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The Silicon Valley Novel

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Version Note

Article

In recent years, quite some energy has been spent determining what comes "after postmodernism" when we speak of contemporary fiction; a literary history of the present. From Charles Altieri, through Peter Boxall, up to Stephen Burn, for just a few instances, critics have sensed that our periodising movements in contemporary fiction – an always-after modernism – have reached a state of exhaustion.[1] Some tell us that we are in a post-postmodern frame, while others, such as Bob Eaglestone, claim that such a term is "silly".[2] Yet, we continue to use periodisations (if postmodernism is actually a periodisation and not a formalist designation) as not only a neat way to subdivide aesthetic trends over time but also as a means to preserve the prestige of English studies, as Ted Underwood has noted.[3]

Literary trends, of course, are not merely delineated along formalist aesthetic lines but also through thematic cartographies of genre and theme. Historical fiction, for instance, is codified through a set of sometimes contrasting ontologies. It at once must "portray the time period as accurately as possible and avoid obvious anachronisms" – a set of realist tropes identified by Sarah Johnson – while "the reader" also "knows that the novel is a representation of something that is lost, that cannot be reconstructed but only guessed at", yielding the more "postmodern" angle

propounded by Jerome de Groot.[4] It is an unsurprising but nonetheless worthwhile observation that literary thematics cut across periodisations.

We propose that one of the emergent, but under-charted, and as-yet un-named thematic strands in recent American fiction and that contributes to this recent literary history is that of the "Silicon Valley novel". Despite having first been proposed as far back as 1997, the trend can be seen in the contemporary literary fiction of Tony Tulathimutte, Jarett Kobek, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Dave Eggers, to name but a few, but also in the trilogy of novels by Ann Bridges dubbed, "The Silicon Valley Trilogy" and in works such as Douglas Rushkoff's *Exit Strategy (Bull)* (2002), Greg Bardsley's *Cash Out* (2012), Keith Raffel's *Dot Dead* (2006), *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore: A Novel* (2012) by Robin Sloan, Pat Dillon's *The Last Best Thing* (1996), Shelley King's *The Moment of Everything* (2014), or Ellen Ullman's *The Bug* (2003), among many, many others; our list is hardly exhaustive.[5] Silicon Valley novels are concerned with the emergent technological industry in the Bay Area but they are also of a specific periodising moment. Hence, while named for the geography, we here situate the Silicon Valley novel as more tied to time in the early twenty-first century.

As of 2017, the unfolding history of Silicon Valley novels exposes several shared characteristics between these texts that we will more closely chart in the remainder of this article. Often, but not exclusively, composed by male authors with female protagonists, the Silicon Valley novel is rarely enamoured of the technological and financialised cultures that it depicts. Instead, these works are derived from a set of dystopian science or speculative -fiction traditions, with the difference being that this dystopia is one of the *present*, rather than a projection of some terrible age yet-to-come. In some senses, then, the Silicon Valley novel often might be read as its opposite, as anti-Silicon Valley fiction.

The Silicon Valley novel is also closely historicised. While we here focus most intently upon a number of contemporary authors who have turned to writing *Silicon Valley* novels after literary

careers spent elsewhere, several of these authors whose later works have focused upon the technological hub in the south of San Francisco's Bay Area have previously written novels exploring American overseas military intervention in Arab states. Thus, we move in a progression from the conquests of deserts of sand to the economic domination of the world by valleys of silicate. This yields a curiously material basis for the exploration of virtualised, digital spaces for which such novels are more widely known and for which the "Silicon Valley" has become a metonym. It is also not surprising, given that many scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which "the role of defense spending" was integral "to the development of Silicon Valley".[6]

We here use the term Silicon Valley somewhat loosely since it is, as Martin Kenney notes, difficult to trace a precise point of origin for the region that now denotes a specific brand of techno-capitalism.[7] Yet, if one traces the Valley back to "foundation of Shockley Semiconductor in 1956 or, somewhat earlier, with the 1939 partnership between William Hewlett and David Packard", as does Kenney, then it is clear that the emergence of Silicon Valley comes from the same root as much postmodern fiction of that period: the countercultural left and the "hip".[8] In this sense, that so much fiction at the end of postmodernism should find itself so critical of Silicon Valley culture – spawned, perhaps, from the same space of genesis as the postmodern novel – is a curious auto-aesthetic and cultural indictment.

In all, we here present this typology of the Silicon Valley novel as a sub-genre of a type of platform-capitalism fiction that emerges at the "end of literary postmodernism" while also charting the ways in which the virtualised commodities that dominate societal postmodernism persist.[9] This focus on Silicon Valley as a subject of critique is hardly only a novelistic phenomenon; there is even a televisual satire called *Silicon Valley*. Yet, in the long arc and lengthy gestation period of literary takes on Silicon Valley cultures over a twenty-year period that we chart in this article, these literary works operate on a distinctly different timescale from Silicon Valley itself. In a sense, the slowness of novelistic production and dissemination, coupled with the history of the Silicon Valley novel,

work within a type of slow time and present-ness that structurally opposes the accelerationism of Silicon Valley entrepreneurial cultures.

When we here speak, then, of the Silicon Valley novel as a genre, we mean this in the sense articulated by Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* where she writes of conceiving of a moment from within that moment itself as "a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters [...] are also always there for debate"; an emerging social arrangement that provides "an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold".[10] Our contention is that, from this taxonomy and its critical literary representations over a longer period, Silicon Valley emerges within these novels as a parameter of the present that signifies an unfolding failure of modernity. In these representations, Silicon Valley becomes part of a dialectic of enlightenment in which techno-progression is socio-regressive and in which the "making it new" of disruptive entrepreneurship and innovation holds out but little hope of a revitalized culture or aesthetics.

Labour Cultures, Social Security, and Personal Identity

In Douglas Coupland's prototypical Silicon Valley novel, *Microserfs* (1995), the protagonist Daniel complains of a life working at Microsoft: "Work, sleep, work, sleep, work, sleep. I know a few Microsoft employees who try to fake having a life…. You can tell they're faking it".[11] Here describing the leisure-time "life" of technological workers in the explicitly sexualised language of an elusive female orgasm, Coupland's vision of Silicon Valley has more of the Dickensian factory or a dysfunctional relationship to it than the grand sense of noble vision and purpose that the industry purportedly seeks for its projects. Indeed, when his former colleague tells him that "history is happening, it's happening now, and it is happening here, in Silicon Valley and in San Francisco," Daniel's choice to leave, in the face of such a radical re-shaping of personal identity by labour, becomes inevitable.[12] Such a focus on technologically-mediated identity through digital labour practices, linked to a re-balancing of State provision for social security, is the first area that

delineates the Silicon Valley novel, even from this early phase in the genre's history.

The fervour with which Silicon Valley pioneers spoke of their labour under this emerging paradigm of work-as-identity is well charted by historians of the technological industries. For instance, Fred Turner notes that "digital technologies" allowed early Silicon Valley entrepreneurs to "turn work into play", thereby erasing the difference between leisure and labour.[13] Alternatively, as Rebecca Solnit puts it, this conflation of work and play, or work and life, has been a feature of Silicon Valley culture from its very inception: "Silicon Valley", she writes, "has long been famous for its endless work hours, for sucking in the young for decades of sixty or seventy-hour weeks".[14] Indeed, as Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron note, two decades ago when describing the "Californian Ideology": "Lacking the free time of the hippies, work itself has become the main route of self-fulfillment for much of the 'virtual class'".[15] Since this time there have been prominent studies that attempt to understand the cultures of work and free-time that are uniquely reconfigured in the Silicon Valley areas.[16]

As a theme, the all-consuming nature of work as opposed to leisure time in the technology industry continues well into the most recent texts of this genre. It is central, for instance, also to Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013), perhaps the quintessential Silicon Valley novel. The present-day dystopia of this novel is the titular company, a thin parody of Google, whose platform TruYou bestrides the web. TruYou's central premise is that of removing user anonymity, an aspect that not only returns to a key debate from the early years of the internet, but that also brings focus to the subject-forming aspects of data capitalism.[17] For while, we are told, TruYou's policy led to the civilization of the web and the eradication of trolls, Eggers's protagonist, Mae's, ascent through the company's hierarchy not-so-subtly alerts the reader to the dystopian world behind *The Circle*'s hip façade.[18] This is achieved through an individuation of technological employees through quantified idealised avatars of themselves within re-imagined social worlds of the digital. As with Thomas Pynchon's Nicholas Windust in *Bleeding Edge* (2013) – which despite being set in New York

nonetheless encapsulates many of the thematic aspects of the Silicon Valley novel – such avatars are usually "younger version[s] of" people, a set of "not-yet-corrupted entry-level wise-ass[es]" fetishising youth and work.[19]

The metonym for the re-engineered world that Eggers gives in *The Circle* is the company's office space. This world includes gourmet restaurants, gyms, cinemas, and dorm rooms, ostensibly to provide employees with a fully-functioning society but in reality sharing more with a feudalism in which employees are housed within land owned by the corporation.[20] This world contrasts starkly with the decaying structures of the Bay Area outside *The Circle*'s campus, after neoliberal economics drove local and state governments to abandon social spending in order to balance their budgets.[21] In *The Circle*'s privatized neo-welfare state, however, employees are cushioned from the demise of the public sector but are expected, in return, to work whenever possible. The possible realm of free action by agents within Eggers's novel are, therefore, severely restricted through an economic dependence in which the boundaries between free-time and work are erased. Of course, as Marx clearly demonstrates in Chapter Ten of *Capital*, the tuned proportions of work against recuperative leisure is part of capital's structuring apparatus for the extraction of surplus value.[22] Clearly, in *The Circle* and other Silicon Valley novels like it, on-site dorms are more technologies of control and production than of liberation.[23] They are part of a mechanism that frames work as vocational and indistinct from personal identity, seen through Mae's discovery of seductive forms of labour-as-fun.[24] Indeed, such largesse in providing the perks to motivate such fear – the "nap rooms, chefs, gyms, laundry" of which Solnit writes – is now a major drain on technology firms.[25]

Perhaps more importantly, though, such environmental factors are a crucial part of self-identity construction and have been for a long time; the ways in which we define and expose ourselves in relation to work is central to how others perceive us. This auto-identity construction rests upon a balance of revelation and secrecy; a balance that is harder to maintain the longer one spends in the company of friends, or work colleagues. As Zizi Papacharissi and Emily Easton note

in their work on social media environments, "Redaction enables the bringing together and editing of identity traces, to form and frame coherent performances of sociality and self-expression […] Self-editing has always been a part of how we present the self to others".[26] Certainly, in *The Circle*, after Mae has "gone clear", she becomes much conscious about what is on vs. off -camera.[27] Likewise, in Tony Tulathimutte's *Private Citizens* (2016), there are many instances when Will alters his own behaviour since he knows that the cameras are watching.[28] The explicit codification of such redactive practices, however, while removing others in the workplace and as part of an access-agreement for institutional perks is a solid feature of several Silicon Valley narratives.

This process of self-editing and selection of identity is one that time and time again, like Pynchon's Windust, favours a presentation of youth and work. As Microserf's Daniel comments, "One grudgingly has to respect someone who's fortysomething and still in computers…. Shaw still remembers the Flintstones era of computers with punch cards and little birds inside the machines that squawked, 'It's a living'".[29] This is linked, in most of these novels, to an operating work environment that appeals as a replacement for the welfare state to the generation known as "millennials". Put otherwise, that is, a generation that has witnessed the systematic erosion of the Global North's welfare states only to see them replaced by private enclaves of provision in the form of work-related "perks".

Deserts of the Real: From Sand to Silicate

In at least three more contemporary cases, the literary-thematic histories of Silicon Valley (anti-)novels are centred around US policy interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other middle-Eastern countries with desert expanses. More specifically: authors who write novels about Silicon Valley have often previously written books that feature deserts and US overseas military policies. This phenomenon can be seen in the novelistic trajectories of Dave Eggers, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo. An additional case of American domestic policy interacting with its overseas wars can

be seen in the career of Jennifer Egan. Indeed, the post-9/11 Silicon Valley novel seems increasingly to turn its focus to US foreign policy and the link between tech-culture and foreign military intervention.

For instance, Eggers's two novels around *The Circle* are both concerned with issues of US foreign policy. In *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* (2014), Eggers's pro/an -tagonist brings seven kidnap victims to an abandoned military outpost in an explicit mirroring of US rendition and foreign policy: "every day the government is bringing some enemy combatant to some undisclosed location to interrogate them, right?".[30] Indeed, Eggers's novel is not subtle and one reviewer described it as a "200-plus-page hammer to the head".[31] Yet, time and time again, problems with US home and economic policy are linked in this text to acute overseas conflict. In one of the conversations with the Congressman whom Thomas has kidnapped, the economics of war are described thus: "there isn't a line item for war [on the budget]". It is also said, though, that "everyone agrees on funding the troops".[32] The discussion at this point, centring around the issuing of globalised government bonds in order to fund acute overseas conflict, interlinked with problems of US home identity, are key to this novel.

If this interlinking of US foreign policy and globalised finance is important in *Your Fathers*, then it is even more prominently pronounced in the text that precedes *The Circle* in Eggers's ouevre: *A Hologram for the King* (2012). In this novel, set primarily in Saudi Arabia, the useless protagonist and synecdochal American, Alan Clay, seeks to market a holographic telecommunications system to King Abdullah. As with *Your Fathers*, the message is far from complex; the virtualised commodity ecosystem that Clay peddles is met with an equally unsubstantiated response from the Saudi delegation and the epigraph from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) ("It is not every day that we are needed") signposts both thematic disappointment/non-appearance and linguistic/narrative minimalism.

Yet perhaps what is most remarkable in *Hologram* is the way in which deserts and

technology are fused into a single narrative strain; as though the material substrate of *sand* fostered some binding connection between Silicon Valley and American foreign policy between texts, even when it is an inverse relationship. Indeed, between the presentation of the naïve Clay, not understanding that his new-found Saudi acquaintances are "kidding […] About wanting the U.S. to invade [their] country" and the consistent "burst[s] of dust" that pepper the text, Eggers once more strongly links the geographical situation of the novel to US foreign policy.[33] There is also, though, a technological link that seems, at times, to be inverted. When the technology team are attempting to boost their signal in order to demonstrate their holographic equipment, their success is directly linked, at multiple instances, to the inverse temperature of the hostile environment. When the "air-conditioning [has] stopped working", the narrative of the wireless network strength switches to the past tense: "signal was strong today".[34] However, even a short time after the breakdown of the cooling, the signal has gone. When the temperature is later restored to "a cool sixty-eight degrees" the wifi becomes "strong enough to work with" again and the demonstration is "astounding".[35] In this land where, the guidebooks say, "Alan might be sold to Al-Qaeda", in which "the heat was alive, predatory", the "*Los Angeles with burqas*" that Clay experiences is only the result of "an act of sheer will" that has been imposed upon an "unrelenting desert".[36] It is a desert that seems antagonistic to Silicon Valley's un-real holographic technologies.

Although Pynchon's aforementioned *Bleeding Edge* is not strictly set in Silicon Valley – and is, instead, more merely a broader reflection of the technologies that emanated from that region – there is also a tracking back to the desert in his earlier works. For the Silicon Valley narrative in Pynchon's career actually began in *Inherent Vice* (2009) where Fritz Drybeam speaks to Doc of "a network of computers [...] all connected together by phone lines. UCLA, Isla Vista, Stanford. Say there's a file they have up there and you don't, they'll send it right along at fifty thousand characters per second".[37] Taking this as the entry point for Pynchon's Silicon Valley arc, we see that *Against the Day* (2006) was the novel immediately before *Inherent Vice*. While these texts could not, in

some ways, be more different – *Inherent Vice* is set in 1960s California and traces a short time period in the life of Doc Sportello whereas *Against the Day* spans the decades of the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries – there is actually more that connects them. For what, then, sits at the heart of *Against the Day* but a story of America's old West that is linked to more recent domestic and foreign policy? The reader is certainly given, in this earlier text, multiple references to the sandy deserts of the West and the world. Aside from the explicit setting in the American desert there is a character called Inspector Sands, punning on the emergency code used on London's underground railway system, alongside a fictional "ancient metropolis of the spiritual, some say inhabited by the living, others say empty, in ruins, buried someplace beneath the desert sands of Inner Asia", as just a few instances.[38]

Once again, though, the deserts of *Against the Day* are trans-temporal and linked to contexts of recent American foreign and domestic policy. For instance, the Vormance Expedition in the novel is framed as an allegory to the 9/11 attacks on New York. The reader is presented here with scenes of "fire, damage to structures, crowd panic" and "disruption to common services". The city's denizens are then presented as an "embittered and amnesiac race" who are "unable to connect" to the "moment of their injury, unable to summon the face of their violator". The city in Pynchon's historical novel even creates a "night panorama" on "each anniversary of that awful event".[39] Thus, Pynchon's old West and global deserts are framed with reference to the surrounding contexts of 9/11 and the ongoing war on terror. Again, this occurs immediately before Pynchon moves, first tangentially, and then more fully, to write of the emergence of digital networked technologies in the Valley area.

The list goes on. Don DeLillo, whose most recent novel *Zero K* (2016) is, again, not set in Silicon Valley but nonetheless frames the dream of its Valley entrepreneurs of evading death through cryogenics, gives us the same desert narrative. For in DeLillo's preceding work, *Point Omega* (2010), the work that perhaps most overtly connects contemporary terrorism to a statist

totalitarianism, we are introduced to Richard Elster, the war hawk, who explicitly says that America "needed" the Iraq war: "we needed it in our desperation, our dwindling, needed something, anything, whatever we could get, rendition, yes, and then invasion".[40] Yet, Elster's daughter, Jessie, one day decides simply to walk out into the US desert: the lady vanishes, as David Cowart put it.[41] When she disappears in what is referred to as the "Impact Area", it is clear to the reader, given Elster's policy background, that the foreign policy with respect to the lands of the desert has once again circled around to claim another American victim.[42]

Finally, if DeLillo is often deemed "eerily prescient", even when others call for caution on his supposed prophetic ability, Jennifer Egan's intersection of Silicon Valley technological capitalism with the war on terror has the same resonance.[43] In fact, almost the whole of Egan's oeuvre is saturated with references to Silicon Valley culture. In *The Keep* (2006), Egan's protagonist, Danny, finds it difficult to stay out of contact when his mobile phone ceases to work, thereby exploring the anxiety of disconnection in a world of hyper- and persistent- connectivity. Likewise, in her celebrated *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), Egan explicitly renders a portion of the narrative in the form of a Microsoft Powerpoint presentation, invoking the ubiquity of such software contexts for information presentation.

However, Egan's *Look at Me* (2001) is the novel that completes the cycle of desert sand to Californian silicate within her oeuvre. For this novel, in itself, bombards the reader with Silicon Valley-esque technologies, such as PersonalSpaces, a type of Facebook *avant la lettre*. The text is also, according to at least one reviewer, centred around "image culture and self-representation via technology".[44] Yet, this breakthrough text for Egan, released in the week of the September 11 attacks on New York city, also has a strong focus on contemporary terrorism. As Egan herself wrote in a journalistic work: "in the days since Sept. 11", she "fielded countless calls and e-mails from spooked friends remarking on the parallels between [her] terrorist, one of whose several names is Z, and the emerging portraits of the men who destroyed the World Trade Center".[45] While, once again,

many focused on the prophetic nature of Egan's writing – "the uncanny way in which many of Egan's futuristic visions have come true" – what is important here is that her Silicon Valley narratives links terrorism to US foreign politics.[46]

It is not surprising that authors writing in the contemporary moment would choose to use deserts as metonymic place-signifiers of terrorism, and US foreign and domestic policy consequences. That so many writers have done so in a career arc that has then, broadly speaking, turned to Silicon Valley technologies and labour conditions marks an important and oft-repeated pattern in the genesis of this genre. Others, such as John Masterson, have gestured towards this already in Eggers's work.[47] There is also the circuitous path of slow violence that threads from US foreign and domestic policy into climate change and the various technological complicities and remedies of Silicon Valley that has been shown by Rob Nixon.[48] So no, again, this is not surprising. It is less, though, a dust-to-dust burial but more of a symbiotic transfer: amid a shift from sand to silicon, the Silicon Valley novel tends to emerge.

Valley Girls: Gender and the Silicon Valley Novel

As numerous veterans reveal, Silicon Valley has a huge gender problem.[49] Its espoused meritocratic and "flat" institutions often actually harbour a hierarchical, masculinist, patriarchal culture.[50] As *The Guardian* reported in March 2017, "startups and tech corporations skirt employment laws and reject HR practices while sometimes fostering a party culture where young male executives encourage socializing and drinking".[51] Elsewhere in the Valley, jokes about rape, condescension towards women, discriminatory pay and hiring practices, predatory attitudes towards sex, and an "asshole culture" permeating all working practices have been reported.[52] Surveys also suggest that most women who work in the technology industry have experienced sexual harassment, and a number of female whistleblowers faced further harassment online after going public, a damning indictment of "tech bro" culture. Male domination of the technology industry is facilitated by a

wave of men heading to Silicon Valley rather than Wall Street to make their fortunes courtesy of venture capital and a rapacious economic culture.[53] While the pejorative term "Valley Girls" refers geographically to the San Fernando area, rather than Silicon Valley, there is clearly much gender trouble in the more technologically orientated space to the north.

These issues with gender in many Silicon Valley novels are compounded by their intersections with race. As noted by Lisa Nakamura, systemic racial prejudices within Silicon Valley culture are reflected in speculative fictional representations; a matter that calls for further, ongoing intersectional critique.[54] Indeed, Silicon Valley's whiteness is reflected in the bleached racial landscape of these texts. In reality, the San Francisco Bay Area possesses an ambivalent relationship to its ethnic mix, reflected in periodic crises such as the attempt to bar Japanese and Korean children from San Francisco's public schools in 1906 to the displacement of the poor and ethnic minorities in the 1960s through the "modernization" of the city center.[55] Such displacement accelerated during the dot-com booms as money poured into the bank accounts of white software engineers and tech entrepreneurs courtesy of venture capital. This nouveau riche lavished wealth on real estate, encouraging landlords to evict lower-paying (often minority) tenants in order to maximize their rental income.[56]

Silicon Valley novels, over most of their arc, tend to be poor at addressing these racial dynamics. For instance, one might note that although Dave Eggers does devote one small portion of *The Circle* to the racial prejudices of the police force and "driving while black", this feels tokenistic.[57] Perhaps at least one major exception to this decentering of race, though, is Tony Tulathimutte's *Private Citizens*. Vanya and Will, a nascent web celebrity and her Asian-American software engineer boyfriend, are defined by their otherness. After a childhood accident, Vanya spends thousands of dollars making herself into a wheelchair-bound beauty. This character believes that Will, an agoraphobic, has a complex about his race.[58] Vanya's life-vlogging venture, however, destroys Will's self-confidence. He becomes the target of online racial abuse and becomes

embroiled in a racially-charged fight on a San Francisco bus, momentarily forgetting that he is broadcasting the incident.[59] Amid the fallout, Vanya persuades Will to have an eye operation that will westernize his Oriental eyes and thus cure what is apparently his personal psychological problem.[60] Vanya's attempt to monetize the botched operation leads to their final split.[61]

While, then, we argue, Silicon Valley novels often tend to under-play issues of race, they *do* acknowledge the oppressive gender dynamic of the space that they depict, at least implictly. For they are largely written by men, with female protagonists. At once, this signals an ambivalence from authors about the patriarchal culture of Silicon Valley while also, perhaps unwittingly, reinforcing that very same culture.

An instructive range of examples can be drawn upon to illustrate this point. Take again, for instance, Tulathimutte's *Private Citizens*. Tulathimutte, a Stanford graduate, writes of a female character, Cory, who finds her life destroyed by Silicon Valley culture. Cory, the book's conscience, begins as an idealist social activist. Her politics, we are told, were forged on the campus of Stanford University where she stood out for rejecting her peers' willingness to embrace Stanford's integration with Silicon Valley.[62] Cory's path through various aspects of Silicon Valley, though, is guided by male influence. First, as do many American fictions, the novel begins with an inheritance, as Cory takes on a failing social enterprise when its male CEO allegorically dies at his desk ("our non-profit is a nonrevenue" he tells her in his last days).[63] When the next man, her father, lovingly tells her to take care, she resolves this to a statement meaning "take care: of business", rather than the familiar interpretation.[64]

The induction of Cory to the world of platform capitalism is likewise facilitated by a man. Will introduces her to the web at "the half-empty Revolution Café", commenting that she had no choice but to engage with Google; "capitalism at its finest" he tells her.[65] After a pedestrian dialogue in which they outline their respective attitudes towards the internet, money, consumerism, and ideals, Will signs her up to Gmail, formally inducting Cory into platform capitalism.[66] This trend of

inheritance runs through the text as, in a mirror of the opening, Cory eventually inherits her father's own business. Ironically, it is the private education that her father funded that yields this obligation to take over and run blue-collar capitalist industries, instead of pursuing the earlier socialist utopia for which Cory yearned. In other words, family situations, and particularly those of male-female inheritance, are closely linked to the gender difficulties in the Silicon Valley novel.

The gendered narrative is most apparent in *The Circle* where metaphors of rape culture abound. Led by "three wise men", the Circle draws Mae's college friend Annie into its Gang of 40, a leadership cult deliberately referencing the crimes of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.[67] In this novel, however, corporate parodies of family and relationships are paraded that continually enforce lopsided gender expectations and that violate the texts' women. For instance, Francis, one of Mae's coworkers, transparently reveals to the entire workforce that he wants to date her. Indeed, the novel's dating service, LuvLuv is described by its creator as a means to eliminate the uncertainty of dating. After trawling all of a potential paramour's social media posts, the fictional service promises to ensure that the user will not make a fool of him- or her-self or unwittingly offend, thereby enabling him or her to emphasize compatibility on the date.[68] While the crowd whoops and cheers at the ingenuity of such an application, Mae slinks away, mortified.

A later incident intensifies this gender disparity, which seems to be rooted in cultures of American dating. As Joanna Bourke has charted, this culture is one in which a woman's consent to even minor intimacy is read as consent to any subsequent activity or escalation.[69] This conflation of rape/date culture with a technological aspect is seen when Francis secretly films a sexual encounter with Mae. When she protests, demanding its deletion, Francis states that even if he wanted to delete it, the Circle would not let him. The video thus remains available to all.[70]

This biopolitical control of individuals through a conjunction of virtue shaming, interpersonal relations, and technology – particularly directed at women – goes far further in *The Circle*, though. At an appointment with the staff clinic, Mae unwittingly ingests a sensor that will

permanently monitor her health, literally extending the surveillance state to the body. The nurse openly admits that she secretly placed the sensor in a gloopy substance given to Mae to drink rather than telling her because she would 'hem and haw,' rather than allow it to begin monitoring her every move.[71] This bodily violation of women serves as a reminder of the overlap between discourses of consent and sexual assault and their intersection once more with technology and surveillance. Further, these bodily violations within Silicon Valley is also linked to pernicious discourses of health insurance, in which bodies are made to function as currency units within symbolic economies. For, after divulging her parents' struggles with their health insurance amid her father's advancing multiple sclerosis, Mae finds that the Circle will soon expand to engulf them in its state-of-the-art healthcare plan.[72] It extracts its payment, though, via further surveillance of their home, thus creating an economy in which bodies, data, and finance become freely interchangeable.

The gender dynamics of Silicon Valley novels are often mimetic of the Valley itself. As documented in the opening part of this section, the technology sector is known for having a chronic gender problem that is hostile to women and trans-people. This feature of these texts serves to highlight this part of Silicon Valley culture. But, it is curious that so many Silicon Valley novels are written by men, with female protagonists. This causes a range of problems. First, there is the more general problem of artistic representation, namely: that in every textual depiction of distress there is the lingering possibility of readerly pleasure. As Adorno put it, "[t]he so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people [...] contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment".[73] Second, though, there is the question of whether strategies of condescension are implicit in such writings. While male authors writing of the technological environment seem to be highlighting the gender culture of Silicon Valley, their novels also profit by such a focus. Hence, the situation emerges, as described by Pierre Bourdieu, in which we see "those strategies by which agents who occupy a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space symbolically deny the social distance between themselves and others, a distance which does not thereby cease to

exist".[74] Such strategies of condescension are of benefit to male authors who wish to appear as though their novels have a social conscience.

Dystopias of the Present

Silicon Valley novels and their bleak depictions do not arise from a vacuum. Instead, they are clearly situated within a lineage of North American technological dystopian writers. In the near-term literary history figures in this tradition would include, among others, Philip K. Dick and William Gibson, the latter of whose cyberpunk coinages seem to be taken as a motto rather than a warning for Silicon Valley. There are certainly also aspects of Margaret Atwood's work that permeate this genre (for instance, *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) extends the society-as-prison setup of which Atwood had previously written in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) to a surveillance-capitalism environment).[75]

Perhaps what is most interesting about the Silicon Valley novel in the dystopian tradition, though, is the displacement of setting and place, rather than time. Most dystopian and utopian fictions, of course, work by a distancing effect.[76] Such works usually use a temporal distancing in order to amplify the cracks in our present. Most dystopias of the twentieth century, though, also featured digital technologies. The Silicon Valley novel, however, is more akin to Menippean satire since it is set in the present but dislocated (for the most part) to one particular geographic region; as Atwood has noted of *The Circle*.[77] Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) is an apt precedent in some ways here. For Gulliver visits his lands in the novel's *present* rather than any other form of dislocated time period. There are also, in this novel, technological advances in the distant places to which Gulliver journeys (think only of the flying island in Laputa). Yet, Silicon Valley novels combine the tradition of twentieth-century dystopian fiction and its digital technologies with the present-day dislocation of space (albeit more convincingly claimed *real* space in this instance) seen in many satires.

It is on this note that we will conclude. In this piece, we have identified and characterised a set of tropes that can be said to be present within texts that we have thematically labelled "Silicon Valley novels". We have explored this subject under the headings of: depictions of platform capitalism and labour politics; a novelistic trajectory that focuses on US foreign and domestic policy with respect to terrorism; a set of problematic gender issues; and a conjoined lineage of dystopian fiction and satire. We have not attempted, due to space constraints, to outline formal or stylistic affinities between novels in these genres.

However, what we have also attempted to do here is to outline a way of thinking about generic classification of literary works that is rooted in genre, place, and near-term literary history. Rather than resorting to some label of digi-modernism or techno-modernism, the go-to terms for such works, we have tried to think about the specificities and commonalities of these works in terms that evade the formal classificatory difficulties of the many post-modernisms. In this way, through a combination of close and historical literary reading, we hope to point to a useful set of tropes that can identify and bind together a set of dystopias of the present, a set of Silicon Valley novels.

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