confirmed when, at the end of the chapter, Robert drowns after

jumping into the East River. In Egan's novel, the unregistered R characters are doomed; they do not make it. Rhea, who is one of the groupies of Bennie and Scotty's band, The Flaming Dildos, is similarly characterized. She explains the web of relationships in the band: "Jocelyn knows I'm waiting for Bennie. But Bennie is waiting for Alice, who's waiting for Scotty, who's waiting for Jocelyn . . . . Jocelyn is waiting for Lou . . . . No one is waiting for me" (42). Like Rolph and Robert, Rhea is the unconnected character. Though Rhea's death is not explicit, she is gone from the novel by the fifth chapter after Lou tells Jocelyn, "Our friend Rhea . . . she's doomed" (87).

Wish-Fulfillment Fantasy: Form and Web-Based Social Media

> *"It will prompt some of them, years from now, to search for each other on Google and Facebook, unable to resist the wish-fulfillment fantasy these portals offer:* What ever happened to . . . ?*" (Egan 71)

In its portrayal of social networks, the novel also scrutinizes the slow and inevitable migration toward web-based social media sites. In October 2010, Joanna McNeil wrote an article titled, "Where are the iPhone Addicts and Facebook 'Stalkers' in Contemporary Fiction?" Asking where are all the characters who "compulsively play with the device [smart phone] while waiting to meet a friend or catch a flight," she responds: "this ever-present anachronism has made it so that almost all literary fiction is science fiction, a thought experiment as to what life might be like if we weren't so absorbed in our iPhones but instead watched and listened to the world around us at a

moment's rest."[17] Published the same year, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is an early

example of how the print novel incorporates elements of the internet and web-based

social media. Egan investigates how these media impact the way people connect with

each other. She seems to conclude that the endless connections offered by these

technologies reveal a troubled relationship between the user and the "world around us."

They alter users' perception of themselves within a spatiotemporal grid, which also

changes the role of the body and corporeality in these relationships. Furthermore, the

ubiquitous connections offered these technologies drastically impacts the way we speak

about connection.

The presence of internet media is announced in the novel's first chapter, which is

set in 2006. In regards to her therapy, Sasha asks questions that she knows "could have

been resolved on Google in less than a minute," but she concludes, "they were useful

questions" (4). Her early resistance to Google—that is, as a tool for a quick answer to

these questions—is unique with Sasha, and it suggests that there is something productive

to dwelling in the unknown. Sasha is in therapy, after all, and she realizes that her ability

to cope has less to do with finding answers than it does with learning to exist in a world

composed of large gaps and unknown spaces. She is haunted, for example, by the gap left

in the sky by the 9/11 attack. Sasha distrusts these media sites, too, though she also

participates in the easy forms of deception they allow. For example, Sasha is "thirty-

five," but "her online profiles all listed her as twenty-eight" (6). Yet, it is important to

recognize that the novel represents the use of Facebook and Google as new normative

modes of communication. Deception in social interaction is of course not new; Sasha

merely attends to the new possibilities of deception. Despite her early misgivings, it is

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[17] See: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joanne-mcneil/the-bookfuturist-where-ar_b_763068.html.

later revealed, "she'd reconnected on Facebook with her college boyfriend and married late" (233). Facebook, as an aid to social connection, is not good or bad; it is simply the new way that people keep in touch.

In the novel's chronologically earliest chapters, Facebook and Google search engines are a specter that slowly comes into focus as the characters age and the eighties and nineties give way to the new millennium. The omniscient narrator in "Safari," which is set in 1973, projects into the distant future to imagine these new forms of connection. After describing the lion attack, Egan writes: "The members of Ramsey's safari have gained a story they'll tell for the rest of their lives. It will prompt some of them, years from now, to search for each other on Google and Facebook, unable to resist the wish-fulfillment fantasy these portals offer: *What ever happened to . . . ?*" Those who actually meet face to face as a result of these searches will "marvel at physical transformations." Of the meetings, the narrator describes one that will eventually lead to a marriage. Egan continues: "But this outcome will be the stark exception—mostly, the reunions will lead to a mutual discovery that having been on a safari thirty-five years before doesn't qualify as having much in common, and they'll part ways wondering what, exactly, they'd hoped for" (71). This passage describes a social connection that is characterized by fantasy. There is the wish-fulfillment fantasy of those seeking to reconnect with a lost contact, though the contact is largely an illusion; in the real world, the users discover that the ability to contact someone does not make the connection any less superficial. Also, there is the spatiotemporal fantasy. The connection obscures the awareness that time *has* passed—recognized by the physical transformations during face to face meetings—and that they are no longer on Safari. In Egan's portrayal of web-based social media, the

connection between individuals is often maintained by the illusion of time and place as accessible points on a grid; when the illusion falters, the social connection grows increasingly tenuous.

In *A Visit From the Goon Squad,* distortions of time and space are frequently a result of the media used to establish these connections. In *open sky* (1997), Paul Virilio writes about the distortion of time and space that occurs with the use of telecommunications. Although he writes at the end of the twentieth century, he is concerned with electronic media—such as the internet and mobile phone—that alter one's perception of time and space. He writes: "if the loss of the inaccessible far reaches is accompanied by a media proximity that owes everything to the speed of light, we shall also pretty soon have to get used to the distortion of appearances caused by the *real-time perspective* of telecommunications, a perspective in which the old line of the horizon curls itself inside the frame of the screen" (3). Electronic media experienced through a screen, argues Virilio, as opposed to a lens, obscures the present moment, both geographically and historically. He writes: "The real-time interface then once and for all replaces the interval that once constituted and organized the history and geography of human societies." This creates a paradox, he explains, "in which everything arrives not only without needing physically to move from one place to another but, more particularly, without having to leave" (19). This distortion of time and space is realized in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by the anguish that arises from the impassable gaps. Throughout the novel, characters are paralyzed by an inability to transcend a particular distance (Scotty cannot cross the desk to Bennie, just as Robert cannot cross the East River back to Sasha and Drew [101-02, 207]). Other characters struggle to transcend the

111

gap of time (Dolly and Jocelyn cannot go back to rewrite those mistakes that forever altered their lives, and the "R" characters' premature deaths[18]). The use of social media throughout the novel to transcend these spatiotemporal gaps tends to reveal the tenuous nature of their connection, a fact that is obscured by the virtual nature of the medium they use.

Egan is aware that evolving methods of social media impact perceptions of corporeality, as well as time and space. As time and space are more easily transcended through social media, perceptions of corporeality are also altered. Early in the novel the corporeal form is often privileged as a way to give physical structure to the intangible. The novel's opening chapter, "Found Objects," for example, is essentially about Sasha's need to possess a physical object as tangible evidence of her memories, of who she is. These objects are Sasha's inscriptions. She archives her memories through the objects she steals. When she describes the table of objects, she explains, "it almost shook under its load of embarrassments and close shaves and little triumphs and moments of pure exhilaration. It contained years of her life compressed" (15). To Sasha, the table bears the weight of memories, not of objects. In the age of Facebook and Google, however, when one can "scour planet Earth and the universe without ever leaving the green velvet couch you'd pulled from a garbage dump" these inscriptions are replaced by one's profile page, and the many contacts depicted by one's social media. The value of physical objects and physical location is slowly replaced by virtual experience.

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[18] This refers to Robert, Rolph, who died of suicide, but also potentially Rhea, whose death is alluded to by the fact that she is considered "doomed." She also makes it clear that "no one is waiting for me" (87, 42). Furthermore, as described above, she shares the characteristics of the other "R" characters, each of whom committed suicide.

In fact, the physical form of the novel incorporates—gives corporeal qualities

to—the invisible structures of web-based social media in order to highlight the growing

divide between tactile and intangible media. (The novel must be held and thumbed and

turned over in one's hand; it can be annotated and dog-eared, while web-based social

media is often limited to the touching of a glass screen for nearly every function.)

Foremost, the novel's lack of chronology and its spatial arrangement of each chapter is a

physical representation of the spatiotemporal distortion that Virilio associates with

telecommunications. Furthermore, several elements of the text itself draw emphasis to the

corporeality of the novel's physical form. The most obvious example is chapter 12, titled,

"Great Rock and Roll Pauses By Allison Blake." This is an eighty page section of the

novel written entirely as a PowerPoint presentation.[19] Each slide contains graphics and

text. The presentation is the "slide journal" of Allison Blake, the twelve-year old

daughter of Sasha. It is her inscription. When her mother asks her, "Why not try *writing*

for a change? . . . I mean writing a *paper,"* Allison responds "Ugh! Who even uses that

word?" Her response illustrates the devaluation of analog forms. Sasha recognizes that

the slide journal doesn't look or operate like a traditional journal, just as the narrative

form of Egan's novel eschews traditional conventions, such as a linear timeline,

consistent point of view, and traditional plot arc. Yet, the arrangement of the chapter

forces the reader to handle the book in a non-traditional, nonlinear way. The reader must

turn the novel sideways and flip the pages up while following the flow of each graphic.

The text is organized according to the logic of the graphics, each containing a slide title

and graphics/text arranged with arrows and shadowed boxes. The illusion of depth

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[19] Online, at http://jenniferegan.com/, Egan has even created an actual presentation with interactive slides, audio files, and functioning PowerPoint capabilities.

created by the shadowed boxes imposes 3D dimension onto the page; the text is read as though navigating a series of open windows on a computer. The design forces the reader to engage with the novel as a physical object, a media device to turn over in her hands. The novel draws attention to the corporeal form of print in other ways, too. The heavily footnoted, Wallace-esque newspaper article that comprises chapter 9, for example, contrasts sharply against the concise, though nearly illegible textspeak scattered throughout chapter 13. As the novel describes the increasing lack of tactility in social media, it simultaneously draws awareness to the novel as a physical entity. It is something to hold in your hands, to manipulate with your fingers.

The novel also associates a shifting view of the body with the migration toward new forms of social media. This is recognized in the above passage, which describes how social media users in the novel are surprised by the "physical transformations" of their contacts when they meet in real life. In the novel's chronologically early chapters, social relations are remarkably physical and much attention is paid to the corporeal body. This is especially true in "Safari," which is set in 1973, long before Facebook and Google. "Contact" and "connection," in the sense of social relations, are meant quite literally. They involve the corporeal presence of bodies, and often include the violent collision of bodies. Accordingly, characters are fixated upon their physical features, and the bodies of those around them. Charlie is distracted by her "father's legs, which have intertwined behind her with those of his girlfriend, Mindy" (60). When the warriors arrive for the ceremony, she dwells upon the warrior who has "scar tissue designs coiled like railroad tracks of the rigorous architecture of his chest and shoulders and back." The warriors produce "guttural noises pried from their abdomen." Mindy passes by "a very young

woman whose breasts were leaking milk" and when she returns to her father, he wants to "grab his daughter's skinny arm and yank her away from these black men" (61). In one scene, the characters bodies are described as though prominent features of the landscape: "knobby-chested men [sell] beads," "Chronos's chest is less startling than his small potbelly," Lou is "lean, a little ropy," and Mindy "looks even better than expected . . . in her sparkling blue bikini" (76). On the following page, "Rolph looks thin; he needs more exercise" (77). In addition to it heightened awareness to the corporeal body, the chapter is also filled with aggressive actions against the body. Chronos, for example, is attacked by a lion. The lioness "vaults at Chronos in an agile, gravity-defying spring" and "lands on his head, flattening him instantly. . . . All that's left is the zebra carcass and the body of the lioness, Chronos's legs splayed beneath her" (69). By the chapter's end, Rolph "has shot himself in the head" (82). Egan also emphasizes the role of these social connections through sex. Sex is both a corporeal and social expression. Rarely is its impact limited to the two participants. Charlie and Rolph listen as Lou and Mindy "make love on one of the narrow rickety cots" in the adjacent tent. Later, when Rolph unknowingly informs his father that Mindy may have slept with Albert—Lou's anger is revealed by "a muscle jumping in his jaw"—Lou responds by spending "the past hour in bed, fucking Mindy senseless" (78, 79). This act is as social as it is physical. It is an attempt to show Alfred and Mindy that "Lou is a man who cannot tolerate defeat." He spends the rest of the evening with "one hand on her slim thigh, reaching under the hem" (79). The emphasis of the body in this chapter contrasts sharply with the novel's later chapters, which are set in the early days of web-based social media.

In the novel's chronologically later chapters, the body is often portrayed as a burden. It is something that can be left behind. In fact, this is, according to Bix, the promise of web-based social media. When Bix is introduced in "Out of Body," (set in the late nineties), he is in front of his computers "typing messages to other graduate students that they'll read on their computers, and reading messages they send back. According to Bix, this computer-message-sending is going to be *huge*—way beyond the telephone" (190). Web-based social media, through email, in this case, are introduced as a way to connect without having to physically meet or leave one's space. In this scene, Bix is in a room with a group of friends who are smoking hash and joking. Though his body is present, he is distinctly elsewhere. This is described through the way Egan characterizes and situates Bix within the scene. In one moment, after Rob tells a joke, "everyone laughs except Bix, who's at his computer" (186). Shortly after, Rob looks at Bix through a window "into an alcove where Bix's computer lives" (190). The window is a symbolic divider between Rob and Bix, and the computer "lives" because that is where Bix socializes. As described at the beginning of this chapter, Bix, who is a PhD student in electrical engineering, believes that "the days of losing touch are almost gone." He predicts, "Everyone we've lost, we'll find. Or they'll find us." When pressed to describe what he means, he explains: "We'll rise up out of our bodies and find each other again in spirit form" (203). Though oblique, Bix describes here the future of social connections through web-based social media, through which connections are made without the burden of one's corporeal body.

The devaluation of the corporeal body is described in two ways throughout the chapter. First, the chapter opens and closes with a description of Rob's attempted suicide,

and a description of his death. Rob explains that he "hacked open [his] wrists with a box cutter three months ago and nearly bled to death" (187-88). By the end of the chapter, he drowns while trying to swim in the icy East river. Both of these events are illustrate Rob's attempts to shed his corporeal body. Furthermore, within the chapter, they bookend Bix's description of social media as rising out of one's body. Second, the chapter, which is titled "Out of Body," contains several examples of characters whose consciousness separates from their body. Apologizing for his cruelty to Bix's girlfriend, Robert realizes that "a part of you is a few feet away, or above, thinking, Good, they'll forgive you, they won't desert you, and the question is, which one is really 'you,' the one saying and doing whatever it is, or the one watching?" (191). Sasha, after describing her rough years of prostitution and theft tells Robert, "That wasn't me in Naples . . . I don't know who it was. I feel sorry for her" (194). Robert uses a similar disassociation when he reflects on a memory: "It wasn't you in the car with James. You were somewhere else, looking down" (195). Finally, at the end of the chapter when Robert drowns, Egan writes: "your mind pulls away as it does so easily, so often, without your even noticing sometimes, leaving Robert Freeman Jr. to manage the current alone while you withdraw to the broader landscape, the water and buildings and streets, the avenues like endless hallways, your dorm full of sleeping students, the air thin with their communal breath" (207). For Bix, web-based social media allows users to connect, no longer burdened by the corporeal self. They are able to live within these connections. Robert, however, has already fallen into the practice of disassociating himself from his connections. He also exists out of body, but unlike Bix, the experience does not link him to anyone; rather, it pulls him

117

farther and farther away from his corporeal self, which is ultimately depicted in the destruction of his body.

Conclusion: Word Casings and the Disconnected

> *"Ballads of paranoia and disconnection ripped from the chest of a man you knew just by looking had never had a page or a profile or a handle or a handset, who was part of no one's data, a guy who had lived in the cracks all these years, forgotten and full of rage, in a way that now registered as pure."*
> (Egan 336)

At the beginning of this chapter, I ask what it means to keep in touch, and what it means to lose touch. In the final chapter, Egan elucidates on the notion of touch by examining on the lexicon of tactility and connection change with the technologies that provide this connection. This chapter marks the return of Alex, who made his debut in the first chapter, Found Objects, on a date with Sasha. As such, the novel *almost* completes a cycle, connecting the first chapter to the last through the connection of their two main characters. Almost.

In the final chapter, "Pure Language," Alex spends a lot of time pondering what it means to be pure. He considers himself pure, which he understands as untouched by corruption (315). He agrees with Bennie who identifies Alex's unwillingness to sell out, to compromise "the ideals that make you, 'you,' (310). Alex supports this belief in himself by calling up the memories of the times "he'd walked away from sleazy bosses" and how he "now routinely walked away from women who were drawn to the sight of a

man caring for his baby daughter during business hours" (316). So why, then, does Alex so eagerly agree to Bennie's business proposition of becoming a "Parrot" to promote the concert of Scotty Hausmann?

A parrot is a shady marketing strategy—thought of as "an obscenity"—in which someone uses their social influence to clandestinely promote an event. They are hired based upon their social reach and, ironically, their purity: the impression that they were incorruptible. They are people who use their pure standards and their excessive reach to get their contacts to buy products or attend events. Alex, with his "15,896 friends" is certainly suited for his job. Alex has an epiphany about what it means to be so well connected in the contemporary media ecology.

Stuck in the conflict of coming to terms with his decision, Alex has an epiphany about what it means to be so well connected in the contemporary media ecology. Maybe he was never pure to begin with. Maybe purity is not attainable. He reflects that maybe it is "because he never could quite forget that every byte of information he'd posted online (favorite color, vegetable, sexual position) was stored in the databases of multinationals who swore they would never, ever use it—that he was *owned*, in other words, having sold himself unthinkingly at the very point in his life when he'd felt most subversive?" (316). He realizes that he is, in fact, owned by the multinationals that have stored his entire social media identity as bytes of information, which they can use to influence opinion, just as Bennie wants to use him. He has always been compromised. There is little difference between the information he spreads through his online profiles and the promoting work he has agreed to do with Bennie. The notion of purity, then, becomes a joke. Nobody in this media ecology remains untouched.

Alex's epiphany, then, speaks to the larger question of what it means to keep in touch. As this dissertation has argued, phrases like "connection," "contact," and "keeping in touch," no longer have much to do with tactility. In fact, they are no longer actions at all; rather, connection is a passive state of being. One is connected simply by existing within the network of social contacts. Through the aid of one's handsets (the chapter's version of the smartphone), with its tracking features and automated function only needs to exist, and the handset will broadcast your activities and secure your connections. The chapter offers two examples of how language, such as the lexicon for connection and tactility, changes, often in the wake of technological development and social protocols. The first example is offered when Alex meets with Lulu, the full time assistant for Bennie (keep in mind that this was once the job held by Sasha before she was fired for stealing). Lulu chastises Alex for his use of the word "viral." She explains: "No one says 'viral' anymore . . . I mean, maybe thoughtlessly, the way we still say 'connect' or 'transmit'— those old mechanical metaphors that have nothing to do with how information travels. See, reach isn't describable in terms of cause and effect anymore: it's simultaneous. It's faster than the speed of light, that's actually been measured." In this case, the words to define the technologies, such as "connect" and "transmit" have been outgrown by the technologies themselves. Even though they are still used "thoughtlessly," they are no longer accurate descriptions for what is happening. When this occurs, the words take on new meanings. "Connect" or "transmit" no longer refer to an act of connecting. The phenomenon of simultaneous occurrence (being connected to an event at the same time it occurs) describes not an act, but a state of being: a state of connection.[20]

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[20] She continues: "So now we study particle physics" (317). Her reference to particle physics is an unknowing nod to a previous chapter when Jules Jones used particle physics decades ago to explain how, in

The second example exists in the work of Alex's wife, who is "an academic star." Egan writes: "Her new book was on the phenomenon of word casings, a term she'd invented for words that no longer had meaning outside quotation marks. English was full of these empty words—'friend' and 'real' and 'story' and 'change'—words that have been shucked of their meanings and reduced to husks. Some, like identity,' 'search,' and 'cloud,' had clearly been drained of life by their Web usage" (324). Her research, however, only seems to go halfway to its foreseen conclusion. "Friend" and "Search" and "cloud" are not simply husks of words. They are words in transition. She refers to the terms as word casings, which suggests that once emptied, they can be filled once more. This leads to one final query of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, I also asked what it means to lose touch. Must a character who has lost touch share the fate of the "R" named character? Does the loss of connection mean that one is, like Rhea, doomed? Egan presents two alternatives. Not surprisingly, they share the same initials: Scotty and Sasha.

When Alex first meets Scotty in the trailer before the concert, his wife's work is immediately brought to mind. Egan writes: "Alex understood that Scotty Hausmann did not exist. He was a word casing in human form: a shell whose essence has vanished" (332). Yet, Alex's appraisal of Scotty, like his wife's study of word casings, only goes halfway. Scotty's state of being is so foreign to Alex, so foreign to any normative existence that Scotty seems as though he doesn't exist. Of course, in literal terms, Scotty does exist. Like the descriptions of the characters on the Safari, Scotty's features are all raw corporeality. He is "a guy with gutted cheeks and hands so red and gnarled he looked like he'd have trouble playing a hand of poker, much less the strange, sensuous

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the presence of Kitty Jackson, people simply become aware of the celebrity's presence and also aware of their social inferiority. It requires no action; it is passive.

121

instrument clutched between his knees." He "sounded like he'd recently wept" and "shoulder-length hair slicked away from his face and empty, blasted eyes." Scotty resists going on stage so fiercely that a fight breaks out, which further emphasizes physical connection and corporeality. At one point, "Scotty managed to rear back and head-butt [Alex] in the solar plexus," and in an attempt to punch Alex in the face, "the musician's fist smashed the flimsy door. There was a tannic smell of blood" (333, 334). Scotty's does not exist through a computer screen; he is not simultaneously connected to all times and all places through his handset. Rather, he exists physically in the world, set apart by the X's and O's that he fixates upon in his chapter.

When Scotty finally takes the stage, Alex realizes what is actually different about Scotty. He describes:

> Songs he'd been writing for years underground, songs no one had ever heard, or anything like them—"Eyes in My Head," "X's and O's," Who's Watching the Hardest"—ballads of paranoia and disconnection ripped from the chest of a man you knew just by looking had never had a page or a profile or a handle or a handset, who was part of no one's data, a guy who had lived in the cracks all these years, forgotten and full of rage, in a way that now registered as pure. Untouched. (336).

Scotty, then, is someone who has lost touch. Egan plays on the irony of this usage by associating Scotty with stark corporeal features and physical aggression. In the literal sense of the word, he is characterized by touch and corporeality. Yet, in this media ecology, touch as little to do with physical contact. Rather, touch refers to one's state of connection upon the social media grid.

Egan provides one last example of a character who has lost touch in Sasha. At the beginning of this chapter, I suggest that the novel *almost* comes full circle by connecting again with its beginning. Yet, it falls just short. In the final scene, Bennie and Alex walk down a Manhattan street and realize they are in the neighborhood of Sasha. They both share some memories about her. Bennie points up at her apartment and Alex "remembered [it] as clearly as if he'd left Sasha's apartment this morning." As he presses the buzzer, "every electron in his body [was] yearning up those ill-lit angular stairs." The metaphor once again evokes the particle physics theory posited by Jules Jones. If Sasha is connected, then the yearning of Alex's electrons would trigger a simultaneous response. But, of course, she is not there. "I'm betting she's far away," Bennie says (339).

And she is. Reconnected with her college boyfriend, Drew, Sasha has disconnected from the social media grid. She has moved to the desert in California where she lives with Drew and her two children, Lincoln and Allison. Her inscriptions are still "Found Objects," but they are in the form of sculptures she makes "in the desert out of trash and . . . old toys". When the sculptures fall apart, it is "'part of the process'" (242). Being out of touch, for Sasha, then, is an embrace of the temporary. It is a willingness to connect through physical touch, even if that means losing touch with the endless swaths of social connections.

The novel, then, almost forges a link from the final chapter to the first, but the absence of Sasha from its networked grid severs the connection, and the flipping of its final page, the closing of its cover, is a reminder of touch as it once was: an action, a physical manipulation of object or person, and a connection unspoiled by passivity.

123

Chapter 3

"Silence, Black and Complete": Human Connection and

Identity Construction in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*

In a scene near the end of Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010),

which takes place in a slightly futuristic America, a riot breaks out which results in the

loss of connection for all äppäräti. The characters refer to it as "the Rupture." The äppärät

is a tiny do-it-all personal computer, like a smartphone, that handles all the characters'

social connections, credit history, civil responsibilities, and entertainment. In the midst of

the blackout, Lenny, the novel's protagonist, writes in his diary: "My äppärät isn't

connecting. I can't connect. . . . I can't connect in any meaningful way to anyone, even to

you, diary" (270). When connection is lost, the impact is devastating. Lenny's loss of

connection leads to a crisis of identity. He describes the suicides of four young people in

their apartment complex. Two of them left notes. Lenny explains, "how they couldn't see

a future without their äppäräti." One note describes how the victim "'reached out to life,'

but found there only 'walls and thoughts and faces,' which weren't enough. He needed to

be ranked, to know his place in this world." Even Lenny admits, "I can understand him.

We are all bored out of our fucking minds. My hands are itching for connection, I want to

connect to my parents and to Vishnu and Grace . . . . But all I have is Eunice and my

Wall of Books" (270). What is most fascinating, here, is the way that Lenny speaks about

connection. Though the symptoms of Lenny's desire to connect are physical (itching

hands), connection itself is not. Lenny *wants* to connect, but ironically, he only has access

to that which is corporeal: Eunice and his books. The connection Lenny seeks is nonphysical. It is connection to data, knowledge of one's rankings and credit score, and location within a social network. In short, these connections are evidence of one's identity. Without the äppärät, characters struggle to connect, and without connection, they struggle to grasp who they are. Shteyngart's novel explores the nature of connection in age of smartphones and social networks. The novel asks: What does it mean to connect in the age of ubiquitous mobile computing? How do these connections impact human relationships and constructions of identity? How will it change the way we think about the body and corporeality?

Super Sad True Love Story is a novel about the increasing expectation for uninterrupted connection, and what happens when that connection is severed. The expectation for connection is illustrated through the use of the äppärät, which is a tiny, do-it-all mobile media device, similar to a smartphone or tablet. What happens, as described above, when that äppärät is disconnected? The novel's slightly futuristic setting provides a nuanced and somewhat detached look at what connection looks like in the age of mobile computing, particularly as it heads toward a total blackout: a collapse of all networks: social, financial, and governmental. In *Super Sad,* Shteyngart seems to suggest that the increasing migration toward a single do-it-all device could have a destructive impact on human connection, both through the breakdown of verbal communication and through a shift in the way identity is constructed. Therefore, the novel focuses on the tension between print and new media. It warns that a media ecology that is not diverse could have a devastating impact. The novel explores this tension through its anxious depiction of print and new media. It also explores this tension through formal techniques,

including its epistolary structure and frequent reproductions of emails and chats. To investigate human connection and identity construction in the age of the äppärät, this chapter focuses on narrative structure, shifting perceptions of corporeality and digitality, and the tense relationship between print and new media.

Super Sad True Love Story tells the story of Lenny Abramov, a thirty-nine year old man who works as a recruiter for the Post-Human Services division of the Staatling-Wapachung Coorporation. Lenny's job is to recruit biologically favorable candidates for an expensive life extension procedure. His personal dream is to live forever. "Today I've made a major decision," Lenny announces in the novel's first sentence: "*I'm never going to die*" (3). Though his "slightly dangerous body mass index," excessive carb-intake, and love for all things old media severely limit his eligibility, he falls in love with twenty-four year old, beautiful, and media-obsessed Eunice Park, in the hopes that her love will provide him with eternal youth, or at the least, impress his boss enough to give him some free dechronification treatments (4, 66). While Lenny is a closeted old media book-lover, Eunice, like the rest of society, spends most of her time tapping incessantly at her äppärät screen. The äppärät is a device, similar to a smart phone, through which the characters communicate, shop, and rank each other according to credit score, looks, and "fuckability." Set in New York City in the near future, the country is on the precipice of economic collapse. Shteyngart's novel explores a society in which human connection is limited to social media, and identity is constructed by social rankings, credit scores, and shopping histories.

One of the ways the novel examines the tension between print and new media is through its structure. The novel's structure alternates between Lenny's diary entries and

Eunice's online GlobalTeens account. The diary entries are traditionally written. When Lenny describes how he composed a checklist "on an actual sheet of paper" and "started writing [it] out by hand," the reader is led to believe that his diary entries may also be handwritten (50). The entries are meticulously proofread, grammatically sound, and organized into neat and compact paragraphs. They contain occasional reflexive asides by the author, such as when he disrupts an explanation to explain: "That's not exactly true. The chronology isn't right. I'm lying to you, diary. It's only page seven and I'm already a liar. . . . I want you to be a *positive* diary" (7). Lenny's medium reveals him as citizen of the twentieth century media ecology, grasping for relevance in the twenty-first century. Eunice, on the other hand, is a young woman who was born into the frenetic new media ecology of the near future, and is familiar with old media—books, printed text—only as far as they have been taught as artifacts in her history classes at Elderbird College. Eunice's accounts are all published through the GlobalTeens platform, an ubiquitous social media site used exclusively throughout the novel. They are riddled with grammatical errors, and they appear in various formats, including instant chat and email messages. Acronyms are frequently used instead of writing out popular phrases, and advertisements appear promoting the use of images over words. The tension that exists between these media forms—the refined heft of Lenny's diary and the web-speak sleekness of Eunice's GlobalTeens chats—mirror the characters' own distinguishing features: Lenny's age and heftiness and Eunice's youthful and slender features.

The tension between old and new media forms in the novel are exhibited through Lenny's bookishness, and Eunice's attraction to all things digital. Through their relationship, Shteyngart portrays how old and new forms often come together through the

process of remediation. Media theorists, such as Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* and Bolter and Grusin in *Remediation* (1999) discuss the relationship between old and new media in terms of evolution, tension, and production. Jenkins writes: "history teaches us that old media never die . . . . Delivery technologies become obsolete and get replaced; media, on the other hand, evolve" (13). He continues to explain, "Old media are not being displaced. Rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies" (14). Similarly, Bolter and Grusin describe the tense, evolving ecology as productive rather than competitive. They examine "the rapid development of new digital media and the nearly as rapid response by traditional media. . . . Both new and old media are invoking the twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy in their efforts to remake themselves and each other" (5). The media ecology, they describe, evolves through the production of new media technologies, and the adaptability of old media to accommodate new technologies.

Raymond Malewitz argues that the migration toward the äppärät in *Super Sad True Love Story* depicts remediation in progress. Regarding the double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy, he explains that our culture "wants to convey the immediate sensation of reality through media, which it can receive only if reality is redefined as an ever-expanding hypermediacy." The "felt erasure of mediation" within the novel, explains Malewitz, is "facilitated by new media and posthumanist fantasies of universally translatable information," that is, the ability to sync all devices to a universal standard, so that they operate seamlessly, and invisibly, in their production of a mediated reality. As this occurs, new forms that mediate reality by using this "universally translatable information" replace media forms that do not. Accordingly, the media

ecology loses its diversity of forms, and along with them, the diverse languages and practices associated with these forms.[21] The scenario that *Super Sad* depicts, according to Malewitz, is that the user becomes more compatible with these devices as prostheses, than it does with its own human body. This mediated construction of reality devalues the body in favor of a more seamless and less obtrusive faculty for experiencing the "immediate sensation of reality through media." This, according to Malewitz, has a profound impact on perceptions of the human body. He writes: "If our technological prostheses create our definitions of the human, then our bodies and our selves will increasingly be expected to mimic the mediated and networked features of these prostheses in a manner similar to the ways in which television programs now resemble websites" (109). While Malewitz focuses on how the body is constructed through the use of media forms as prostheses, the work in this chapter focuses primarily on what happens when those media devices fail. This chapter asks: once the human experience of reality— including constructions of identity, social connections, sex and love, economic roles, civil duties, etc.—is upgraded so that it is compatible with the universally translatable language, what happens when the device that reads that language fails? This chapter will rely in part on Malewitz's incisive work to describe the impact of media on the body, but will diverge from Malewitz as it explores the impact of the Rupture at the end of the

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[21] I come to this conclusion based on Lisa Gitelman's definition of media from *Always Already New* (2008), in which media are "socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation" (7). The media, then, are not only the technological forms and the hardware that enable and limit the technology (touchscreens, telephone wires, routers, etc.), but also the social practices and protocols that develop alongside the media (such as the abbreviated language adopted for text messaging or the effect of smartphone screens on sleeping habits). Cultural diversity plays a major role in defining media, then, since different cultures use media for different cultural needs.

novel, and the implications that this rupture has for the relationship between old and new media.

Tracing, Scanning, FACing: Human Connection in *Super Sad's* New Media Ecology

In this novel, all connections—social, political, economic—occur through the äppärät, and one is always connected. These connections occur through the äppärät, which is something like a newer model smartphone. Though a couple different models exist, the most popular is a "pebble-like" device that is worn around the neck (61). From the äppärät, one has access to near-endless information. Personal histories and habits can be mined through the äppärät, and it is also a social mediator. Social interactions—even those undergone in public—are almost exclusively conducted through the äppärät's ranking and community features. The äppärät is compulsive, omniscient, and ubiquitous. While it isn't exactly illegal to *not* have one's äppärät, its absence creates suspicion. The absence of äppäräti connection—which is nothing less than a refusal to be transparent—becomes a spectacle. This is evident in a couple scenes that also portray the culture that has developed around äppärät usage. In one scene, a crowd in Central Park gathers around a former bus driver named Aziz, who is disconnected and homeless. After losing his job and home he was forced to relocate to the park. Shteyngart describes the spectacle: "the small crowd of New York natives who had formed respectfully a few yards away to watch his poverty, and the äppäräti-toting tourists just another few yards behind them, jostling for a sightline" (106). Äppäräti has become so pervasive that its absence draws a crowd. The refusal to use an äppärät is often met with equally suspicious governmental intervention. In this way, the äppärät is utilized as a governmental

130

apparatus. Its relatively compulsory use allows power structures—both economic and governmental—to track and influence users. Throughout the novel, Credit Poles lined on the streets read the äppäräti of passersby and shout their credit scores. Often, depending upon the user's ethnicity, the speakers atop the poles bark instructions at the potential consumers, coercing them to save or spend money.

The governmental tracking of äppäräti is evidenced early in the novel when Lenny flies to New York from Rome. When Lenny first boards the plane and uses his äppärät to scan fellow passengers for their history, he notices a suspicious traveler: "there was this one guy who registered *nothing*. I mean he wasn't there. He didn't have an äppärät . . . . And he looked like a nothing. The way people don't really look anymore" (35). When the plane lands, the man is escorted away by the National Guard. Though his offense is not named, his lack of the device marks him as aberrant. Äppäräti usage does not simply enhance one's connection to others and to the world. It constitutes being. The lack of an äppärät renders your information, and therefore your being, nonexistent. It is no surprise, then, that the National Guard removes the disconnected man from the plane. Later in the novel, they are also responsible for killing Aziz, who starts a revolution by burning down the credit poles. The three main uses of the äppärät throughout the novel are to maintain social connections through ranking and FACing, monitor credit rankings, and gather information. It is used to remove all the risky guesswork from decisions regarding employment, investments, and social and romantic interactions. While the sharing of this information is more or less involuntary, the practice is ubiquitous to the point that unwillingness is a social aberration that warrants punishment. The expectation of unlimited information supersedes any expectation of privacy.

The äppärät is the primary medium for human connection throughout the novel. This mode of connection devalues face-to-face interactivity, and often borders upon stalking. Lenny's first use of the äppärät is to learn more about Eunice. Though he claims that her "digital footprint wasn't big," he is able to learn about her abusive father and her sister's shopping habits. As he scours zoomed images of Eunice's family, Lenny explains that he "closed my eyes and let the image slide into my mind's burgeoning Eunice archive" (39). Lenny's mind is a hard drive, uploading contents from his äppärät searches, and Eunice is a series of incorporeal images. The äppärät also tracks characters' locations. Midway through the novel, while Lenny and Eunice are sitting together, he describes Eunice's descent into "another äppärät reverie." He writes: "I did the same, pretending it was something serious and work-related, but really I was just GlobalTracing Eunice's location. She was, as always . . . [in] my home, deep into her own äppärät" (213). The GlobalTracing function further conflates the distinction between one's physical and virtual location. Lenny can see Eunice sitting across the room from him, but he still uses the äppärät to validate her location, thus elevating the äppäräti data over his own physical sensorium. Furthermore, once he locates her at his address, he revises this observation to state that her real location is "deep into her own äppärät." For Lenny, GlobalTracing confirms what his senses already revealed, but also reveal what his senses could not: that Eunice's corporeal presence does not necessarily mirror her incorporeal presence.

Perhaps the most popular äppäräti function is its RateMe feature. Characters rank each other by FACing (with a hard "C"), an acronym for "Form a Community." FACing takes place in a public space in which characters use their äppärät to rank people

132

according to criteria such as Fuckability, Personality, Anal/Oral/Vaginal Preference (89). It requires the user to merge his body with his äppärät by pressing the device's "EmotePad to your heart." At the bar with his friends, one character explains: "The EmotePad picks up any change in your blood pressure. That tells her how much you want to do her" (88). Lenny doesn't quite grasp the concept. He writes: "I touched my heart with the back of my äppärät, trying to fill it with my warmth, my natural desire for love" (89). Merging with a machine to identify virtual mating partners, however, falls somewhere short of natural. Yet, in this media ecology, FACing is so pervasive that Lenny is commanded to start ranking people in order to keep his job. An executive tells him to "Learn to rate everyone around you. Get your data in order" (70). FACing is described as simulated sexual intercourse. At the bar, Lenny first hears "Let's FAC" as "Let's fuck" (88). The confusion between FACing and fucking, however, subtly points out a distinguishing feature in this media ecology: sex has largely become a virtual and public experience. For such a hypersexualized culture, it is astounding how rarely sexual intercourse actually occurs within the novel. Sex is everywhere, as long as it occurs on a screen. Newscasters have "hardcore gay sex" on screen while delivering political commentary, and Eunice speaks about the "porns we used to watch when we were in kindergarten: (155, 266). Off-screen, however, intercourse is practically non-existent[22] (155, 226). More pointedly, in *Super Sad True Love Story*, sex is almost always a simulation. Often, it is digitally fabricated, such as when GrillBitch tries to get back at

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[22] The only exception is a single scene between Lenny and Eunice, which this chapter discusses later. Even in the opening chapter, a sex scene between Lenny and Fabrizia is disrupted just before it starts when they discover her toddler son is in the room. Yet, the novel is very clear about the pervasiveness of the äppärät in the characters' sex lives. In an early orgy scene Fabrizia alternated between kissing Lenny and "having one of those very angry Italian äppärät chats on the couch. She would flash Lenny, tease him, and then "snapped her legs shut . . . and then went back to her äppärät assault" (14).

her boyfriend for cheating on her. She explains that she "went on this new Teens site called 'D-base' where they can digitize you like covered in shit or getting fucked by four guys at once and I sent Gopher all these Images of myself getting fucked by four guys at once" (147).

The most prevalent form of simulated sex occurs through social media practices, like FACing. The progression of their FACing is described like an orgy, a scene that contrasts sharply with the actual orgy that takes place in Rome at Fabrizia's apartment, just before Lenny left with Eunice. Characters shout out: "We're FACing pretty hard now, people" (90). Yet, the tangle of arms and legs has been replaced with intersecting streams of data. "Streams of data were fighting for time and space around us," Lenny writes (90). Later, he explains that "the bar was now utterly aflash with smoky data spilling out of a total of fifty-nine äppäräti." After Lenny continuously fails to catch the eye of a female user's äppärät, his friend tells him: "You'll find the mercy in this rude data stream" (92). Attempts to break the fourth wall of the äppärät screen by engaging someone face to face are thwarted. When Lenny passes a group of girls who had been ranking him, they "were too busy looking at rankings" to notice him. Later, he turns to engage a girl in conversation, but suddenly phrases like "Look away quickly, dork" and "Hair transplant time for RAG?" and "I can smell the DO from here" appear on Lenny's äppärät screen (92).[23] In short, Lenny's attempts to transition from virtual FACing to face-to-face interaction are met with a barrage of insults delivered to him, of course, through his äppärät.

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[23] For the girls who speak in acronym's, Lenny's äppärät automatically translates "RAG" to "Rapidly aging loser" and "DO" to "Dick Odor" (92).

FACing also illuminates the impact that new media technologies have had upon

everyday speech. Words like "connect," "touch," "desktop," and "cloud" no longer mean

what they meant twenty years ago.[24] On one hand, FACing is nothing like the act of

physical intercourse for which Lenny confuses it; yet, it seems to have replaced the

physical act of intercourse. In fact, the bar in which they are FACing is called "The

Cervix." It is a place where "hot women in their early twenties [are] looking to

supplement their electronic lives" (83). The name of the bar further extends this

simulated view of intercourse (82). Literally, they are inside the Cervix while simulating

sex through their äppäräts. When spelled out as a verb as it frequently appears in the

novel, "FACing" (with a hard "C") reads as "facing" (with a soft "c"). Ironically, the only

conversant one actually *faces* while FACing is the äppärät screen. Even the

"Community" that is being formed is stripped bare of its more common meaning. Of

course, Shteyngart refers to an online community in this scene, but positioned within a

public space, in which everyone is brushing shoulders with the avatars they're FACing

through their äppärät, it is clear that communal tendencies to communicate, exchange

services, share experiences have been replaced by the more streamlined duties of

dumping data into the ether, not to connect to another human, but to find where one is

ranked.

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[24] As discussed in chapter two of this dissertation, Jennifer Egan draws attention to this phenomenon
through her *A Visit from the Goon Squad* character, Rebecca. Rebecca has just written a book on "word
casings, a term she'd invented for words that no longer had meaning outside quotation marks." She goes on
to explain that "English was full of these empty words—'friend' and 'real' and 'story' and change'—words
that had been shucked of their meaning and reduced to husks. Some, like 'identity,' 'search,' and 'cloud,'
had clearly been drained of life by their web usage" (Egan 323-24). Her observation of how language is
impacted by web use is carried on by Shteyngart.

The Book in the New Media Ecology

Throughout the novel, with Eunice as his guide, Lenny migrates from a world of books,

to one of the äppärät. His conflict is characterized by the tension between these media

forms. Shteyngart explores this tension through the depiction of geographical boundaries.

Though the bulk of the novel takes place in New York, it opens and closes in Rome. As

such, the narrative oscillates between the old and the new world, just as it oscillates

between Lenny's old media handwritten entries, and Eunice's new media GlobalTeens

accounts. *Super Sad True Love Story*, then, positions the printed book as representative of

old media, and the äppärät as the new technology that could potentially render the book

obsolete. This dichotomy is bolstered by the consistent alignment of the book with the

elderly, and the äppärät with youth. Lenny, for example, who worships books, also lives

in a "NORC—a Naturally Occurring Retirement Community—a kind of instant Florida

for those too frail or poor to relocate to Boca in time for their deaths" (53). Of course,

there is no magic line between old and new media, and Lenny's transition, which is

gradual and evolving, often reflects this. In *Convergence Culture,* Henry Jenkins

describes media convergence as "a process, not an endpoint" (16). Using recorded sound

as an example, he explains how old and new media *coexist* in the process of convergence:

"Once recorded sound becomes a possibility, we have continued to develop new and

improved means of recording and playing back sound. . . . Each old medium was forced

to coexist with the emerging media. That's why convergence seems more plausible as a

way of understanding the past several decades of media change . . . . Old media are not

being displaced. Rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new

technologies" (14). Yet, while old media are not being replaced, their adaptation to new

media technologies is ushered in with much tension and anxiety. As *Super Sad True Love Story* explores, this anxiety arises in part from the destabilization of certain media technologies, such as the book, and the impact that this destabilization could have upon human connection. Even if the novel continues to exist as an audio file, for example, or a text document on a screen, the novel asks: how will these technologies shape abilities to concentrate, communicate, or reflect? How will this impact society? Lenny's migration from old to new media, then, represents anxiety over the potentially destructive and often productive coupling between old and new media.

At the onset of the novel, Lenny is, more or less, a caricature of the book. Despite the agenda of his business trip to Rome—a quest to find potential clients for the life-extension program offered by Lenny's company—his suitcase is brimming with books, he is described as "bookish" and Eunice mistakes him at once for a bookkeeper (25, 19, 22). His first act in the novel is to write the diary entry that will eventually become the pages that Shteyngart's readers will turn (or screens they will swipe, or MP3 files they will listen to). He is "Lenny Abramov, last reader on earth!" (90). His love for the book is an aberration in a society that has come to worship the äppärät. On the airplane heading home from Rome, for example, Lenny is criticized for reading: "I noticed that some of the first-class people were staring me down for having an open book. 'Duder, that thing smells like wet socks,' said the young jock next to me" (37). When he and his friends are FACing at the bar, Lenny's profile reveals his recent purchases: a series of "bound, printed, nonstreaming Media artifact[s]." His friends tell him: "You've got to stop buying books . . . All those doorstops are going to drag down your PERSONALITY rankings" (90). Books are an aberration because they remind people of a primitive world. More

pointedly, they remind people of a world in which people still have to die. Lenny

describes his failed business trip as an attempt to "spend some time thinking about

immortality in a really old place. Read some books. Get some thoughts down." Joshie,

Lenny's boss, responds: "Those thoughts, these books, they *are* the problem . . . You

have to stop thinking and start selling." He explains to Lenny, "You remind them [your

coworkers] of death. You remind them of a different, earlier version of our species" (66-

67). Yet, at the same time, there is something authentic about Lenny that emanates from

his love for books. Shortly after they meet, Eunice describes Lenny as "Earnest" and

"kind of beautiful." She writes: "You're like what Prof Margeaux in Assertiveness Class

used to call 'a real human being'" (75). It is no surprise, then, that Lenny is, at the start of

the novel, the champion of the book. When he returns to his apartment in New York,

Lenny "celebrated my Wall of Books. I counted the volumes on my twenty-foot-long

modernist bookshelf to make sure none had been misplaced or used as kindling by my

subtenant." Then, he speaks to them: "'You're my sacred ones,' I told the books. 'No one

but me still cares about you. But I'm going to keep you with me forever. And one day I'll

make you important again'" (52).

Lenny's mission to revive the book is not simply an attempt to tear äppärät users

from their banal screen-obsession, but it is also an attempt to preserve his identity. Just as

other characters find their identity in äppärät data, ranking, and online profiles, Lenny

finds his identity in the book. In many ways, he even sees himself as a book. When he is

ignored by the young kid who told him his book smells like socks, Lenny confides that

the kid "looked away from me, as if I too radiated the stench of a short-story collection"

(40). Later, he worries that his coworkers are "projecting data about me, perhaps telling

them how little I mean, my thirty-nine-year-old obsolescence" (64). As such, the novel posits a clear parallel between Lenny's attempt to live forever and the book's impending obsolescence. Furthermore, the foundational moments in Lenny's life are substantiated by the books on his shelf: near the end of the novel, when he is packing up his books, he describes how the "Wall of Books began to empty and the boxes began to groan with thirty years' worth of reading material, the entirety of my life as a thinking person" (311). This is neither the first nor the last time that Lenny views his books as a summation of his life. He identifies each stack of books with a specific moment from his life: the "Fitzgeraldian and Hemingwayesque stuff" with college, the "brittle Soviet books" with his father," and the "Lacanian and feminist volumes" with his attempts at dating (311). The books substantiate Lenny's being, much in the way that the äppärät does for others. It is through the book—its stories, its characters, and its penchant for long-winded reflections, and even its old-world bulkiness—that Lenny understands who he is, and where his place is in the world. Constantly reading a ratty copy of Chekhov's novella, *Three Years* (the same novel he is caught reading on the airplane), Lenny recognizes himself in the undesirable main character, Laptev. "Much like Laptev," Lenny reflects, "I truly was that 'honorable, good man who loved her'" (36). When he is confronted about his poor health and physical features, he sees "Chekhov's prose before my eyes, his description of the Moscow merchant's son Laptev, who 'knew that he was ugly, and now he felt as though he was conscious of his ugliness all over his body'" (62). Later, Lenny reflects: "I prepared myself to become Chekhov's ugly merchant Laptev again" (108). In *Super Sad True Love Story,* the äppärät eliminates nuance through the transparency of data; it calculates cold and hard statistics to reduce Lenny and his peers to credit scores

and fuckability ratings. The book, on the other hand, for Lenny, substantiates an emotional dimension that is not quantifiable or translatable by the äppärät. At least, not at the novel's onset.

Rome: The Old World, the Old Body, and the Old Media

If, throughout *Super Sad True Love Story*, Lenny is analogous with the book, then Eunice is Lenny's digital counterpart. They contrast in several important ways. Through their individual characters, and ultimately through their relationship, Shteyngart depicts the coupling between old and new media. For example, Lenny, an "NYU English major," is fascinated by words and language (137). On a playground near his apartment, he "relished hearing language actually being *spoken* by children. Overblown verbs, explosive nouns, beautifully bungled prepositions. Language, not data" (53). Eunice, on the other hand, majored in "Images," and she speaks in the sort of abbreviations associated with texting and äppärät usage (308). In one exchange with Lenny, she says, "'LPT . . . TIMATOV. ROFLAARP. PRGV. Totally PRGV,'" to which Lenny replies: "The youth and their abbreviations. I pretended like I know what she was talking about. 'Right,' I said. 'IMP. PLO. ESL'" (22). Accordingly, their relationship is marked by an initial incompatibility that emerges on the level of language. Though they evolve and converge toward compatibility, traces of their prior dysfunction persist. Their compatibility always remains somewhat buggy. They also contrast as media consumers. Whereas Lenny prefers to bury his face in a book, Eunice prefers the glow of her äppärät screen. When Lenny is confronted by a stream of data, he reflects: "how much I wanted to forsake these facts, to open a smelly old book" (81). Eunice, on the other hand, is

140

nearly always staring at her äppärät screen, "floating above the projected data, ready to pounce when an item she coveted was unfurled on the screen, the green 'buy me now' icon hovering beneath her busy index fingers" (104). Even in conversation, when Lenny pauses he notes that Eunice would "use my forty-second pause to bury her head into her äppärät" (153). Her absorption into new media even alters the way she interacts with older forms of media. When Lenny actually catches her looking at one of his books, he describes how her "index fingers raised above the book as if ready to tap at the BUY ME NOW symbol on her äppärät, her other fingers massaging the book's back, maybe even enjoying its thickness and unusual weight, its relative quiet and meekness" (205). The novel shows the disparate practices of Eunice and Lenny as consumers of new and old media, respectively.

At the onset, Lenny views data streaming and textspeak as an anxious affront upon language and books. Eunice, on the other hand, handles books from the paradigm of the äppärät user: curious, confounded, and searching for a button to click. As they converge, literally in their physical relationship, and figuratively as caricatures of old and new media, traces of their prior media habits remain as bugs in an operating system. It is as though a trace of incompatibility always remains despite the adjustments each character makes. When the äppäräti connection is severed, for example, instead of picking up a book, Eunice prefers to open up her äppärät to "[concentrate] on the last shopping page stored in its memory before communications collapsed" (277). She falls back upon the media practices to which she is accustomed.

The description of Eunice handling the book—"massaging the book's back, maybe even enjoying its thickness and unusual weight"—interrogates the relationship

between media and corporeality. Physical presence is a prominent theme early in the novel, which opens in Rome, also called "the Old World" and "a city useful only as a reference to the past" (21, 18). Rome is a place where Lenny can read his suitcase full of books, quote from Whitney Houston's "eponymous first LP," and wax poetic about the grandeur of the Pantheon: its "ideal proportions," "the weight of the dome" and its "icy mathematic precision" (3, 6). Much attention is also given to the human corpus. Lenny has a "dangerous body mass index of 23.9" and his lover, Fabrizia, has "curves fixed by carbohydrates" (4, 21). The old world values physical presence: both the corporeal evidence of human achievement and the human body itself. Yet, when Lenny describes the Pantheon, he refers to it as "the most glorious grave marker to a race of men ever built" (6). That the Pantheon is a grave marker suggests that one race of mankind has concluded, and a new race will take its place. Only a page prior to Lenny's Pantheon visit, as he ruminates about his plan to live forever, he fantasizes about leaving the expired earth for "a new earth, greener still but with fewer allergens." Lenny claims that he will:

> jump through a black hole and surf into a dimension of unthinkable wonders, where the things that sustained me on Earth 1.0—*tortelli lucchesi*, pistachio ice cream, the early works of the Velvet Underground, smooth, tanned skin pulled over the soft Baroque architecture of twentysomething buttocks—will seem as laughable and infantile as building blocks, baby formula, a game of 'Simon says *do this*.' (6).

Even while in Rome, Lenny is aware of the fading relevance of the corporeal body. He plans to eventually leave it behind to travel to a place where fleshy desires such as rich,

carb-loaded food, fatty deserts, and even the physical flesh of another human body (compared to Baroque architecture) will seem simple and juvenile. Lenny claims that the technology for this transition "is almost here." It will require him to "regrow my melting liver" and "replace the entire circulatory system with 'smart blood'" (5). Later, when describing his boss, Joshie, who has already undergone the procedure, Lenny writes: "I could see . . . the deep-veined reality of what he was becoming, the little machines burrowing inside him, clearing up what had gone wrong, rewiring, rededicating, resetting the odometer on every cell" (218). Quite literally, then, the organic body is being replaced by machinery.

This reconfiguration of the human body—effectively, a devaluation of organic corporeality—is articulated with more nuance when Lenny first meets Eunice. She is escorted into a party with an old sculptor, whom Lenny refers to as "A Roman fixture" who needs to "take the tire off the belly" (16, 18). In contrast, Eunice "could not have weighted more than eighty pounds, a compactness which made [Lenny] tremble with bad thoughts" (16). Lenny's lust over Eunice's diminished presence is akin to the fanaticism over the newest media technologies, such as Eunice's äppärät, which is described as "a sleek white pendant—a pebble almost" (18-19). It is a desire for what is smaller and sleeker; for what is both immediate and invisible. In comparison, Lenny's äppärät is "dated," "retro," and "dusty" (15). When he upgrades, his coworker responds mocks its old and bulky technology, crying out: "Good fucking Christ. What is this, an iPhone?" (69). Value has shifted from the bulky grandeur of the Pantheon and the curvy softness of Fabrizia, to the compact, slightness of Eunice.

This transition is made most clear when Lenny and Eunice race out of the party in Rome. It is the moment during which he realizes that in order to live forever, he must evolve. He must become compatible with the incorporeal technology that dominates the media ecology. This means coupling both with Eunice and with the äppärät. As they rush out of the Rome party, Lenny has an epiphany:

> Fabrizia. The softest woman I had ever touched. But maybe I no longer *needed* softness. Fabrizia. Her body conquered by small armies of hair, her curves fixed by carbohydrates, nothing but the Old World and its dying nonelectronic corporeality. And in front of me, Eunice Park. A nano-sized woman who likely had never known the tickle of her own pubic hair, who lacked both breast and scent, who existed as easily on an äppärät screen as on the street before me. (21)

Fabrizia is described by her abundant physical properties. Elsewhere, Lenny notes her "elegant forty-year-old breasts" and "thick Mediterranean pubic hairs" (13-14). Eunice, on the other hand, is described by the absence of these properties. Thin, curve-less, and without hair, she is sleek and machine-like. Lenny reduces Fabrizia to "the Old World and its dying nonelectronic corporeality." In doing so, he identifies the qualities that will prevent him from living forever: the old world, old media, the body, and of course death. Eunice, in contrast, is described almost as an apparition, capable of existing anywhere and forever. In the äppärät age, when social networks exist exclusively online, sex is simulated, and identity is constructed from one's digital profile, the äppärät becomes somewhat of an apparition: one's incorporeal form to exist where the corpus cannot. This is what Lenny envisions as he plans to eventually leave Earth 1.0 behind. Eunice can

scarcely be traced by the human sensorium. When Lenny says she "had never known the tickle of her own pubic hair, who lacked both breast and scent" he recognizes that she is not registered by touch, sight, or even smell. In the acts that matter—FACing, credit ranking, shopping, emoting on Global Teens—the human body is no longer relevant.

When Lenny and Eunice escape from the party, their media practices begin to merge. Lenny, lover of books, begins to love all things digital. His transformation begins as soon as the plane trip from Rome to New York, during which he hides his book and began to "thump [his äppärät] loudly with my finger to show how much I loved all things digital" (37). Back in New York, he boasts of his progress: "I've spent an entire week without reading any books or talking about them too loudly. I'm learning to worship my new äppärät's screen, the colorful pulsating mosaic of it, the fact that it knows every last stinking detail about the world, whereas my books only know the mind of their authors" (78). Lenny, who once believed that books could contain unimaginable introspective depths while the äppärät reduced all nuance to a fuckability ranking and a credit score, now replaces his reading with äppäräti text-scanning. He confesses in his journal: "I wanted nothing to separate me from my sweetheart, certainly not a two-brick tome of Tolstoy's *W&P*" (158). Eunice also undergoes a transformation. At times, she seems secretly impressed by Lenny's reading. Confiding to her friend that she once watched him read *War and Peace*, "which lasted for like HALF AN HOUR," she compares his to her previous boyfriend: "I thought Ben was really brain-start because I saw him streaming Chronicles of Narnia in that cafe in Rome, but this Tolsoy was a thousand pages long BOOK, not a stream, and Lenny was on page 930, almost finished [sic]" (144). Later, Lenny catches Eunice touching his books, "maybe even enjoying its

thickness and unusual weight" (205). She even lies in bed while Lenny reads to her from

The Unbearable Lightness of Being (276). Yet, despite their attempts to converge, the

remainder of their evening is pocked with reminders of their incompatibility.

Super Sad Incompatibility: Sex as Media Convergence

The moment that Lenny runs away from the party with Eunice, the potential

problems of their relationship become visible. They are incompatible in nearly every

way. Lenny writes of their departure: "Eunice and I marched ahead. She marched, I

hopped" (21). The disparity in their stride reflects their odd coupling. This

incompatibility is also reflected in their speech. As mentioned above, Eunice speaks to

him in acronyms. Though he "pretended to know what she was talking about," he clearly

cannot understand her. Everything she says to him is either a rebuke or critique. "You're

such a nerd," she says, and when he tries to ask why, she responds: "Who says things like

that? And who wears those shoes? You look like a bookkeeper." She even critiques his

clothing: "This isn't buttoned right." All of this occurs within a single page of dialogue.

Finally, Lenny reflects: "When dealing with people my own age, I know precisely who I

am. . . . On Planet Eunice Park . . . I was some kind of ancient dork" (22). Lenny

recognizes their insurmountable incompatibility, to the extent that he describes Eunice as

otherworldly. He summarizes the conversation they share during their first dinner

together:

> I told her I wanted to do more than make her laugh.
>
> She told me I should be thankful for what I had.
>
> I told her she should move to New York with me.

She told me she was probably a lesbian.

I told her my work was my life, but I still had room for love.

She told me love was *out of the question*. (24)

Each of Lenny's statements is bounced back to him like an error message. No matter how hard he tries, he fails to connect with Eunice, just as he eventually fails to re-imagine his identity through his newfound devotion to the äppärät. This early failure to connect foreshadows, perhaps, the error messages that Eunice will receive much later in the novel when her äppärät fails to connect her to anyone. In both cases, Shteyngart implores the struggle to initiate and maintain human connection in an age of unending digital connectivity.

Their struggle to connect is also illustrated in their physical relationship. Just as the novel explores a media ecology in which old and new media are often portrayed as incompatible, Lenny and Eunice also seem unable to physically consummate their union. When they finally return to Lenny's apartment and retire to the bedroom, it seems that their disparity will fall away, especially as they "kissed, lazily . . . then roughly, like we meant it." Yet, their attempt at sex only verifies the prior incompatibility. Lenny writes: "There were some problems. Eunice Park wouldn't take off her bra . . . and I was too drunk and scared to develop an erection." Eunice's refusal to undress and Lenny's impotence describes a physical inability to merge bodies through intercourse. Instead, they engage in cunnilingus. Lenny describes: "I . . . pushed my lips right inside her soft, vital pussy. . . . She must have sensed just how much her youth and freshness meant to me, a man who lived in death's anteroom and could barely stand the light and heat of his brief sojourn on earth. I licked and licked, breathing in the slight odor of something

147

authentic and human, and eventually must have fallen asleep with my face between her legs" (25). Instead of two bodies converging, their physical relationship is described as leaching, in which Lenny literally leaches onto Eunice to suck life out of her. Her vulva is vital and Eunice is reduced to her youth. Lenny, on the other hand is a "man who lived in death's anteroom," attempting to live forever by leaching onto that which is young and vital. Eunice is, for Lenny, a fountain of youth. It is not, however, simply the promise of immortality that Lenny craves; rather, it is the sleek digital technology that Eunice represents. In this technology, Lenny sees the ability to transcend corporeal existence, and to transcend corporeal existence means to also bypass disease and decay. Lenny is not merely thinking about immortality as living forever within his body, but as the act of transcending the constraints of bulky corporeality. This is perhaps why Eunice is so often described as a machine: "a sleek digital creature" who "existed as easily on the äppärät screen as on the street before me" (153, 21). Her body is not essential to her being. Even in the vulnerability of this scene, she is not acknowledged as fully human, but has the "slight odor of something authentic and human." The qualification suggests that Eunice's humanness is itself a simulation, something programmable to be human-like. It is no surprise, then, that in the morning, Eunice makes Lenny wash his face in order to "obliterate all traces of her" (25). She wipes him clean like a hard drive, thus describing Eunice as something digital that can not only be downloaded and shared, but also be retrieved and deleted.

The above sex scene with Eunice takes place shortly after a scene with Fabrizia, and the juxtaposition of these scenes reveals the latter scene for what it is: a dysfunctional simulation of sex. Lenny describes sex with Fabrizia as exerting and depleting. They

refer to intercourse with vulgar aplomb: they "screw," they "[make] the love," and they "fuck" (16, 21). With Eunice, however, sex is not collaborative; rather, it is something done to her, almost exclusively in the form of cunnilingus. With Fabrizia, sex is described as an overload of the senses: "the muscles stirring somewhere deep beneath her skin like phantom gears . . . her breath . . . was shallow and hard, so that when she 'made the love' (her words), it sounded like she was in danger of expiring" (16). It is a fully physical experience profound enough to evoke thoughts of expiration. While Lenny and Eunice also expire at the end of their first night together, it is not due to any profound sexual completion; rather, it is because Lenny "must have fallen asleep with [his] face between her legs" (25).

Though it only occurs once, late in the novel, Lenny and Eunice do eventually have intercourse. The experience is initiated after the riots in the city intensify and the National Guard's presence increases. Eunice feels increasingly distant from her family, and Lenny explains that from her perspective, "family was eternal. The bonds of kinship could never be broken." Realizing that "our families had failed us," Lenny explains, "What I had seen as a sign of great patience and traditional morality on my part I now saw as a failure to connect." The scene is remarkable for the profound, yet fleeting transformation they undergo. Where Eunice once contained the "slight odor of something authentic and human," she now possessed an urgency to connect. According to Lenny, "we had to form an equally strong and enduring connection to each other. Any gap between us was a failure. Success would come when neither of us knew where one ended and the other began" (167). Their intercourse is described with heightened awareness to their corporeality and sensory perception. Eunice, who once "lacked both breast and

scent," is now described by her vividly corporeal qualities, including her "alert nipples that formed tight brown capsules" and her "garlicky, sweet, slightly turned breath." Lenny "felt the melody of her garlicky" breath. The use of synesthesia, which perceives Eunice's scent as both a sound and a feeling, suggests an overwhelming of the senses, perhaps a product of senses too long dulled by simulation. Furthermore, Shteyngart evokes in them an image of animals. Lenny remarks on the "thick tendrils of Eunice's mane" and her "strong, vital legs with their half-moon calves." Lenny is "moored, righted, held in place for life." The tendrils of Eunice's mane and Lenny's mooring posit them as horses; their fierce mating is natural and animalistic. Lenny even describes a "desperate animal growl filtering out of my lungs" (168). Despite the sensual and corporeal quality of their coupling, however, Lenny's desperate growl is the only fitting way to describe it. The coupling is a final, desperate attempt to connect in a near-future society in which connections are increasingly frail, shallow, and unreliable, where connections are, at best, a simulation.

Similarly, their coupling can be read as a futile effort to converge old and new media. Eunice later confides to her best friend: "I WANT to have a baby with him, even if things are really bad in the world. I think I'd be the happiest fairy in the forest if we were a real family someday" (199). It is as though Eunice suspects that the convergence is faulty unless it produces something vital. Yet, even her metaphor—the happiest fairy in the forest—is steeped in fantasy. Besides, Eunice's role in the intercourse is not much different than the scenes in which Lenny performs cunnilingus. Though her eyes were "wet and compassionate," Lenny explains that she "watched me do what I needed to do." Her participation is merely as an observer, watching Lenny try to force a connection. This

150

desperation is visceral in Lenny and Eunice's sudden awareness of their impermanence. Lenny writes: "When . . . she groaned with what I hoped was pleasure, I saw that there were at least two truths to my life. The truth of my existence and the truth of my demise." Similarly, as the coupling ends, Eunice bites Lenny's lip, repeating "Don't leave me Lenny . . . Don't please ever leave me" (168). Lenny, once again, recognizes his impending obsolescence, and Eunice argues against her unavoidable departure from Lenny. Their fleeting coupling is fueled by the desperate awareness of their incompatibility and their inevitable departure from each other.

The Rupture: Dead Äppäräts and a Longing for Family

The climax of the novel occurs when a riot breaks out in Manhattan, after Aziz— the homeless bus driver whom Lenny and Eunice previously gawked at in Central Part— was killed for protesting and setting fire to several Credit Poles. As news spread of the destruction in Manhattan, Lenny and Eunice hurriedly board a Staten Island ferry to return to the city. A missile strikes the opposite ferry, and Lenny's media friends, Noah and Amy, are killed in the explosion. Lenny describes the explosion's immediate aftermath in the final paragraph of his July 29 diary entry as "a moment of nonscreaming, of complete äppärät silence" (248). This is the start of the Rupture: a nation-wide loss of äppäräti connection. The äppäräti silence triggers a period of media dysfunction and disconnection. The gravity of this silence is compared to "moment of nonscreaming." It is ineffable and paralyzing. Most important is what the disconnection reveals about a society that has grown increasingly fluent in, and accustomed to, the äppärät. First, it reveals a faltering system of verbal communication. As the äppärät ceases to work, it

151

becomes clear that people have forgotten how to communicate without it. Second, in the absence of the äppärät, characters lose sense of who they are. Their histories have been cleared. When all one's data, including social rankings, credit scores, and online profiles are channeled through a single media device, the absence of that device leaves a profound gap in one's composited identity. The loss of communication and history ultimately culminate in an inability to connect with one another. Lenny and Eunice react to this disconnection with attempts to resituate themselves within the history of their families.

The first clue that the rupture has disrupted communication is in the novel's structure. In the spot where Eunice's GlobalTeens account should be, following Lenny's July 29 diary entry, there is another entry by Lenny. It is the only place in the novel where Eunice's account is omitted. The disruption of the novel's structure, which has alternated unperturbed between Lenny's handwritten diaries and Eunice's electronic GlobalTeens messages for two hundred and fifty pages, represents through form an ecology that is out of balance. The attempted congruity between Lenny's old media accounts and Eunice's new media accounts has failed. This disruption not only symbolizes a failure of the äppärät to transmit communication, but also exposes the tenuous structures of communication that have evolved in conjunction with the äppärät's rise. Communication has relied so exclusively upon the äppärät that in its absence, characters simply cease to connect.

Eunice's chapter is only skipped once; yet, when her chapters resume, each message is followed by an error message from GLOBALTEENS: "We are so TOTTALY sorry for the inconvenience. . . . Please be patient and the problem should resolve itself like whenever" (263). She is no longer able to contact her parents, sister, or friends. More

startling, however, is that in the absence of the äppärät, characters also cannot connect interpersonally, face-to-face. This disconnection reveals *not* a sudden rupture, but one that has evolved gradually beneath the shadow of the äppärät, and that only becomes apparent once the äppärät is disabled. It is a failure of language. The misspelled words and imprecision in the GlobalTeens error message —"TOTTALY" and "like whenever"—reveal a crumbling stratum of verbal communication that, prior to the failure of the äppärät, had heretofore gone unnoticed. It was masked by the features of the äppärät that deemphasized text by allowing people to connect without verbal communication, or by automatically translating indecipherable acronyms, such as Lenny's äppärät does during the FACing session (92).[25] According to Lenny, they no longer live in an age of literacy. During the Rupture, as Lenny watches Eunice struggle to read, he feels pity for her and explains that "Reading is difficult. People just aren't meant to read anymore. We're in a post-literate age. You know, a *visual age*." This is evidenced by the frequent spelling and grammar errors throughout the GlobalTeens pages, such as when GrillBitch confides, "It must suck to be the older sister in a family with no *mails* [emphasis added]" and Eunice refers to Tolstoy as "Tolsoy" and Freud as "Froid" (46, 144, 297). In this "post-literate" age, the dysfunctional communication system extends beyond a disdain for reading.

The failure of language is also evident through the characters' inability to communicate. When characters confide in one another, it is referred to "Verballing." Verballing is an intimate act, exclusive and regarded somewhat shamefully. In an early message to her best friend, GrillBitch, Eunice writes: "I need someone to verbal with and

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[25] While FACing, Lenny's äppärät automatically translates "RAG" and "DO" to "Rapidly aging geezer" and "Dick odor." (92).

[Global] Teens just ain't cutting it. I'm so confused" (44). By the end of the message, however, she's already apologizing: "God," she writes, "I'm sorry for all this verbal diarrhea" (45). Since characters rarely speak without the äppärät's mediation, verballing has become a shameful act. GrillBitch tries to reassure Eunice: "You know you can verbal me anytime day or night. . . . I'm so glad we can confide in each other, because the world sometimes feels so, like, I can't even describe it" (46). In their attempts at verballing, Eunice and Grillbitch, who have no problem talking gratuitously about porn, male anatomy, and their sexual exploits, are suddenly timid and reticent.[26] Verballing deteriorates into confusion and inarticulacy. Eunice is "so confused" and when her friend tries to reciprocate, she finds that "the world sometimes feels so, like, I can't even describe it." In short, verbal communication is a lost skill: they are reluctantly willing, yet unable to translate their pain and loneliness into words.

GrillBitch captures the devaluation of human connection through unmediated verbal communication at the end of her correspondence with Eunice. She writes: "The moment anyone gets near me or I get near anyone there's just this STATIC. Sometimes people verbal me and I just look at their mouth and it's like WHAT? What are you saying to me? How am I supposed to even verbal back and does it even matter what comes out?" (46). It is as though the äppärät, like a high definition screen, has replaced human interaction so precisely that any off-screen interaction appears blurry in comparison. It is no coincidence, then, that the only relationship that develops during the Rupture—the

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[26] The shame is also evident when, at the end of her message, GrillBitch follows a particularly reflective moment, with the following passage: "BTW, do they sell this brand of pop-off sheer panties called TotalSurrender in Italy? . . . You know my size, slut . . . Come back to sunny Cali! I think I get crotch itch when I'm on the pill. What is UP with that?" (46). In order to avoid appearing too sentimental and introspective, GrillBitch recovers her tough exterior through shopping inquiries, crude name calling, and oversharing.

only instance of two characters connecting on an emotional level—occurs between Eunice and Joshie. Not surprisingly, this connection occurs almost exclusively through an emergency äppärät line that Joshie has secured.

While the loss of connection reveals the devaluation of verbal communication, it also has larger implications for the characters' sense of identity. Throughout the novel, one's identity is so intrinsically tangled with the äppärät that removing it is like removing an essential organ: it makes a spectacle of the ways the body fails in the absence of that organ. As described at the beginning of this chapter, Lenny discovers in the absence of the äppärät an inability to connect. He writes: "My äppärät isn't connecting. I can't connect. . . . I can't connect in any meaningful way to anyone, even to you, diary." Lenny has transformed over the course of the novel. When he once craved only his wall of books and Eunice, he now admits: "My hands are itching for connection, I want to connect to my parents and to Vishnu and Grace . . . . But all I have is Eunice and my Wall of Books" (270). All Lenny has left is that which is corporeal, but for him, connection is no longer a physical act.

It is no coincidence, then, that during the Rupture, characters suddenly speak of their strong desires to exist within a family. The family unit provides the characters with a history and collective identity. It fixes a problem posed frequently throughout the novel: that Lenny must "develop a sense of nostalgia," Eunice experiences the "pain of living without history," and Joshie's technologically supplemented body "would ever long for a history" (23, 209, 222). Through progeny, the family unit situates the characters within a historical timeline. This history that will help them understand who they are. Community also becomes increasingly important. GrillBitch explains to Eunice: "I think this is the

155

time for us to forget who we are and to be part of our families" (201). She speaks of trading in their digital identities for an ancestral identity that reunites them with abandoned social and cultural implications, or as Eunice describes: a "Korean family with a Korean way of doing things" (297). In an attempt to create her own family, Eunice even admits that she wants to "have a baby" and start a family with Lenny" (199). Eunice and Lenny, both of whom have troubled relationships with their parents, even consider the possibility of fabricating a family. When Lenny takes Eunice to visit his boss, Joshie, he remarks: "The idea occurred to me that we could form a family, although I was unsure of what role I would play" (218). Only a few pages later, when Eunice meets up with her father and David, the leader of the riots at Tompkins Square, she remarks: "maybe this could be my family, without mom or Sally" (229).

Prior to the Rupture, one's family had been usurped by the digital identity procured by the äppärät in the form of ranking and shopping habits. The absence of the äppärät motivates them to reverse this process. The tension between one's digital and familial identity is described in one scene in which Lenny returns home to find Eunice drunk on the couch, staring at her blank äppärät. He writes: "She was whispering in English and Korean. '*Appa*, why?' she beseeched her father. Or maybe it was merely her nonfunctioning äppärät. I never realized the similarity between the device that ruled our world and the Korean word for 'father'" (260). This scene describes an inquiry of self. She beseeches both her father and her äppärät because in this novel they are the sources of her identity: her father represents Eunice's cultural and genetic code and the äppärät represents her digital identity (credit score, shopping habits, ranking, etc.). In the äppärät's absence, Eunice tries to reconnect with her family. In one failed message, she

writes "I need you right now, Mom" (263). She beseeches Lenny's boss to "find out if

my parents are okay" (267). She even laments her disappearing roots in another failed

message to her mother: "I know you raised me better than that. I know that if this were

Korea you'd figure out a way to help your parents no matter what the personal sacrafice

[sic]. I'm just not a good person" (266). Lenny, too, recognizes Eunice's longing to

connect to a real physical place and to a more vast history. While embracing her, he

experiences Eunice's thin connection to her family and culture. He writes: "She wailed

from a place so deep that I could only connect it with somewhere across the seas, and

from a time when our nations were barely formed. For the first time since we'd met, I

realized that Eunice Park, unlike others of her generation, was not completely ahistorical"

(261). Yet, the Rupture renders both sources of identity inaccessible: it has disabled

access to digital identity and in doing so, reveals the ruins of her historical identity.

Eunice's desire to reconnect with her family grows stronger as the political

problems in America escalate. This is because her experience of political upheaval and

social disconnection links her to her parents' immigration experience and the turmoil they

faced when leaving Korea.[27] Eunice is closest to them as she shares their experiences.

The dysfunction of the äppärät, for Eunice, is uprooting, much like her parents' literal

uprooting from Korea. Her identity is lost; she is cut off from her digital networks,

economic stability, shopping and ranking histories, and family. Both Eunice and her

father struggle to hold onto the cultural identity that they know. This shared experience

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[27] Comparing America to Korea, Eunice's mother explains that "Korea [is] now richer country than
America and also not have so much political problem . . . . Now even in Fort Lee we see tank on Center
Avenue. Very scary for me, like in Korea in the 1980 long time ago when there was Kwangju trouble and
many people die" (47).

manifests subconsciously (in her sleep and while intoxicated) as a tension that is depicted

by her one-sided arguments with her *appa*: her father and her äppärät.

Lenny also feels the pangs of his abandoned history, and he struggles to situate

himself into his parent's history. He confesses, "I missed my parents. In times of trouble,

the weak seek the strong" (277). His visit to his parents' house is rife with attempts to

situate himself within their family experience, though the incongruity is clear. His visit

occurs just after äppäräti connection was restored, which is described by Lenny as "a

time no one of my generation will ever forget" (283). When he arrives to his childhood

home, Lenny immediately recognizes that "My parents were starving" (289). In contrast,

Lenny is "clutching my relatively full belly." Literally, their starvation speaks to the

conditions during the Rupture, but symbolically it represents their waning presence on

Lenny's life. He struggles to help them, to be a part of their history. Driving through

town where an armed militia gathered near a popular restaurant, Lenny considers: "Was

this what Russia looked like after the Society Union collapsed? I tried, unsuccessfully, to

see the country around me not just through my father's eyes but through his *history*. I

wanted to be a part of a meaningful cycle with him, a cycle other than birth and death"

(290). His inability to imagine his father's experience belies the frailty of this cycle.

Furthermore, he describes his father's outfit as "denims, old Reebok sneakers that I had

bequeathed him, an Ocean Pacific T-shirt . . . (also from the Lenny Abramov teenage

collection)" (290). That his father is wearing hand-me-down clothes from Lenny suggests

a sort of role reversal, in which Lenny is the progenitor, and his father, the child. Their

reversal of roles continues as Lenny takes them shopping and advises them on their

finances and eating habits. He admonishes them: "You've lost all your savings and

pension and now you're scared to walk past a Credit Pole. When he says 'the boat is full'

he's talking about you, you know" (293). Lenny acts in the role of his parent's patriarch.

This reversal of roles reflects how far removed Lenny is as their son.

Yet, at the end of the Rupture, both Lenny and Eunice have epiphanies regarding

their identity. Their assertions of identity occur within three pages of each other,

culminating in something of a narrative climax: the "I Am" statement. Eunice writes: "I

miss Italy sometimes. I miss being a complete foreigner and having no ties to anyone.

America might be gone completely soon, but I was never really an American. It was all

pretending. I was always a Korean girl from a Korean family with a Korean way of doing

things, and I'm proud of what that means. It means that, unlike so many people around

me, I know who I am" (297). Similarly, Lenny reflects: "Who was I? A secular

progressive? Perhaps. A liberal, whatever that means anymore, maybe. But basically . . .

little more than my parents' son" (294). Yet, the statements are unconvincing. They

suggest that Lenny and Eunice have finally connected to others in a meaningful way, and

in doing so, now understand something about who they are. The reason the statements are

unconvincing is because they occur in a vacuum, in a state of disconnection. Eunice's "I

Am" statement appears in a Global Teens message to herself. Without äppäräti

connection, she cannot send it to anyone. In the same message she uses this assertion to

justify her breakup with Lenny so that she can become "a lucky version of my mother

with Joshie" (297). As we learn in the novel's final pages, however, Eunice does not stay

long with Joshie. In fact, despite her longing to be connected, she also goes abroad once

more and is last referenced as living north of London (329). She is once again a

"foreigner" with "no ties to anyone" (297). Lenny's "I Am" statement also occurs in a

159

"the spotless downstairs bedroom" (293). He does not even stay in his childhood

bedroom, which is earlier revealed to be upstairs. When he visited his childhood bedroom

earlier in the novel, he is flooded by a rush of memories, of "the youthful beatings

administered by my father, my mother's anxieties and manias, my own teenage

sullenness" (137). While the memories unleashed by his upstairs childhood bedroom

affirm his position within his family, the downstairs bedroom is "spotless." There are no

memories attached to this room. Lenny describes the night as "restless, sexless" and he

feels "lonely." In his loneliness, he even tries to GlobalTrace Eunice, but discovers that,

after tracing her to "the Upper West Side . . . her signal just disappeared" (293). In every

way Lenny is cut off, and it is in this state that he grasps on to the nearest marker of his

identity: that he is "little more than my parents' son" (294). This realization, however, is

as ephemeral as his visit. The reader is reminded of Lenny's initial reflection on living

forever, in which he debates with himself whether our progeny allows us to live on past

death. He responds: "Utter nonsense. The children are our future only in the most narrow,

transitive sense. They are our future until they too perish" (3). Quoting from Whitney

Houston's "The Greatest Love of All," he writes: "the song's next line, 'Teach them well

and let them lead the way,' encourages an adult's relinquishing of selfhood in favor of

future generations" (4). Lenny at the end of the novel does not seem to have progressed

far from this view. He may, in a state of loneliness and disconnection, assert that he is his

parents' son, but the scene that builds up to this assertion tells a different story, one in

which Lenny is severed from his parents' history.

Silence, Black and Complete.

In the notes at the end of the novel, Lenny describes himself as a man without social connections and without a discernible, traceable identity. He is both malleable and invisible. Eunice and Joshie have left him, and his parents have died. He changes his name "from Lenny Abramov to Larry Abraham," explaining that "following my parents' death, I could not stomach the idea of bearing the name they had given me and the surname that had followed them across the ocean" (328). He also realizes that "*I am going to die*. Nothing of my personality will remain. The light switch will be turned off. My life, my entirety, will be lost forever" (304). Furthermore, Lenny has "left New York [to live] in Toronto, Stability-Canada, for the better part of a decade, where I changed my worthless passport to a Canadian one." From Canada, he returns to Italy, to the "Valdarno Valley of the Tuscan Free State." It is a place with "less data, less youth, and where old people like myself were not despised simply for being old" (328). Though the description sounds grim, Lenny is back to the place where the novel began. It is a return, of sorts, but not a regression. Lenny is transformed: he is willingly disconnected from the äppäräti grid that threatened to consume his identity. Also, he is no longer disillusioned by the prospect of immortality, of leaving his corporeal self behind. He simply exists, without the need of an äppärät to verify this fact. In a way, Lenny has become like the man on the plane from the beginning of the novel, only now he is free to register nothing, to be without record.

However, Lenny is not entirely disconnected. In the novel's final chapter, the reader learns that the book she had been reading all along is the published version of Eunice's and Lenny's correspondence. Lenny's life, his relationship with Eunice, is

preserved in print form, just as his beloved Chekhov stories. It is both the "text you see on your screen," as well as the pages you turn in your hands (327). It is a collaboration between Lenny and Eunice, between print and digital. Lenny explains, "it never occurred to me that *any* text would *ever* find a new generation of readers," yet, a reviewer calls the book "literature as it once *was*" (327). It is something from the past, remediated for the present. *Super Sad True Love Story*, then, is a product of the tension between old and new media. Its various styles—which oscillate between handwritten lists, instant chats, email messages, and advertisements—describe a diverse media ecology that had been missing throughout most of the novel. Though the final product of their accounts appears in physical book form, the final chapter imagines their existence in multiple media forms.

In the novel's closing scene, Lenny is at a party in Tuscan when "two young Cinecittá actresses just arrived from Rome. Their arrival is like a reprisal of Eunice's entrance into the party at Fabrizia's several hundred pages earlier. The crowd bends toward them. Lenny soon learns that one of them "had just been charged with playing Eunice Park in a new Cinecittá video spray of my diaries" (330). Once more, the image of a diverse media ecology emerges as Lenny's diaries, which have been published as a book, are now being produced as a film. The actresses quickly become the focus of the party and create a spectacle. They begin acting out scenes with mock sincerity. After enduring their spectacle for as long as he could, Lenny interrupts them. He explains: "There was only one way to stop the young actress's diatribe. 'They're dead,' I lied. . . . 'They didn't survive.' And I laid out a scenario for the final days of Lenny Abramov and Eunice Park more gruesome than any of the grisly infernos splashed on the walls of the neighboring cathedral." After years of having one's information accessible and evaluated

and used coercively by everyone within äppäräti range, Lenny's lie is an attempt to write his own story: to create his own fiction. As such, it is a decision to no longer be ranked according to other people's version of his story. After his eruption, he writes: "For a while at least, no one said anything, and I was blessed with what I needed the most. Their silence, black and complete" (331). Lenny has created a rupture on his own terms. By lying about his and Eunice's fates, he is able to preserve his version of their connection.

Chapter 4

"You Will Hold this Book in Your Hands":

Topography, Corporeality, and Media Coupling in Robin Sloan's *Mr. Penumbra's*

24-Hour Bookstore

Robin Sloan, author of *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* (2012), periodically

sends emails to a group he calls "the Society of the Double Dagger." The Society is

something like a fan group, and the messages describe new work, media

recommendations, and musings about the intersections between print and new media. In a

recent message from the Society of the Double Dagger, in which Sloan announces the

publication of a forthcoming novel (available in only one year!), Sloan describes an

aspect of book publishing. He writes: "*Penumbra* taught me patience . . . the whole point

is to produce something that operates on a timescale longer than that available on the

internet. *Penumbra* came out 3.5 years ago, and even now—this month, this week,

today—people are picking it up for the first time. The pace of book publishing isn't slow;

it's deliberate" ("Official"). In an Internet age in which media distributors are burdened

by the expectation of instant access, the production of books seems to creep along at a

glacial pace. It is counterintuitive to an instant access culture. Yet, according to Sloan, its

slowness is not a detriment. It is a unique tool of the medium.

Sloan refers to himself as a "media inventor," which he defines as someone

"compelled to make the content *and* the container" ("About"). He is concerned with how

the container (the delivery technology, such as a codex, television, or the smartphone)

reaches unique readerships, creates different expectations, and fosters new reading practices. Sloan tests the boundaries of a media inventor by bringing together elements from various media, such as in his short story, "Julie Rubicon," which exists entirely on Facebook. In his email, Sloan explains: "I was betting that a certain kind of story could 'hack into' the sharing impulse on Facebook." Sure enough, the story "spidered out through the social graph to reach about 250,000 people." Yet, "that crowd of 250,000 all arrived in the space of about a week . . . and then… the internet moved on." The story now is "hardly being read at all. Facebook and Twitter and all the rest of them have very few mechanisms to highlight things that aren't brand new. It's a deep structural problem." Sloan continues: "contrast with libraries and bookstores: highlighting things that aren't brand new is what [books] *do*." As such, Sloan argues that there is a need for instant access media *as well as* media that "operate on a timescale longer than that available on the internet" ("Official"). Sloan's work investigates intriguing ways in which old and new media enter into symbiotic relationships. These media retain individual characteristics and protocols that shape expectations and practices, but also merge to foster new expectations and practices. This dissertation chapter investigates *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* in order to ask: in what forms do these symbiotic relationships exist? More specific, what is produced from the coupling between print and new media? Between media and user?

The media ecology in *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* reflects a diverse array of symbiotic relationships between old and new media. The novel tells the story of protagonist, Clay Jannon, who is hired at Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore. Clay quickly discovers that the mysterious texts in the back of the store—called codex vitae—

are encrypted, and the bookstore is part of a secret society devoted to decoding the codex vitae, Aldus, Manutius, one of the earliest figures in the history of the printing press. The society, called the Unbound Spine, believes his codex contains the secret to eternal life. To gain entrance into the society, one must decode several codex vitae and eventually produce their own encrypted life story. Members work tirelessly to decode the codex vitae of Aldus Manutius. The novel's main source of conflict arises from the methods used to crack the code. Many of the society members hold fast to the belief that the methods used should be limited to those available during the days of Aldus Manutius. This means no technology that was not available prior to 1515. As such, it took the society decades to finally introduce electric lights into the reading room. Anyone who violates this rule will have their codex vitae burned, and be banished from the prospect of eternal life. Clay, however, uses a computer program to solve the first puzzle, and with the help of his friends, including employer Mr. Penumbra and Kat, his romantic interest from Google, he scans a copy of Manutius's codex vitae and brings it back to Google's campus to crack. Though Google's technology fails at cracking the code, Clay still solves it using an unusual array of old and new media technologies.

Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore bears the markings of a media ecology in transition. It describes an ecology that evolves through the productive tension between old and new media. Media are not in competition, and print is not on the verge of obsolescence. Rather, old media are adapted to fulfill social needs that are vacated or created by the presence of new media. Often they function in conjunction with new media, such as with the e-reader or audiobook. Furthermore, the novel's frequent depictions of media coupling—the convergence of various media—reflect a shifting

166

perception of corporeality. Old media are often inseparable from their physical

technologies. The novel, for example, is stored, distributed, and exhibited within the

codex. This link between media content and its technology privileges corporeality. It

gives the media a physical presence. New media, however, are more often transferable:

they flow more fluidly from one device to another. Hardware limitations can be

addressed simply by accessing the media from a different device. As such, the physical

structure bears less upon the media content.

So, what does this mean? For starters, it contributes to changes in communal

expectations and how people interact. Drawing from an argument I make in my second

chapter, in the new media ecology, social interaction relies less upon corporeality.

Staying *connected* and keeping in *touch* utilizes the language of corporeality, but no

longer requires physical presence. The appropriation of the lexicon of tactility by new

media experiences masks the absence of physical interaction and fosters new

expectations for social interaction. Technologies such as video conferencing and social

networks further reduce the necessity of physical presence. This shifting perception of

corporeality is registered throughout Sloan's novel, particular in reference to physical

technologies, the human body, and media topographies. As such, the novel reflects upon

media topographies: how the accumulation of human knowledge is archived. This has

been a central concern of new media studies since the mid twentieth century when

computer scientist, Vannevar Bush explained, "publication has been extended far beyond

our ability to make real use of the record. The summation of human experience is being

expanded at a prodigious rate, and the means we use for threading through the

consequent maze to the momentarily important item is the same as was used in the days

of square rigged ships" (Bush 38). New media scholars such as Janet H. Murray argue that the development of new media is largely a response to the problem of archiving human knowledge and experience.[28] In Sloan's novel, these are the markings of a media ecology in transition: print and new media enter into a volatile, yet productive relationship, and perceptions of corporeality begin to shift.

(Techno-)Genesis: Tension between Conflicting Media Topographies

Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore opens upon an economy in tumultuous transition. Clay writes: "After less than a year of employment, I was jobless. . . . People were living in motels and tent cities. The whole economy suddenly felt like a game of musical chairs" (5). The difficult transition also extended to the media ecology. Clay's friends had "already designed world-famous websites or advanced touch-screen interfaces . . . worked at Apple." Clay, on the other hand, had created a logo for an upstart bagel shop" and his portfolio consisted of "an art-school thesis on Swiss typography" and "a three-page website" (5-6). Even though these were the days when Clay "rarely touched paper," it turns out that it was "paper that saved [him]" (3, 6). There is a stark discrepancy between those still stuck in the print age, and those in the age of new media. Sloan uses this transition to establish a ripe setting to describe technogenesis.

In *How We Think* (2012), N. Katherine Hayles describes the concept of technogenesis as "the idea that humans and technics have coevolved together." To explain how technogenesis occurs in the contemporary moment, Hayles refers to two modifications. The first is the "Baldwin effect," which suggests that the spread of a

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[28] The evolution of these archival structures, from print to new media, according to Murray, are a result of "the increased complexity of human consciousness and the failure of linear media to capture the structures of our thought" (Murray 3).

genetic mutation "is accelerated when the species reengineers its environment in ways that make the mutation more adaptive." The second is the occurrence of epigenetic changes, which are "changes initiated and transmitted through the environment rather than through the genetic code" (10). The environment has a profound impact on human evolution; not only does it make genetic mutations more adaptive, but it also speeds up the process of evolution through epigenetic changes. Hayles continues: "Because the dynamic involves causation that operates through epigenetic changes, which occur much faster than genetic mutations, evolution can now happen much faster, especially in environments that are rapidly transforming with multiple factors pushing in similar directions" (10-11). Epigenetic changes, brought about by changes in the environment, actually change the shape of human brains by fashioning new neural pathways. Hayles writes: "research indicates that the small habitual actions associated with web interactions—clicking the mouse, moving a cursor, etc.—may be extraordinarily effective in retraining (or more accurately, repurposing) our neural circuitry, so that the changes are not only psychological but physical as well." (2). She elaborates: "recent work in neurophysiology, neurology, and cognitive science . . . has shown that the brain, central nervous system, and peripheral nervous system are endowed with a high degree of neural plasticity. . . . even into old age." These changes frequently occur from interactions with digital media. "Digital media . . . embedded in the environment," Hayles argues "push us in the direction of faster communication, more intense and varied informational streams, more integration of humans and intelligent machines, and more interactions of language with code. These environmental changes have significant neurological consequences, many of which are now becoming evident in young people and to a lesser degree in

169

almost everyone who interacts with digital media on a regular basis" (11). Essentially, Hayles argues that existing within an environment populated by digital media essentially transforms the neural circuitry of one's brains.

In *How We Think,* Hayles argues from the perspective of the Humanities, which is characterized by "mindsets formed by print, nurtured by print, and enabled and restrained by print" (1). Her research theorizes ways for the humanities to productively integrate, rather than resist digital media. Sloan's novel, which was published the same year, begins at the other end of the spectrum. The novel begins with an environment already embedded with the prevailing digital technologies of the early 2010s—internet, mobility, smart phones—and its characters' minds are coevally formed alongside these technologies. Print media is a specter. Yet, as many characters discover, centuries of print culture has had a massive impact in shaping human thought, even in the digital age. The recurring challenge, then, is in determining how print culture's practices, values, and structures can merge symbiotically with the new protocols of new media.

Clay Jannon, the novel's protagonist, is a genesis figure in the early twenty-first century media ecology. His name connotes the physical element of clay: it is mutable, a composite of water and earth. Furthermore, it is the substance from which the first human was crafted according to several creation myths. Similarly, Clay is a composite of his own media ecology: a web designer, online and social media marketer, and lover of new media. As a genesis figure, Clay announces a beginning. It is the beginning of the novel, and, recently unemployed, it is the beginning of a new life for Clay. Within the burgeoning new media ecology, the origin is a sense that a new status quo is developing. Yet, these beginnings are unpredictable. Despite frequent innovations in new media, the

imprint of five hundred years of print culture is etched into the social and cultural framework. The uncertainty about how these media interact and merge is formally represented in the novel's beginning, which starts with a stutter. In the opening two paragraphs, Clay ascends a ladder in the bookstore, "holding on for dear life . . . searching" for "the book I'm looking for." Then, following a block of white space, there is a new beginning: "My name is Clay Jannon" (3). The ladder and the bookstore do not appear again for several pages. Each scene portrays Clay engaging in distinct media landscapes. In the first, he is perched atop a ladder, reaching for a book; in the second, he lays on a couch surfing the web. The remainder of the novel consists of Clay searching for the places in which these contrasting media landscapes intersect. Sloan begins with these scenes to emphasize two important characteristics of the media: their informational grid (how they organize information according to space) and their corporeality (physical presence).

In the first scene, which takes place in Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour bookstore, Sloan emphasizes vertical space. He writes: "Lost in the shadows of the shelves, I almost fall off the ladder. I am exactly halfway up. The floor of the bookstore is far below me, the surface of a planet I've left behind. The tops of the shelves loom high above, and it's dark up there—the books are packed in close, and they don't let any light through. The air might be thinner, too. I think I see a bat" (3). In this passage, the book is depicted as an archival tool: it is only one unit of myriad other units that stack boundlessly high, representing five hundred years of print culture and the staggering accumulation of human knowledge. All the spatial details refer to only two directions: up or down. The verticality refers to depth over breadth. The archive is exhaustive, yet it continues to

171

tunnel deeper and climb higher. An esoteric quality exists in the heights of the shelves, the lack of light, the loneliness, save for a specter of a bat.

Furthermore, the passage emphasizes the epistemological uncertainty of the archive's limits by comparing the ground to a "planet I've left behind" and the shelves above as too high to perceive. The epistemological uncertainty of the quantity of books—of how high the shelves reach—foreshadows the conversation that Clay has with a Raj, an employee at Google. Raj explains:

> Old books are a real problem for us. Old knowledge in general. We call it OK. . . . Did you know that ninety-five percent of the internet was only created in the last five years? But we know that when it comes to all human knowledge, the ratio is just the opposite—in fact, OK accounts for most things that most people know, and have ever known. . . . Where's the OK? Well, it's in old books, for one thing. (86).

Clay's description of the towering shelves in the novel's opening paragraph illustrates the overwhelming influence that books still hold in the contemporary media ecology. In *Mr. Penumbra*, books are not a waning media or a thing of the past. Rather, they account for almost "all human knowledge." Furthermore, they are rooted deep in history. Compared to the internet's recent explosion of growth, Raj explains that the vast majority of information in books has accumulated slowly across history. The implication is that the slow process of book production, distribution, and consumption forms the reader's reading practices according to an the archive that is different from that of the internet. Unlike the internet, which according to Raj accumulated ninety-five percent of its content in the last five years, the book accumulates slowly and adds to human knowledge over

172

time. Readers can encounter centuries-old material for the first time, in its original form. As Sloan described in his email to the Society of the Double Dagger, the slowness of book distribution is deliberate. Furthermore, it archives information within a codexed form that is isolating; it does not overwhelm or distract with other media competing for attention.

Corporeality is also emphasized in this passage through repeated references to the human body. Sloan writes: "I am holding on for dear *life*, one *hand* on the ladder, the other on the *lip* of a shelf, *fingers* pressed white. My *eyes* trace a line above my *knuckles*, searching the *spines*—and there I spot it, the book I'm looking for [emphasis added]" (3). Surrounded by books, Sloan heavy-handedly emphasizes the corporeal body. He not only describes Clay's physical straining, but also anthropomorphizes the books and shelves, as though they form a second body atop the ladder with Clay. The features of these bodies are at work in a coeval process of retrieving information from this archive. It is strenuous and collaborative. Furthermore, there is urgency in the tactility of this process. His grip on the ladder and shelf are acts of self-preservation: he is "holding on for dear life." Through this opening scene, Sloan asserts the hold that print culture still has upon contemporary society, and in doing so, characterizes print according to unfathomable heights and depths, as well as corporeality. In the next scene, the features of the media ecology are quite different.

The second scene describes Clay as he browses the internet. Compared to the act of retrieving a book, Clay's experience of reading on the internet is remarkably different. Following the break after the description of the bookstore, Clay introduces himself: "My name is Clay Jannon and those were the days when I rarely touched paper" (3). The

tactile qualities of paper is noted, as is its rarity in Clay's life. Sloan continues with a description of his media habits. This passage describes a starkly contrasting illustration of the internet archive and the corporeality of new media. Sloan writes:

> I'd sit at my kitchen table and start scanning help-wanted ads on my laptop, but then a browser would blink and I'd get distracted and follow a link to a long magazine article about genetically modified wine grapes. Too long, actually, so I'd add it to my reading list. Then I'd follow another link to a book review. I'd add the review to my reading list, too, then download the first chapter of the book—third in a series about vampire police. Then, help-wanted ads forgotten, I'd retreat to the living room, put my laptop on my belly, and read all day. (4)

The internet, like the book, unveils a vast archive of information. Yet, the organization of this archive is quite different. Where the bookstore is vertically organized, the internet's grid sprawls horizontally. Clay's progress across the internet's grid stretches outward, as though across the grid of a city. He follows the links through a series of beginnings: "I'd follow a link. . . . Then I'd follow another link." His movement is directed by a surplus of links, all accessible within the single device of his laptop. The books, on the other hand, are self-contained: they allow a tunnel-like focus undistracted by a new link. Therefore, instead of moving deeper into a subject (consider deep as a vertical direction), Clay moves laterally. Literally, the tabs on a web browser stretch horizontally from left to right across a browser window. As he follows links, Clay's attention moves from side to side across the screen. Figuratively, he never completes an article. Instead, he starts one, and then gets "distracted." When another article is "too long, he "[adds] it to my reading list."

Clay briefly becomes interested in a book—an act that foreshadows the coupling of the

book and new media—but only downloads a single chapter. As he moves laterally across

his browser window, his search lacks depth. He abandons each link for a new beginning.

Furthermore, Clay's physical posture within the internet's grid is supine. In the

bookstore, he stretched vertically from toes to fingers, straining to reach a book. His

movement was deliberate and physical. Browsing the internet, however, Clay moves

laterally from the kitchen to the living room, and then rests in a supine posture, the laptop

perched atop his belly. All of his motions describe a horizontal sprawl. He does not move

upward; he "retreats." He is not urgent; rather, he "[has] a lot of free time." Through

these opening scenes, Sloan highlights the organization of each medium. It is not an

attempt to pit them against one another, but to recognize the differences and tension that

exist between these organization forms and to emphasize the features of each: one that

caters to depth, and another that caters to abundance and accessibility. Sloan's novel

seeks to resolve this tension by imagining ways that the book and new media can be

coupled.

Corporeality and the Topography of Reading

Throughout *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore,* the corporeality of a text is

valued. Clay describes the symbol that marks the front of Mr. Penumbra's actual 24-Hour

bookstore as "two hands, perfectly flat, rising out of an open book" (8). Elsewhere, Clay

and Kat upload an image of the symbol to a computer program in order to crowd source

the location of another bookstore similar to Penumbra's (The Reading Room in New

York City, which is led by the First Reader, Corvina). Before long, a chime emits from

the computer and the image appears: "etched into the stone, gray against gray, there it is: two hands, open like a book. It's tiny—they aren't any bigger than real hands" (122). The symbol draws attention to the tactile nature of print; it is a medium that must be navigated manually, with the physical cooperation of its user. Furthermore, the symbol of hands *rising out of* the book—as opposed to a book resting in a pair of hands—suggests that there is something corporeal about the act of reading itself.

The relationship between tactility and reading has been frequently studied in recent years. One such article, from a 2013 issue of *Scientific American,* quotes developmental psychologist and cognitive scientist, Maryanne Wolf, as saying "There is physicality in reading." The article suggests, "the human brain may also perceive a text in its entirety as a kind of physical landscape. When we read, we construct a mental representation of the text, in which meaning is anchored to structure." This representation is compared to "the mental maps we create of terrain—such as mountains and trails—and of man-made physical spaces, such as apartments and offices" (Jabr). The interpretation of the text's meaning is tied to its physical characteristics. The structure allows the reader to spatially visualize the argument or narrative as it unfolds. A physical book allows the reader to *explore* the text, rather than to steamroll through it. Furthermore, the reader can effortlessly flip to previous pages, and also to look forward, perhaps to the end, or to search for clues about particular characters or setting changes. Ferris Jabr continues:

> In most cases, paper books have more obvious topography than onscreen
> text. An open paperback presents a reader with two clearly defined
> domains—the left and right pages—and a total of eight corners with which
> to orient oneself. A reader can focus on a single page of a paper book

without losing sight of the whole text: one can see where the book begins

and ends and where one page is in relate to those borders. One can even

feel the thickness of the pages read in one hand and pages to be read in the

other. (Jabr)

The relationship between touch and reading is paramount. By use of her hands, the reader

is a direct part of the medium's functions, from flipping its pages, bookmarking locations,

searching for specific text, and even through annotation. Digital text, on the other hand,

requires software and an interface in order to be readable by the user. The reader is

alienated from even the most basic functions. Software and interface must always

mediate for the reader, who is often ignorant of the many processes that occur when a

screen is swiped, a term is searched, or a passage is annotated with digital mark-up tools.

Perhaps more profound is the distance between the reader and the text itself, which exists

as binary code until the software translates it, only for the time it is on screen before

being stored once again as binary. As such, the original source of the text is always

obscured from the reader. Furthermore, digital texts have no physical properties to

distinguish them from each other. On a Kindle, *War and Peace* weighs as much as *The

Heart of Darkness*. While some onscreen texts are paginated, more frequently in e-

readers, these pages are not fixed; they are automatically scaled according to several

factors, including the size of the font and the orientation of the device (landscape or

portrait). Text within the codex, on the other hand, becomes a physical object at the

moment of printing. Page numbers cannot shift, and when the codex is placed on its side,

text cannot be reoriented.

The corporeal structure of the book offers the reader a landscape to explore. Its navigability and fixity within a corporeal medium invites the reader to read deeply within a single text. This isn't to say, however, that the organization of information within new media, including electronic texts, does not possess a landscape of its own, which itself fosters unique reading and navigation habits. According to a 2005 study from San Jose State University, "people reading on screens take a lot of shortcuts—they spend more time browsing, scanning and hunting for keywords compared with people reading on paper, and are more likely to read a document once, and only once" (Jabr). This description of reading from a screen calls to mind the novel's opening scene of Clay, skipping through articles and books on the internet. Rather than articulating the qualities of digital reading as negative features, however, Robin Sloan identifies the unique role of digital text, and more generally, the organization of information within the new media ecology. Each medium has a unique topography and in *Mr. Penumbra*, the question is not which one is better, or whether one will usurp the other, but in what ways do they converge? He recognizes that the limitations of the codex—its unilateral navigability, the inability to link almost endlessly to related texts—become the strengths of new media, just as the limitations of new media texts—distracted reading, ephemerality, distance between the user and the medium's processes—emphasize the strength of the codex. Both print and new media offer unique geographies and foster unique reading habits. The transitioning media ecology in *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* is marked by the tension between these two representational geographies.

One way that Sloan delineates the topographical features of each media is through the physical elements of cities. Two recurring motifs throughout the novel are vertical

178

height (as depicted by Clay's navigation of the bookstore) and wide open spaces (as depicted through Clay's navigation of the web). Verticality evokes focus and depth; it is indicative of the great feat of five hundred years of print culture, and also of the difficulty inherent in navigating such an accumulation of human knowledge. The sprawl of wide-open spaces evokes possibility, democracy, and collaboration. It archives a surplus of content, but does so within a structure that is navigable. As such, each of these characteristics describes enabling and limiting features of the medium. In his description of New York City and San Francisco, Sloan imagines different ways that these topographies merge.

Sloan emphasizes the corporeality of a text by embedding its physical qualities into the topography of the novel's landscape settings. For example, books, bookstores, and those who deal books are always characterized as skinny, tall, or narrow. Mr. Penumbra is "a man, tall and skinny like one of the ladders" (8). The bookstore is "a tall, skinny box full of smaller boxes" (41). Much later, when Clay finds Penumbra's codex vitae, it is "tall and skinny, with golden letters spaces out along the spine" (182). New York is also characterized as tall and skinny. When Clay and Kat's plane descends upon New York City, Kat, who has never been to New York, remarks that "I didn't realize it was so skinny" (126). Once they find the Reading Room, they wait in the long and narrow Central park, "sitting quietly on a bench in the skinny city" (126). The old city of New York, a hub of the publishing world, is a constant reminder of the physicality of the codex. Each of the characters in this scene—Kat the Google employee, Neel the programmer, and Clay the web-designer—attempt to fit in by fumbling around with print artifacts. Clay alternates "pages of *The Guide to Central Park Birds*" which he purchased

from the JFK bookstore while "Neel is sketching on a little notepad, drawing curvy babes with curvy swords." Kat, on the other hand, "bought a *New York Times* but couldn't figure out how to operate it, so now she's fiddling with her phone" (126). As innovators and architects of new media, they are out of their element. The environment around them follows a different organizing structure.

Sloan also uses the topography of New York to emphasize the depth and focus of the codex. The codex—the medium that contains and distributes most of what Raj calls "Old Knowledge,"—represents "most things that most people know, and have ever known" (Sloan 86). To illustrate this, Kat and Neel get into an argument about the complexity of the New York sidewalk. Kat observes that the city is "so small but there are so many people . . . like fish. Or birds or ants, I don't know. Some superorganism." In response, Neel argues that "the suburban mind cannot comprehend the emergent complexity of a New York sidewalk." Though Kat claims to be "pretty good with complexity," Neel counters: "You're thinking it's just an agent-based simulation, and everybody out here follows a pretty simple set of rules . . . and if you can figure out those rules, you can model it" (127-28). As she agrees, he interrupts her: "You could never hold it all in memory. No computer's big enough." Neel argues that not even Google's "Big Box," which contains copies of "the web . . . Every video on YouTube . . . Everybody's email, and upon which "everything at Google runs," is big enough (83). "'This box'—Neel stretches out his hands, encompasses the sidewalk, the park, the streets beyond—'is bigger'" (128). Sloan is criticizing the representational ability of even the most advanced computer systems. The representation of a city by using topographical coordinates and rules will always be lacking; something more complex—nuance,

180

subtlety, ethos—cannot be captured by a computer program. Arguably, since New York

is topographically compared to the codex, Sloan suggests that this print media, with its

depth and accumulation of human knowledge is more suitable for representing nuance

and subtlety. This description also describes ways in which the book and the computer

seem incompatible. The city runs according to an operating system vastly different from

what Clay and his friends are used to. It operates according to a logic of complexity that

is the result of layers stacked upon layers of written record, accumulated over hundreds

of years. Yet, the potential and the need for compatibility are quite clear.

Though Sloan describes the codex as possessive of depths of human knowledge

and able to capture subtlety, his description of New York implies esotericism and

isolation. When Clay breaks into the Reading Room to scan Aldus Manutius's codex

vitae—using a makeshift scanner constructed from cardboard and disposable cameras—

he describes it as "heavy grids of inscrutable symbols," and considers that "maybe it is

my own limitation that's getting to me. Maybe it's the fact that I can't understand what

I'm scanning" (179). The codices that Clay encounters are subtle and deep, but they are

also impenetrable. They resist the user. Clay has an epiphany: "Turning the pages of this

encoded codex, I realize that the books I love most are like open cities, with all sorts of

ways to wander in. This thing is a fortress with no front gate. You're meant to scale the

walls, stone by stone" (180). New York, like the codex Clay scans, is isolated. Literally,

Manhattan is an island. Furthermore, the Secret Library of the Unbroken Spine is a

subterranean reading room, blasted out of the bedrock. Clay must break in during the

middle of the night to gain access, and once there, he describes himself "standing alone in

a freezing pitch-black subterranean vault" (179). A shaking and roaring noise terrifies

him, but it turns out to be "the subway, cruising through the bedrock next door" (179). In Sloan's description of the codex through the topographical features of New York, the codex implies isolation. The accumulation of human knowledge is a subterranean maze of tunnels too complex to navigate.

Whereas New York is described according to the physical features of the codex, San Francisco's topography is a hybrid of vertical and sprawling space. This hybridity represents the tension between print and new media, which Sloan establishes early in the novel. After wasting too much time searching help wanted ads on the internet, and then wasting the day reading half-articles about grapes and vampires, Clay claims that "It was paper that saved me." He continues: "It turned out that I could stay focused on job hunting if I got myself away from the internet, so I would print out a ream of help-wanted ads, drop my phone in a drawer, and go for a walk. . . . This routine did lead me to a job, though not in the way I'd expected" (6). Even this description of how paper "saved" him describes collaboration between print and new media. The ads are mined from the internet, and then materialized in print form. This process allows Clay to establish boundaries that utilize each medium as a tool to address a specific task: the internet to cast a wide net and gather information, and the paper to keep him focused. The unexpected results describe the productive tension between media forms as unpredictable. In the section titled "Media Coupling," this chapter will scrutinize several examples of media coupling and emphasize the unpredictability of the process.

The topography of San Francisco also emphasizes verticality, but its physical features have a different effect. Verticality in New York is often quantified by depth, such as in the examples of the subway tunnels and subterranean reading room. In San

Francisco, however, it is described according to heights, such as in the following passage that describes Clay's bipedal ventures through the city:

> San Francisco is a good place for walks if your legs are strong. The city is a tiny square punctuated by steep hills and bounded on three sides by water, and as a result, there are surprise vistas everywhere. You'll be walking along, minding your own business with a fistful of printouts, and suddenly the ground will fall away and you'll see straight down to the bay . . . . Looming behind it all, if you're facing the right direction, you'll see the rusty ghost of the Golden Gate Bridge. (6-7)

It is difficult to ignore the city's steep hills and the vanishing and reappearing views of the ground below. The description recalls the physical straining and vertical emphasis of the bookstore in the novel's opening scene, in which "the floor of the bookstore is far below [Clay]" and he is "holding on for dear life" (3). Walking the streets of San Francisco, like climbing the shelves of Penumbra's bookstore, Clay is elevated far above the ground below. On the streets, "the ground will fall away and you'll see straight down to the bay" (6). Unlike the novel's portrayal of New York's subterranean topography, the heights of San Francisco provide Clay with breadth of perspective. Just as the books he loves are open cities with all sorts of ways to wander in," San Francisco's vistas offer sweeping horizontal views, including a glimpse of the city's main access point to the north: the Golden Gate Bridge. When Sloan identifies the city as "bounded on three sides by water," he draws emphasis to the fact that, unlike Manhattan, it is not an island. Its connection to the mainland is a southern sprawl into Silicon Valley, through Palo Alto and San Jose.

183

This passageway into Silicon Valley is important because it symbolizes the merging of the literary landscape with the sprawling grid of new media. The heights of a "tiny city punctuated by steep hills" usher into a valley known renowned for its media technology companies. The evolution of this merging media landscape is further depicted as Clay "followed one strange vista down a line of steep stair-stepped sidewalks . . . and watched seafood restaurants fade into nautical engineering firms and then social media startups" (7). This evolution of San Francisco's industries illustrates a city formed by the old and new. Clay, who rarely touches paper, and who has grown accustomed to the topography and practices of the internet is disoriented by this physical topography that merges vertical space *alongside* the sprawling topography of the internet.

As Clay approaches the bookstore, he grows more and more disoriented. The disorientation is a result of finding himself on a new topographical grid. Literally, he is in an unfamiliar part of town. Figuratively, he is entering into a new media landscape, one that explores the intersection between print and new media. The tension exists like a growing pain: productive, challenging, and illusory. In *How We Think*, Hayles addresses "mindsets formed by print, nurtured by print, and enabled and constrained by print" (1). Though Clay has a steady foundation in print—he frequently speaks of his favorite book and talks about typography project in art school in which he designed his own typeface (79)—it is clear that his mind has been formed, nurtured, enabled and constrained by new media. The tension, therefore, arises from Clay's emergence onto a new grid. It is as though he exploring the codex with a computer's operating system. For example, all the details of this place seem incompatible with Clay's stores of knowledge and experience. When he first notices the bookstore 's "Help Wanted" sign, he is suspicious, claiming

"legitimate employers use Craigslist." He has a difficult time acknowledging that the place is actually a bookstore. He is convinced that "'24-hour bookstore' was a euphemism for something. It was on Broadway, in a euphemistic part of town." Next door was a place called "Booty's and it had a sign with neon legs that crossed and uncrossed" (7). Apparently, Clay stumbled upon a district of San Francisco that sustained businesses that have elsewhere been skewered by the internet. Once inside the bookstore, it is even more disorienting. Clay describes it thus: "imagine the shape and volume of a normal bookstore turned up on its side. This place was absurdly narrow and dizzyingly tall, and the shelves went all they way up . . . [fading] smoothly into the shadows in a way that suggested they might just go on forever" (7-8). For Clay, the bookstore literally appears as though it is set upon its side. Furthermore, he doesn't see the store's name until he looks through the front window, where it is printed in reverse. The disorientation that reader experiences from the typographical reversal of the letters mirrors Clay's confusion. Finally, Clay meets Mr. Penumbra, a "very old" man who is "tall and skinny like one of the ladders" (8). When Clay confesses to not having any experience in a bookstore, Mr. Penumbra only has two requisites. First, Clay must describe a book that he loves. He describes "not one book, but a series": *The Dragon-Song Chronicles.* Penumbra seems pleased with Clay's response: his smile grew, showing jostling white teeth" (9). Second, he asks Clay, "But can you climb a ladder" (10). The chapter ends, then, in a continuation of the novel's first passage. Though this time, it is clear that Clay is no longer unemployed. His days of lazily scanning the internet and rarely touching paper are behind him as he climbs higher and higher upon each rung of the ladder.

Following Clay's employment at the bookstore, he is established upon a new topographical grid. Sloan uses the metaphor of the grid to emphasize the importance of corporeality. Where Clay was once sprawled horizontally on his couch scanning internet articles, he is now perched atop a ladder, leaning dangerously "about 150 percent of one arm-length to my left" (10). This new grid is marked by its physicality. However, the grid's topography does not merely extend up and down, as does the reading room in New York and the bookstore in San Francisco. Just as when Clay stumbles across sprawling vistas that provide views far outside of San Francisco, when he strains for the book just out of his reach, and manages to reach it anyway, he is subverting this vertically based grid heretofore associated with the book. He experiences a new dimension. This is one of the ways that Sloan imagines the intersection between print and new media: new dimensions of organization. The remainder of this chapter will examine the media coupling in this intersectional space between print and new media, first by identifying the coupling of media forms, and then the coupling of media forms and human bodies.

Coupling: Medium to Medium

The notion of coupling is intended to connote sex and reproduction. Whether describing the coupling of old and new media, or media and human bodies, Sloan describes bodies merging together to produce something new. The coupling is almost always described in overtly corporeal terms, and the merging of these bodies is tense and productive. At times, the human body and the media technology strain against each other, such as the opening scene in the bookstore in which Clay is "holding on for dear life, one hand on the ladder, the other on the lip of a shelf, fingers pressed white" (Sloan 3). At

186

other times, the coupling is passive, such as in the subsequent scene in which Clay would "start scanning help-wanted ads on my laptop, but then a browser tab would blink" and before long, Clay would "retreat to the living room, put my laptop on my belly, and read all day" (3-4). In either scene, tension emanates from the unmistakable fact that the human and medium are evolving as a result of their interaction.

Out of this tension something is produced. Frequently the product is a new media object. For example, in one scene, a digital copy of Manutius's codex vitae is created using the codex and a scanner made from cardboard "harvested from old boxes" and two "crappy tourist point-and-shoots" (157). In another scene Clay creates a digital audiobook by "playing [cassette] tapes into my laptop, recording them, shepherding them one by one into the great digital jukebox in the sky" (234). More often, however, the product of this coupling is an evolved consciousness, or a different way of interacting with the environment. As Hayles argues "contemporary technogenesis is about adaptation, the fit between organisms and their environments, recognizing that both sides of the engagement (humans and technologies) are undergoing coordinated transformations" (Hayles 81). The coupling between the audio and print to produce the audiobook, for example, can produce new reading habits and expectations for what narrative should accomplish and how it should be organized, distributed, and exhibited. Over time, it can broaden or constrain personal and cultural understandings of what it means to "read." Similarly, the coupling between radio and the internet to produce a variety of media, such as podcasts or internet radio produce new listening habits, new ways of archiving and excavating content, and even change perceptions of time now that the user has some more control over the time and place they choose to listen to specific content. The results

187

of these couplings—new reading habits, new perceptions—continue to influence the way other media is consumed, creating, perhaps, new expectations for mobile devices, theater productions, or virtual reality. This process is ongoing. There is not an endpoint. Hayles argues that "understanding how human cognition interacts with intelligent machines requires theoretical framework in which objects are not seen as static entities, but are seen as constantly changing" (13). Furthermore, the process is neutral: it does not ensure progress in a positive or negative direction. What it does ensure, however, is that through these couplings, humans and media are transformed.

In *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*, Sloan explores these transformations by including several instances of media coupling. The remaining two sections of this chapter will focus first on couplings between media technologies, and second upon couplings between media technologies and humans. These examples will continue to reveal the nuanced ways that corporeality is impacted, specifically when new media merge with print media.

The novel's title, itself, suggests something of an anachronism. In the days of online shopping and Amazon's same-day delivery, the need for a bricks and mortar bookstore is diminished at best, no less a 24-hour venue. It is no wonder, then, that Clay suspects "'24-hour bookstore' was a euphemism for something" (7). Yet, the 24-hour service is a cultural reference to the contemporary moment when the expectation is that services are available around the clock. More pointedly, it is a reference to the accessibility of the internet and the new media ecology. Evidence of the relationship between new media and the book exists all over Penumbra's bookstore, such as in Penumbra's very selective collection of popular books, including the biography of Apple

co-founder Steve jobs, and "five different books about Richard Feynman," the theoretical physicist known for his work in quantum computing (13). The bookstore's catalogue is stored on a "decrepit beige Mac Plus," which announces a successful search with a "low chime," that sadly mimics the brightly tinkling bell above the bookstore door (13, 7). One character even requests a book by flashing Clay the "Amazon product page" from her smartphone (15). As soon as Clay is hired, he goes "one by one through the local review sites, writing glowing reports of this hidden gem," and sends "friendly emails to "local blogs," creates a "Facebook group with one member," and signs up for "Google's hyper-targeted local advertising program" (15). Even though the bookstore is literally open 24 hours, as soon as he is hired, Clay wastes no time in bridging the gap between this brick and mortar store and the internet.

Perhaps most revealing, however, is Mr. Penumbra's interest in e-readers. In Clay's first month working at the store, Penumbra delivers a grim appraisal of the book in the digital age: after Clay insists, "plenty of people . . . still like the smell of books," Mr. Penumbra replies: "You know you are finished when people start talking about the smell." After a brief pause, however, he asks Clay if he owns a Kindle. Clay likens the question to "the principal asking me if I have weed in my backpack" (65). The e-reader is an important icon throughout the novel because it represents one such intersection between computing and the book; it is the book portrayed as new media. Furthermore, the e-reader assumes a variety of forms, many of which seek to emulate that of the codex, including traditional fonts, "pages" that can be swiped, and "skin that's not plastic but cloth, like a hardcover book" (131). Furthermore, through internet connection, most e-readers are, quite literally, 24-hour bookstores. Clay acknowledges this on the novel's

189

final page when he refers to the sale of his own book on "the quiet little store built into the Kindle" (288). Once Clay produces the Kindle for Mr. Penumbra and switches it on, Penumbra is seduced. He "sucks in a sharp breath, and the pale gray rectangle reflects in his bright blue eyes." He calls the device "remarkable" and the typography is "beautiful" (65). Later, when Clay finally meets up with Penumbra in front of the Reading Room in New York, Penumbra is carrying five different types of e-readers, including a prototype that causes Clay to question "Who does my boss know in Silicon Valley?" (131). Penumbra explains that he has come to New York to make his case to Corvina that computers "hold the key for us" (130). The bookstore's title, then, subtly identifies the relationship between the computer and the book by invoking qualities of each medium that continue to seduce: 24-hour accessibility and aesthetically pleasing tactility; a paginated grid with beautiful typography, and a quiet bookstore built into the hardware.

Where the bookstore's name subtly evokes the relationship between computing and the book, the novel's cover does so brazenly. The dust jacket of the original hardcover, and the US paperback feature an arrangement of thin yellow rectangles that are immediately recognizable as books stacked on a tall bookshelf. Over top the image, in a font that look's like penciled handwriting is the title and author's name. The identically thin and yellow, rectangular books are stacked vertically and horizontally upon a shelving grid that stretch across the spine and back cover. The horizontal and vertical lines simultaneously bring to mind a bookshelf and the zeros and ones of binary code. The messy handwritten title, however, interrupts the grid. It is a noisy reminder of human presence in this media grid. As anyone who has left their copy of *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* on their nightstand before shutting out the lights knows, however, this

190

small collision between old and new media is only the start. Each yellow rectangle—there are at least three hundred of them—glows in the dark. The dim yellow glow in an otherwise dark room suggests a computer screen, unattended and left on. As such, the illuminated cover of a print codex formally embodies the intersection between print and new media. It is the codex with electricity running through its cover.

The glowing book cover has its counterpart within the novel: a 3-D computerized imaging of the bookstore, complete with glowing book covers. Clay gets the idea to create this program one evening when his Kindle dies, and after surfing the web for some time, eventually stops at "my new favorite: Grumble." As a minor character—one, in fact, whose only appearance is virtual—Grumble is an important fixture that embodies the intersection between old and new media in several ways. According to Clay, "Grumble manages a bustling pirate library. He writes complicated code to break the DRM on e-books; he builds complicated machines to copy the words out of real books." One of Grumble's trademarks is to post pirated versions of popular novels, such as "the supposedly uncrackable Harry Potter series," with a few changes. In the pirated version, "you suffer fleeting references to a young wizard named Grumblegrits who studies at Hogwarts alongside Harry." Clay describes Grumble as "a secretive programmer who operates at the intersection of literature and code—part *Hacker News*, part *Paris Review*" (40). Clay is inspired by Grumble's newest project, which is "a map of the locations of every science fiction story published in the twentieth century. He's plucked them out with code and plotted them in 3-D space, so year by year you see humankind's collective imagination reaching farther" (41). When he learns that Grumble has "in customary hacker-hero fashion, released the code that powers the map," Clay decides to "make

something of my own." He continues: "I realize my project is standing right in front of me: I'll learn 3-D graphics by making a model of Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore." After working on it for several nights, he admits that "It's crude—just a bunch of gray blocks slotted together like virtual LEGOs—but its starting to look familiar. . . . I've set them up with a coordinate system, so my program can find aisle 3, shelf 13 all bit itself." Before long, he is "stringing out long lines of code" and "a fairly persuasive polygonal approximation of Penumbra's store is spinning slowly on my screen" (42). Clay's decision to "make something of his own" describes programming as a craft, something to physically construct. A corporeal dimension is implied. Furthermore, making something *of his own* is a reference to a project that his roommate, Mat, has been working on for several weeks. The project is called Matropolis. It is essentially a model city made entirely our of "boxes and cans, paper and foam." Mat is a special effects builder for movies. According to Clay, "he gets paid do design and build laser rifles and haunted castles. But—I find this very impressive—he doesn't use computers. Mat is part of the dwindling tribe of special-effects artists who still make things with knives and glue" (23). It was Mat's project that inspired Clay to make something of his own. In doing so, he digitizes the bookstore into a 3D image.

Clay's 3D digital construction of the bookstore is yet another way in which the novel envisions the intersection between old and new media. It privileges old media, such as the book, but Clay's use of Grumble's code and construction of the program also emphasizes two central characteristics of new media: collaboration and automation. Clay, Kat, and Grumble all share in the construction of the program, and once initiated, parts of the program operate without human interaction. The program taps into the unique

characteristics of old and new media in other ways, too. On one hand, it organizes the books according to the archival logic of the internet's grid. The books are linked in a vast network. As such, Clay can detect patterns in the order the books are checked out and returned. It is this realization that propels Clay to consider whether digitizing individual texts would reveal further patterns and diagnostics within each volume (this is why he scans Manutius's codex vitae). On the other hand, the digital imaging reveals features of the shelves' structures that are not intuitive simply by looking at the books, even though these qualities are, as the novel reminds us, "hiding in plain sight." In other words, the book offers close scrutiny of a single object for a long expanse of time while the digital grid opens up to a broader topographical purview. Clay's program organizes the bookstore as a wide open city, and not a walled fortress. The arrangement of information—how and where links are connected and content is archived—becomes visible to the reader. At the end of the novel, after Clay reveals Manutius's secret code, he recognizes the problem that stifled the Unbroken Spine, as well as Kat at Google, in their attempts to decode the text. Announcing that the code was hidden in the font itself, he says "we were looking at the sequence, not the shape" (275). In other words, their focus was on the sequence of letters and words within the text, and not the shape or the topography of the text itself. Digitizing the bookstore allows them to see the shape.

Much is made of the novel's physical qualities. Both Sloan and Shteyngart, as I discuss in chapter 3, repeatedly emphasize the corporeality of the book by taking aim at the book's smell. In Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story,* a character snarls at the book-reading protagonist, Lenny, for reading Chekhov on a plane, claiming: "duder, that thing smells like wet socks" (37). As Penumbra observes, a smell usually indicates that

something is rotting or dead. In *Super Sad*, characters refer to books as "doorstops," and they spray them down with Pine-Sol (25, 52). In *Penumbra*, too, books are regarded by their corporeality. On the first and last pages of the novel, paper is regarded as something to "touch" and books are a thing you "hold . . . in your hands" (3, 288). Describing a book in physical terms is an easy association to make because the physical fact of the book is central to the reading experience. When you hold a book in your hands and start reading, you are unlikely to pick up another day from a different edition of the same book; rather a commitment to read a novel is also a commitment to utilizing that novel's delivery technology—the codex—until the novel is finished. As such, the physical fact of the book is difficult to ignore. Regardless of whether the book is hardcover or paperback, it is difficult to ignore the heft of a Tolstoy novel, the deckled edges of a early-twentieth century hardcover, or the thinner pages of a trade paperback. This attention is not only a superficial observation; rather, these are the tools of the medium. The weight and the pages are noticeable because they are the features used to operate the medium. With new media, physical qualities are often detached from the content. This is because the content is seldom exclusive to the delivery technology. A keyboard that is too cumbersome or a screen that is too small can easily be addressed by accessing the content from a different device. When an online article can be read on myriad devices, the content of that article is less likely to be associated with any one device. Yet, Sloan's descriptions of the ways that print and new media intersect reveal a different sort of corporeality in new media; that is, its media topography. In the coupling of media forms, Sloan finds increased value on media topography *alongside* physical features. This is the logic that guides Clay's digital model of the bookstore, and it is the language he uses to describe the internet as a

sprawling open city. It is also the quality he prefers in a book, and it is one description of how perceptions of corporeality changes in the coupling between print and new media.

Another way Sloan draws attention to the coupling of print and new media is by anthropomorphizing each of the technologies involved. Midway through *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*, Clay brings an old book into Google to be scanned by a high-tech book scanner. The scene begins as a thinly veiled account of the death-of-the-book in the age of new media technologies. The scanner's operator immediately apologizes for "putting [bookstores] out of business." He continues: "Once we've got everything scanned, and cheap reading devices become ubiquitous . . . nobody's going to need bookstores, right?" (89). Furthermore, the book is described as a patient. The laboratory is "like a field hospital" with "harsh floodlights [glaring] down on an operating table," and when Clay hands the book to Jad, he says "here's the patient" (88, 90). Jad then "gently" clips the book into a frame so that "no spines [are] broken here" (90). The book is a weak and fragile being in this scene, and they treat it carefully. The scanner is also characterized as a surgeon, operating upon the book with its "many-jointed metal arms" (88). Even Clay seems to lose hope for the book. He confesses to feeling "a pang of pity" (91). He describes the process as "an exorcism," which is a particularly astute metaphor, given that the machine literally separates the content of the book from its physical corpus. His description of how the computer lifts the "words right up off the pale gray pages" draws attention to the deathly pallor of the potentially obsolescent medium (91). As the book is scanned, the narrative focus is on its diminished, dying form. Furthermore, there is a power-dynamic at play, here, in which the book is being "saved" by new media. However, once the actual scanning begins, a different narrative emerges.

195

After Jad clicks the frame into place, he taps a several buttons and "there's a low, gut-rumbling hum . . . and then the book scanner leaps into action" (90). Sloan writes:

> "The floodlights start strobing, turning everything in the chamber into a stop-motion movie. Frame by frame, the scanner's spidery arms reach down, grasp page corners, peel them back. It's mesmerizing. I've never see anything at once so fast and so delicate. The arms stroke the pages, cares them, smooth them down. This thing loves books. (90-91)

In contrast to the patient-doctor dynamic at play in the scene's onset, the setting has changed. The "operating table" is now a "chamber" and the "harsh floodlights" have been replaced by strobe lights. This is an overtly sexual setting, in which the book and scanner are now portrayed as lovers. Their coupling is a physical one, described as two bodies merging. The description is intimate, during which the "many-jointed metal arms" of the surgeon are now "spidery arms" that "grasp" at the pages and "peel" back layers. They "stroke," "caress", and "smooth." The scanner is not operating on a patient; it is attending to a lover. The description of the technologies as biological beings, with "cameras like two eyes" and arms that are "so fast and so delicate," draws attention to the processes of evolution and ecological interdependence. In short, they are coupling to produce something new. As such, it is worth noting, "the images culled from the book are in 3-D." The multidimensionality of the image suggests that the scanner is not merely copying content, but reproducing physical elements from the page. Therefore, the product of their coupling contains both the content and the form, or, to use Clay's terms, the "sequence" and the "shape." In other words, the grids of print and new media have merged, and the

product of their coupling exhibits corporeal aspects of the print medium—the topography of the page—as well as the archival aspects of new media.

Human-Media Coupling

In the previous sections, the coupling of media forms is described to illustrate how print and new media interact to produce new media forms. These new media forms simultaneously reflect and cultivate new habits and new ways of interacting within one's environment. The corporeality of media forms—the physical hardware of the delivery technology—plays an important role in these couplings. On one hand, a medium's physical features seem to have a diminished role in the consumption of the content; on the other hand, corporeality is increasingly evoked through attention to media topography: the structure and shape of the media archive.

In the transitioning media ecology of *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore,* Sloan describes several instances in which media and user are coupled to illustrate how humans coevolve alongside their media technologies. According to Hayles, "our interactions with digital media are embodied, and they have bodily effects at the physical level." Not only does interaction with media change neural pathways in the brains, but the technologies themselves become extensions of the human body and consciousness. Hayles describes, for example, how "the keyboard comes to seem an extension of one's thoughts rather than an external device on which one types." She continues: "Embodiment then takes the form of extended cognition, in which human agency and thought are enmeshed within larger networks that extend beyond the desktop computer into the environment" (3). Sloan alludes overtly to the coupling between humans and computers through descriptive

details, such as when he Clay is "scanning help-wanted ads on my laptop" or when he describes Mr. Penumbra's expressions as "the equivalent of a 404 PAGE NOT FOUND" (3, 96). Elsewhere, the coupling between user and media are much more subtle, indicating, perhaps, the extent to which humans and new media have already merged.

In one scene, Kat and Clay attempt to cook dinner together. When the recipe doesn't turn out, Kat issues a tub of couscous salad that she brought home from Google. Clay considers the depths of Kat's enmeshment with her work: "Kat spends most of her time at Google. Most of her friends work at Google. Most of her conversations revolve around Google. Now I am learning that most of her calories come from Google" (76). At the surface, Clay jokingly suggests that Kat is actually a creation of Google, a sort of cyborg who gets her sustenance from the company that powers and organizes the world's most popular search engine and email platform. For Sloan and Hayles, however, the suggestion is more of an astute observation. Clay soon learns the extent of this observation when he visits Kat at the Google campus. Waiting in line at the cafeteria, Clay is told he must stand in the visitor line because, according to Kat "Our food is personalized. It has vitamins, some natural stimulants." A fellow Googler chimes in: "I am experimenting with my potassium level. Now I am up to eleven bananas every day. Body hacking!" (84). Another Googler experiments with "Vitamin D, omega-3s, fermented tea leaves" (86).

At Google, the perception is that everything, including the body, can be hacked. This is evident in many of the ways Kat interacts with her environment throughout the novel. When Penumbra first tells Kat about Manutius's codex vitae, Clay describes her "leaning in so intently she's almost up on top of the table. This is catnip: a code to be

198

cracked *and* the key to immortality, all in one" (148). She is certain that "if there's a code, we can break it" (149). At another point, she tells Clay about "Google Forever," a team at Google who works on life extension. Cancer treatment, organ regeneration, DNA repair" (163). Kat, the Googler, has far more faith in the prospect of eternal life than Clay, the character who is instrumental in culling the necessary resources to crack the code. This is what the paradigm offers: it is not just optimism or confidence from the years working at Google. Rather, it is a way of seeing the world. Books, people, New York City sidewalks: they are reducible to code. It may take some time, but all code can be cracked, broken down, and rebuilt.

Kat explains this paradigm: "I think we're going to find different ways to think, thanks to computers. . . . It's not like we have the same brains as people a thousand years ago." Clay argues with her—we do have the same brains—but Kat responds: "We have the same hardware, but not the same software." Privacy, romance, and even inner monologue, Kat argues, are recent concepts. She explains that "Writers are responsible for some of it. . . . But I think the writers had their turn . . . and now it's programmers who get to upgrade the human operating system. . . . There are all these things you can do, and it's like you're in more than one place at one time, and it's totally normal" (91). Kat likens the brain to a computer running different operating systems. Writers were responsible for helping the mind make sense of the world, but as the accumulation of knowledge and print material amassed, a new operating system was necessary. Now, according to Kat, it is the task of the programmers to make sense of the environment. Body-hacking, and the belief that everything is reducible to code is an example of how new media is embodied to the extent that, according to Hayles, "embodiment takes the

form of extended cognition, in which human agency and thought are enmeshed within larger networks that extend beyond the desktop computer into the environment" (3).

Kat wisely chooses her examples for Clay. When she mentions that you can be "in more than once place at one time, and it's totally normal," she refers in part to her and Clay's second date. This experience describes another way in which their bodies are enmeshed in the media they use. Their plans for the date are made during a Gmail chat. Since they met when Kat helped Clay with his 3D model of the bookstore, and their second date was spent discussing singularity, their nascent relationship orbits around their common interest in computers. The gmail chat describes the seamlessness through which they can maintain contact, despite not being together physically. When Kat invites Clay to a house party he can't attend—he has to work—he types: "*Kat, you believe that we humans will one day outgrow these bodies and exist in a sort of dimensionless digital sublime, right?"* She agrees, and he challenges her to put it to a test. He types: "*I'll come to your party, but I'll come via laptop*—via videochat. *You'll have to be my chaperone: carry me around, introduce me to people*" (68). She obliges only if he promises to dress up and drink. Clay senses "an incompatibility between Kat's belief in a disembodied human future and her insistence on alcohol consumption," but lets it slide since he's "going to a party" (69). The initial organization of this date emphasizes a transitional understanding of their corporeal presence, which exhibits their belief that they will "one day outgrow these bodies" as well as their concern with dressing up and drinking. On one hand, the bodies seem inconsequential, a burden, but on the other hand, they are unable to fully undock from a corpus-centered existence. Clay's insistence that Kat "carry me around" is peculiar in that it implies a new understanding of corporeal presence and how

he views his digitized body in this scenario. He does not view the body in the traditional sense; otherwise, it would be absurd to ask her to carry him around. Furthermore, he also does see the body in a "disembodied human future," because he is still asking her to carry him around. Rather, this request recognizes a transitional understanding that views of the body in the new media ecology are changing. Furthermore, Clay's suggestion that Kat carries "me" around—as opposed to the computer or device she is using to broadcast his image—suggests a conflation between his corporeal self and the delivery technology that he appears on. The device is, in this instance, an extension of Clay's body.

When they first meet through video chat, Kat describes him as "just a floating head," reminding him simultaneously of his disembodiment (just) and his embodiment (head). Because he is a "floating head" he must "look extra-good." Clay describes the view through his computer screen: "The store melts away and I fall headfirst into the view of Kat's apartment—a place, I remind you, that I have never visited in person. . . . Kat pans her laptop around like a camera to show me what's what. . . . My view blurs into dark pixelated streaks, then re-forms itself into a sprawling space with a wide TV and long low couches" (69). The dissipation of the store around Clay illustrates how fully he sinks into the point of view of Kat's laptop. Not only his body, but his consciousness and sensorium are encompassed in the hardware of the laptop. The laptop is an extension of Clay. When Kat shows him around, she pans the laptop "like a camera." The simile is redundant given that it *is* a camera installed in her laptop. Yet, comparing it to a camera implies, by negation, that the view does not come from a camera, but from Clay's own phenomenological field of vision. This is the extent to which Clay has embodied the

hardware of the laptop as his own self. Even the view's imperfections—the "dark pixelated streaks"—do not pull Clay from the illusion of physical presence.

The success of the experiment, however, ultimately depends upon the perspective. One party guest asks, "Are you real?" Another, during a card game, cries that "It's not fair . . . We can't see any of his tells" (71). Despite the reality of the experiment for Clay, who watches all the other partygoers through the screen, the one thing he cannot see is his disembodied self attending a party on a computer screen. In his near-total suspension of disbelief, he forgets that he is the anomaly. It is not until a customer pulls Clay's attention from the party that he begins to realize the limitations of his disembodiment. He returns to find that Kat is no longer on the screen and that he has been muted. "All at once I feel stupid," Clay muses. "This exercise in telepresence . . . does not have a point, and everyone is probably laughing at me and making faces at the laptop just off camera . . . I stand and step away from the camera's gaze" (73). Clay realizes the limitations imposed by the camera's frame. When the media hardware (the mute button) is used to excise him from the scene, the full device swells in his consciousness, and his suspension of disbelief is wrecked.

When Kat finally returns, she is in her bedroom and they can no longer sustain the illusion of presence. Clay describes: "The laptop rocks and there's a blur and then we are on her bed." Though he says, "we are on her bed," his presence is now qualified by the laptop. It is no longer implied through a simile. Instead, the media hardware, through the rocking and the blur—looms too largely to ignore. Over the next four short paragraphs, Clay and Kat regard his absence in the subjunctive four times, stating variations of "I wish you were here," or, Clay's sober realization, "as if I am not sitting here alone in the

dim light of this bookstore." When the scene ends, and Kat falls asleep, Clay realizes, "I

am alone in this bookstore, looking across the city at her sleeping form, lit only by the

gray light of her laptop. In time it, too, falls asleep, and the screen goes dark" (74). By the

end of the scene, Clay is only a spectator and Kat has been reduced to a character on a

screen. The breadth of the city separates them, and when the screen goes dark, even that

is finally interrupted by the media hardware that was intended to sustain the illusion. Clay

and Kat proved that they could use the media hardware as an extension of the body in the

body's absence, but that the extension, limited by their consciousness—their current

human operating system—failed to sustain the illusion for more than a few moments.

Despite the failure of Clay and Kat's experiment in disembodiment, it is difficult

to ignore the role that new media technologies play in the connectivity of the characters.

Physical connection and proximity is impacted by digital connection, and characters are

linked by media hardware. They chat through Gmail, date through videochat, and tour

cities together through their phones. Intimacy is often conveyed through a hardware

connection, such as when Clay and Kat are linked by a USB cable: "I'm on the lip of the

bed above her with my Kindle drawing power from her USB port—um, not a

euphemism" (163). When their friend Neel sits down at a bar, Clay describes him as

having "docked with a group of New York startup dudes" (161). The pervasiveness of

this connection is evident when Clay describes one bar as having "air so thick with Wi-Fi

you can almost see it" (155). In short, Sloan carefully details how embedded these

technologies are into the operation of the characters' daily lives, to the extent that the

only way to describe one's connection to others is through the lexicon of the devices that

preserve those connections: "connected," "linked," "docked."

Even in the moments when the characters are physically intimate, their coupling occurs in the shadow of some larger enmeshment with media. After scanning the book at Google, Clay and Kat return to Kat's house to upload the book's digital contents to software called Hadoop, which, she explains, "breaks a big job into lots of tiny pieces and spreads them out to lots of different computers at the same time" (92). Hadoop will produce a usable digital text for Clay by "[transforming] swoops of ink and streaks of graphite into characters it can comprehend, like *K* and *A* and *T*" (92). Even the description of Hadoop evokes in Clay the prospect of reproduction, which is appropriate since it occurs just after the coupling between the scanner and the book, and just prior to Clay and Kat's physical coupling. Silently, he remarks: "Kat Potente, you and I will have a son, and we will name him Hadoop" (92-93). Clay describes the image on the screen as the software initiates: "a diagram is blossoming: a skeletal flower with a blinking center and dozens—no hundreds—of petals. It's growing fast, transforming from a daisy to a dandelion to a giant sunflower (93). The metaphor used to describe the interaction between the digital pages and the networks of computers that are studying, interpreting, and translating their content is one that emphasizes growth and reproduction. Again, the media are compared to living, corporeal bodies; while the book and the scanner were compared to fauna, this process is depicted as flora. In both cases, the ecological metaphor heightens a sense of symbiotic coupling and renewal. Yet, Kat reminds Clay that in this new media ecology, her presence is not limited to her corporeal self. She explains: "A thousand computers are doing exactly what I want right now. My mind is not just here . . . it's out there. I love it—the feeling" (93).

Even as Clay and Kat become physically intimate, her embodiment of Google and her enmeshment with the media technologies around her remain visible. removes her shirt and sees her form reflected "in the laptop screen." Her back is strong from the Google climbing wall." And again, after they finish and Kat returns to her desk to check the progress, Clay describes "her spine curving down into the screen" (93). In every detail Clay finds Kat's body not only nurtured by Google's calories, but her figure formed by the Google climbing wall. Furthermore, Clay's only glimpses of her are in the reflection of the laptop screen until, in the final glimpse, her spine curves into the screen, as though her corporeal self is an extension of the computer, instead of the other way around. While her consciousness is divided amongst the thousands of computers that decode the book, her body—formed and nurtured by Google—is enmeshed with the media technologies around her. Several pages later, a similar scene occurs. When Hadoop seems to small for their task, Kat introduces Clay to "Mechanical Turk." She explains that "Instead of sending jobs to computers, like Hadoop, it sends jobs to real people." Even when she introduces the idea to Clay, she uses a "voice pitched like a cartoon robot" to say, "Well. ,what about hu-mans-and-com-pu-ters . . . work-ing-to-ge-ther?" (120). Clay and Kat's use of Hadoop and Mechanical Turk is always paralleled by their own lovemaking. The parallel bolsters the coupling metaphor by comparing the coupling of media forms to the biological reproductive process. The scene concludes shortly after their lovemaking when Kat's "laptop makes a low chime." Sloan writes: "Kat rolls over to tap at the keyboard. Still breathing hard, she grins and lifts the laptop onto her belly to show me the result of this great human-computer concord, this collaboration between a thousand machines, ten times as many humans, and one very smart girl" (122).

Throughout *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*, Sloan uses Kat's character to describe the new "human operating system," which is designed by programmers, rather than writers. The presence of this new human operating system is evident in the characters' language. They describe their connectivity through the lexicon of the devices that preserve those connections. Furthermore, incorporated within this operating system is a revised understanding of corporeality. Sloan uses Google's calories and climbing wall to imply the embodiment of media technologies. Characters embody the media technologies in their environment. As such, the use of Hadoop and Mechanical Turk demonstrate how, according to N. Katherine Hayles "human agency and thought are enmeshed within larger networks that extend beyond the desktop computer into the environment" (3). Corporeality, however, is not completely devalued. Though Kat seems able to exist everywhere at once through various computer programs in which she is depicted as dissolving into the screens, Clay's virtual date with Kat suggests that existing models of corporeality still maintain a strong hold. He is unable to sustain the experiment of disembodiment for long before he finds himself alone in the bookstore.

Conclusion: "You Will Hold this Book in Your Hands"

At the end of the novel, Sloan includes an epilogue that describes the immediate future of each character. Through the epilogue, he pieces together the novel's many moving parts in order to illustrate this intersectional space between the book and new media, where understandings of corporeality are shifting. Corvina, still enraged by the use of computers in the Unbound Spine, "burns Penumbra's *codex vitae*." The move is ultimately a "miscalculation" and results in the Corvina being voted out of his position as

First Reader (284). It turns out that, in addition to Penumbra, many other members felt it was time to use computers to crack the code of Manutius's codex vitae. As Kat stated much earlier, "the writers had their turn . . . and not it's programmers who get to upgrade the human operating system" (61). The burning of the codex vitae is a final, symbolic critique of the shifting view of corporeality. Translated literally, it means "book of life" or "life book." As such, the codex vitae is often conflated with the body of the writer to the extent that the two are interchangeable. For example, during the one time that Penumbra's store receives a new codex vitae Penumbra proposes a toasts: "'That . . . is a toast to Evelyn Erdos.' He holds the sparkling gray book aloft, and speaks as though addressing her: 'Welcome, my friend, and well done'" (48). Later, when Clay searches for Penumbra's codex vitae in the Reading Room, he finds "no sign of PENVMBRA, and I'm afraid I might have missed him" (181). When he finally finds it, he describes it just as he described Penumbra: "tall and skinny, with golden letters spaced out along the spine." He continues: "It's him. . . . The cover is pale blue, exactly the color of Penumbra's eyes." He refers to the charred remains of Clark Moffat's codex vitae as "bits of MOFFAT [that] float to the floor" (182). In each of these instances, the codex vitae synecdochically stand in for the writer, thereby emphasizing the value of the physical codex. When Corvina burns Penumbra's codex vitae, it is an attempt to destroy Penumbra: his life work, his business, and his claim to eternal life. Clay, however, produces a digital copy of Penumbra's work that he scanned in the reading room, stating "Even though its vessel will be destroyed, the contents of Penumbra's *codex vitae* will be safe" (285). Unlike Corvina, Clay understands that the value is not in the text's corporeality, but in the text itself. The value is in the shape as well as the sequence.

In the epilogue, the characters also move on in their careers. Their careers push them further into a transitional space, where the body and the digital, the book and new media, intersect. Kat, for example, quickly "climbs the ranks" as Project Manager at Google where she helps launch the "Lost Books project" and "Google Body" (284). Each of the projects works on the digitization of books and the body, respectively, for preservation and educational needs. Penumbra is done with the bookstore. He and Clay "form a consultancy: a special-ops squad for companies operating at the intersection of books and technology, trying to solve the mysteries that gather in the shadows of digital shelves" (285). One of their first tasks is given to them by Kat, who asks them to design the "marginalia system for Google's prototype e-reader, which is thin and light, with a skin that's not plastic but cloth, like a hardcover book" (285-86). Just as the burning of Penumbra's codex vitae reveals a shifting view of corporeality, their new careers also illustrate innovative ways of thinking about the physical qualities of the book.

At the end of the novel, Clay characterizes the transitional media ecology by its hybridity. Recognizing that humans evolve alongside their media, he places value in newness and the unknown, "new capabilities" and "strange powers." He writes:

> And finally, I will write down everything that happened. I'll copy some of it from the logbook, find more in old emails and text messages, and reconstitute the rest from memory. I'll get Penumbra to look it over, then find a publisher and set it out for sale in all the places you find books these days: big Barnes & Nobles, bright Pygmalion, the quiet little store built into the Kindle. You will hold this book in your hands, and learn all the things I learned right along with me: . . . We have new capabilities now—

strange powers we're still getting used to. . . . Your life must be an open

city with all sorts of ways to wander in. (287-288).

Clay's book is a portrait of hybridity. It is a composite of various media, ranging from

text messages to excerpts from centuries old logbooks. Each of these media forms is

employed symbiotically to produce a new form. Just as the book draws from various

media, the book's delivery technology is also unclear; or rather, it is malleable. It can be

purchased at the independent or chain bricks and mortar stores, or electronically through

the "quiet little store built into the Kindle." Even though the book's delivery technology

is malleable and versatile, it does not mean that it is incorporeal. Clay states,

declaratively: "You will hold this book in your hands." The declaration implies that the

corporeality of the book is not limited to ink and pages, but is open to new shapes and

forms. "Holding the book," describes new ways to experience it: to traverse its

topography and experience new forms. It is a recognition that the act of reading occurs in

many varieties. Therefore the book should be a means for discovering new capabilities

and for testing the new powers afforded by innovative media in a transitioning media

ecology. Sloan, then, emphasizes corporeality not solely in terms of physical features, but

in terms of its media topography. So, when Clay says "Your life must be an open city

with all sorts of ways to wander in," he is quoting himself when he described the types of

books that he loves. He is calling for diversity in media practices, the potential for odd

couplings, and the hope for new forms.

Conclusion

"Imagine New Forms":

A Survey of the Novel's Incorporation of New Media

Scrolling through my Instagram feed last week, I came across an advertisement

for a smartphone app called "Hooked." The advertisement read: "Stories for the

SnapChat generation." On the iTunes App Store, the description of HOOKED was as

follows: "Every HOOKED story is told as a bite-sized text message conversation, as if

you were reading someone else's chat history." It continues: "We love reading, just like

you, but we know it can get BORING when stories are too long. So we created this app to

make reading snappy, spooky and fun." The stories draw from "the long tradition of

epistolary literature, like Bram Stoker's Dracula." Of course, I tapped "Download."

Apparently, I was not the only one. According to an interview of founder Prerna

Gupta in CNNtech, HOOKED was ranked number one in the App Store in December

2016. In fact, the concept of marketing a novel exclusively for the cell phone is not a new

one. The cell phone novel has been a wildly successful genre in Japan for most of the

twenty-first century. According to the *New York Times*, the first cell phone novel was

created in 2000, though its popularity really soared around 2007 when one writer's cell

phone novel sold 400,000 copies "and became the No. 5 bestselling novel." Last year,

five of Japan's bestselling novels "were originally cell phone novels" (Onishi). As the

genre slowly takes hold in America, HOOKED is only one of the more recent variations.

Its interface is sleek and simple. Each story is represented by a haunting close-up of a

face, underneath a title and author. Each story begins by tapping on the screen, and a chat bubble appears, just like a text message. The stories typically unfold as a conversation between two people: one person is in danger, and the other is trying to coach them through the dangerous scenario (e.g. a mother texting her daughter as a jilted lover tries to break into the house to exact revenge on her father). They are driven by suspense. The liberal use of ellipses (yes, the characters type out ellipsis, hit send, and then finish their thoughts in the next bubble), and rapid-fire development motivates the reader to keep tapping. And it works. According to a review in the *New York Times*, "There is something satisfyingly voyeuristic about reading someone else's texts, even though they are fictional" (Eaton).

Despite their formulaic structures and relatively predictable plots, at times it feels like you can't tap the screen fast enough. This leads me to my favorite feature of the app: the invitation to pay. As a free app, the user is given a limited amount of taps. After about fifty taps, a screen pops up giving you the option to either purchase a subscription, or wait forty-five minutes until your taps refresh. In my limited experience, it takes about 200-300 taps to complete a story, which means one would have to revisit the story several times a day in order to reach the ending. Despite the predictable plots, this app offers an intriguing example of convergence between the novel and new media. It blends the traditional elements of the novel with the language and interface associated with text messages, and even the tapping and wait times that are standard in many mobile games. It also imposes formal restrictions on the novel by the size limitations of a single text. Perhaps most intriguing is how the app's economic model is embedded within the novel's

narrative structure. One is compelled to pay based on the believability of the characters and the efficacy of the plot.

There are many ways that the novel has converged with new media within this transitioning new media ecology. This dissertation has studied four contemporary American novels that have incorporated new media technologies in unique ways. The focus of this dissertation has never been to identify or critique references to new media within the pages; rather, it has been to register the tension of a media ecology that is in transition, and to identify how that tension is manifested throughout the novel's structure, language, and motifs. It focuses, therefore, on how the novel gives physical form to many of the protocols and structures associated with new media technologies, such as the personal computer, online browsing, smartphones, and web-based social media. It has looked specifically at the ways in which the contemporary novel registers a readership who does most of their socializing through online social media, much of their reading on screens, and for whom the computer has become a mobile device. The conclusions have varied from chapter to chapter, but each novel illustrates a remarkable difference in the way people connect, in the way they speak about connection, and in representations of the body (and the tools used to) perform these connections.

The novels included in this dissertation often incorporate new media subtly. There are, or course, some obvious elements, such as the glow-in-the-dark cover of Robin Sloan's *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore,* or the eighty-page PowerPoint display in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, but the real incorporation of new media pulses within these novels at the structural level. The large narrative gaps in Jess Walter's *The Zero*, for example emulate the schizophrenic structure of the nonstop media coverage

in the wake of 9/11. The alphabetical arrangement of characters' initials in Egan's novel explores the relationship between inscription and connection on web-based social media. In Robin Sloan's novel, the motif of the bookshelf and the city describe converging forms of archiving information. Finally, Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* subtly compares the dwindling size of our mobile devices to the dwindling relevance of the corporeal body. In all of the novels, there is a noticeable anxiety of the loss of connection, but they vary in their takes of what it means to be connected. Similarly, the novels contain staggering consistency in their portrayals of bodies that are in the process of breaking down, or trying to transcend their corporeal forms. Again, the tension behind these breakdowns varies from novel to novel. The subtle incorporations of new media protocols and structures within these novels often operate behind the scenes, like the code embedded within this Word application that translates keystrokes into legible shapes and spaces and paragraph breaks. That is to say, the new media influence upon these novels does not always manifest aggressively within their pages in the way that is evident from cellphone novels or print novels that contain a digital component. However, the structural presence of that new media influence has a profound effect on the way the reader engages with the text.

The real challenge of this dissertation was in determining where to draw the circle around my object of study. Which novels should I focus on? Why? Should I only include novels that exist first in traditional print form, or should I select novels that exist on digital platforms as well? What about the more aggressively experimental novels that have holes cut through their pages, contain inserts and accessories, or are intended to be played like a game? Of course I wanted to write about all of these curious intersections

213

between the novel and new media, but I also was aware (or at least frequently reminded) of the limitations of such a broad scope. For this reason, I chose to focus on the aforementioned novels because in my view, these were novels that were fundamentally enmeshed with the logic of new media, but not in a form so aggressively experimental as to distract from the subtle nuances of new media protocols and structures. Doing so, I realize that my study is limited. It only represents one of many ways in which the novel incorporates new media. For the duration of this conclusion, I would like to survey some other novels in which this relationship exists.

There is an element of novelty to the cellphone novel, at least within an American culture where it has yet to take root as a cultural form. It often caters to young readers and thrives in the genres of thriller, romance, and fan fiction. Yet, considering that word, novelty, it is worth acknowledging that new forms are often created through the merging of old forms with new technologies, such as the e-book, internet radio, or the smart phone. Jennifer Egan's science fiction story, "Black Box," is an example of a story that operates under formal limitations that are similar to the cell phone novel. "Black Box," was initially published on Twitter as a series of tweets, one a minute, between 8-9 PM for 9 straight days starting on May 24.[29] The story was written expressly for the purpose of being serialized on Twitter. She describes the story as "a series of terse mental dispatches from a female spy of the future" ("Coming"). In *The New Yorker,* Egan describes the project: "I'd also been wondering about how to write fiction whose structure would lend itself to serialization on Twitter. This is not a new idea, of course, but it's a rich one—because of the intimacy of reaching people through their phones, and because of the odd

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[29] Following its publication on Twitter, "Black Box" was made available in total on *The New Yorker's* website, arranged chronologically from her first tweet to the last.

poetry that can happen in a hundred and forty characters." Twitter, with its formal

limitations, its scrolling newsfeed structure, and its mobile access provides a great

platform for experimenting with serialization in the age of smart phones. The content is

immediately accessible to the reader, but the author has control over the pacing and

distribution.

It is not only through the formal limitations of Twitter that Egan experimented

with the role of fiction for a citizen of the Internet. The story's subject matter also deals

with many issues that are relevant to anyone with a Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram

account. The story's first three tweets, for example, focus on the roles of privacy,

perception, and identity. Without the context of the story, each tweet reads as a critique of

the medium. Imagine scrolling through your Twitter feed, each 140-character quip

accompanied by a stamp-sized photo, and the first tweet from "Black Box" appears at the

top of your feed: "People rarely look the way you expect them to, even when you've seen

pictures." A minute passes, and the next appears: "The first thirty seconds in a person's

presence are the most important." Egan draws awareness to the perception of these

profile photos, and the nature of the relationships you share with your contacts through

your own "black box." Another minute passes. Tweets from social contacts fill the feed,

and then once more from Egan, "If you're having trouble perceiving, focus on

projecting" ("Black Box"). The story is constantly aware of the lines users draw to

distinguish between one's physical presence and one's virtual presence, and the myths

they create on either side of that line. She explores themes similar to those portrayed in *A

Visit from the Goon Squad*, when Robert or Sasha attempted to transcend their physical

bodies during a traumatic experience. Within the context of Twitter, however, the lines

evoke another sort of out of body experience: "Your mind will rejoin your body when it is safe to do so./ Return to your body carefully, as if you were reëntering your home after a hurricane" ("Black Box"). The passage evokes the duality of Internet citizenship: of coalescing one's virtual projections with one's corporeal performances. Much later, when she writes, "Your whereabouts will never be a mystery; you will be visible at all times as a dot of light on the screens of those watching over you," she emphasizes one's interminable connections ("Black Box"). As a Twitter story, "Black Box" uses the conventions of Twitter to explore ways that the serial publication of fiction can create suspense. In doing so, her awareness to the medium illuminates many themes of virtual and corporeal experiences. Egan is not the only to publish stories on Twitter, either. In 2014, David Mitchell used Twitter to publish "The Right Sort" (2014), and Teju Cole published "Hafiz" on Twitter by "retweeting lines that he had given other users and asked them to post" (Crouch).

In addition to the fully digital narrative, many authors have explored the convergence between the novel and new media through print forms that contain digital components. On such novel is *Night Film* (2013) by Marisha Pessl. *Night Film* is a novel that in many ways is structured like a Horror film, the type made by the novel's mysterious antagonist, Stanislas Cordova. Cordova's films have gathered a cult following for their exhibition of real terror and for the shroud of mystery that surrounds their production. Are these acts of terror real? Scott McGrath's investigation of this question, triggered by the sudden death of Cordova's daughter, propels him into a world of equal epistemological uncertainty: that is, the Blackboards of the Deepnet, anonymous emails, untraceable text messages, Google searches, and website easter eggs. Pessl's use of a

216

falsified epigraph and a fake article from *Rolling Stone* further blur the boundaries of what can and cannot be believed. In addition to its text, the novel is a collage of newspaper and website reprint, text conversations, hand written notes. By inundating the reader with a bevy of print and online sources, they are positioned alongside the protagonist in trying to determine what to believe and what not to believe. Central to the novel is the question of how to distinguish myth from reality in the age of the Internet. The novel concludes with a fictionalized cover and article from the December 29, 1977 issue of *Rolling Stone*. On the cover, one headline reads: "Apple II: The World's First Personal Computer. Will it Change the Way We Live?" (589). The organization of this novel is designed not only to answer this question, but to offer examples of how the computer *has* changed the way we live. One character explains how when "we social network alone with our *screens* . . . our depths of feelings get shallower" (56). A website from the Deepnet challenges visitors to "dumb yourself down into a series of idiot choices like LIKE and DISLIKE" (169).

Perhaps most interesting about Pessl's novel is that it was released simultaneously with a smart phone app called "The *Night Film* Decoder." The app, which allows the reader to scan certain images to unlock supplementary documents, audio files, and a film preview, allows the story to unfold across various media. The only problem is that, only four years after *Night Film's* publication, the app is no longer available, and the website that describes the app—Nightfilmdecoder.com—is redirected to Pessl's homepage. This is one of the challenges that novelists face when choosing to embed digital elements into their print narratives: how long will the digital elements be accessible? Disabling certain elements of the novel could have tremendous consequences in the way that the novel is

archived and accessed years from now. Today, it is no burden at all to find a copy of

Middlemarch or *Moby-Dick* and read them in their entirety. *Night Film* brings up the

question of how novels will be accessed and distributed in the future. If their features

require monthly payments to keep them operable, who foots the bill, and what happens

when digital novels are no longer accessible? These will be the questions faced by many

of the authors who spread their work across digital and print media, such as Steven Hall's

The Raw Shark Texts (2007). The novel consists of 36 chapters, but according to Hall,

there are also 36 un-chapters that do not exist within the covers of the novel. In a message

board post from Steven-Hall.com, he explains: "Not all the negatives are as long as a

novel chapter - some are only a page, some are only a couple of lines. Some are much

longer than any chapters in the novel. Not all the negatives are online, some are, but

they're hiding. Some are out there in the real world, waiting to be found" (Hall). Hall, like

Pessl, poses important questions about the future of the novel.

Adam Thirwell engages with some of these same questions, but his approach is

starkly different. Whereas *Night Film* is over six hundred pages and includes a plethora

of supplementary material, Thirlwell's *Kapow!* (2012) is barely over eighty pages, and is

entirely self-contained. *Kapow!* consists of rogue blocks of text that appear in odd shapes,

upside down, and on narrow threads across pages that occasionally unfold to reveal up to

five additional panels. The novel must be rotated and unfolded and read on angles.

Kapow's critical awareness of the new media ecology offers a unique perspective on the

role of the novel. "Whatever people say and discuss," claims a character, "there is

multimedia content that can prove or disprove it. There is too much content" (28). In an

act of literal and figurative revolution the narrator "[imagines] new forms, like pull-out

sentences, and multiple high-speed changes in direction " (18). These formal qualities of the novel seek to emulate the modern world of endless digression and connection. Thirlwell writes, "I was imagining a story that as made up of so many digressions and evasions that in order to make it readable it would need to be divided in every direction" (18). The role of the novel, for Thirlwell, is to shatter the illusion of linearity. It is to create a revolution against traditional narrative structures that fail to capture the diverse and digressive world that it claims to represent.

The novel *S.* (2013) by JJ Abrams and Doug Dorst, is presented as a historical document. The book itself is a journal from a shipwrecked sailor, and the margins are crammed with handwritten annotations. Tucked within the pages of the journal, the reader finds fold out maps, handwritten letters, photographs, postcards, and a functioning compass. Navigating this novel, much like Pessl's *Night Film,* is an exercise in piecing together facts and clues from various documents. The novel contains no overt references to new media. In fact, *Wired* described *S.* as "a book about the value of books, and what they can offer us that other storytelling mediums cannot." The *Chicago Tribune* described it as "a celebration of the book as a physical thing." Yet, in its abundance of information and sources, the text seems aggressively aware of the same issues that Thirlwell tackles: there is too much information, too many digressions.

As the novel continues to evolve and incorporate new media forms, it is worthwhile to look to its future. In Robin Sloan's *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore,* Kat asks Clay to imagine the future. Clay thinks about hoverboards and the end of cancer. Kat presses him: "Go further." He considers space travel and transporters. When she presses him to go further, he realizes that he can't. He says, "Imagination runs out. . . .

219

We probably just imagine things based on what we already know, and we run out of analogies in the thirty-first century" (60). It is difficult to imagine the future of the novel; but it likely exists somewhere in the intersection of print and emerging media. Could the novel be integrated with virtual reality? How will artificial intelligence such as driverless cars shape the way we engage with text? While these questions may be difficult to answer, we can be certain that as media forms continue to converge and adapt to social and cultural needs, the novel, too, will experience new forms. Just as we look to the future, it also important to recognize how each of these novels privilege the past. Most of them are attempts to recover something that has been lost, such as Remy's memory in *The Zero*, or lost time in *A Visit from the Goon Squad.* Many of them are compilations of historical documents. Even if those documents are the emails from *A Super Sad True Love Story,* the web pages and magazine articles from *Night Film*, the journal and correspondence from a shipwrecked sailor in *S.*, or a series of text messages from the cell phone novels available on HOOKED, they all challenge the reader to engage with diverse historical materials and myriad media in order to challenge what one believes to be true. It is sometimes easy to get distracted by the novelty of some of these novels. Yet, it is also difficult to ignore the rich history of the novel that thrives within their pages (their apps, their tweets, their online documents). One doesn't have to look too hard to find other historical narratives and compilations within their pages, such as those that exist in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740). It is in this constant fluidity, this constant merging of the old and the new that the novel persists.

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