# Schizo-narratives: Feminist activism through affect in contemporary women's experimental writing

# Schizo-narratives: Feminist activism through Affect in Contemporary Women's Experimental Writing.

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Arts & Humanities

Birkbeck, University of London

February 2024

**Declaration**

I, Carly Marie Robinson, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed: Carly Marie Robinson

Date: 21 January 2024

**Acknowledgements**

# Abstract

This thesis investigates the affective potential of reading experimental literature as a mode of literary feminist activism. Interrogating a specific sub-set of contemporary experimental writing for its capacity to affect readers through stylistic innovation and formal experimentation, this research proposes a new definition of schizo-narratives to suggest how these texts situate the reader as active participant and co-producer of textual meaning. Examining the work of four contemporary authors; Ali Smith, Eimear McBride, Nicola Barker and Maggie Nelson, the thesis combines philosophical and literary critique with close textual analysis to advance a conception of feminist literary activism. The research is theoretical underpinned by the post-structuralist philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and utilises their concepts of minor-literature and becoming-woman as a feminist tactic of destabilising normative paradigms of subjectivity. Chapter One contextualises the definition of schizo-narratives by unpacking the concept of minor literature and tracing a history of feminist experimental writing. Chapter Two examines the Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical framework to explore how the key philosophical concepts of becoming-woman, rhythmanalysis and schizoanalysis together with scholarship on multimodality and cognitive poetics serve as the basis of the schizo-narrative model. Chapter Three begins the close textual analysis of Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet and Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY* identifying techniques that disrupt realist representations of spatio-temporality. Chapter Four investigates the use of narrative voice and multimodality as tools of disruption within Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing* and Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY* to explore themes of subjectivity as multiplicity and the fragmented self. Chapter Five brings together themes of social commentary and political urgency to demonstrate how Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* work

both as feminist becoming-narratives in themselves and demand a response and call to

action from the reader.

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# Introduction

> Becomings – they are the thing which is the most imperceptible, they are acts which can only be contained in a life and expressed in a style.[1]

## Aim of the thesis

This thesis interrogates the potential affective outcomes of reading experimental literature by way of engaging a mode of feminist literary activism. Underpinned by a theoretical framework of the post-structuralist philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, with an application of their concept of becoming-woman, this research investigates a specific sub-set of contemporary experimental writing, defined in this research as schizo-narratives, for its capacity to affect readers through stylistic innovation and literary experimentation. Investigating the work of four contemporary experimental writers; Ali Smith, Eimear McBride, Nicola Barker and Maggie Nelson, the thesis combines philosophical and literary critique with close textual analysis to advance a theoretical conception of feminist literary activism. Seeking to set the groundwork for further scholarship, it offers close readings of experimental texts to demonstrate how they can be rendered as tools for feminist engagement.

Arguing that the act of reading is an active and embodied practice of self-reflection, this research considers how the experimental form can be mobilised to affect and engage reader response as a mode of feminist literary activism. To identify how a practice of reading can be considered as activism, I draw upon scholarship across the fields of narratology, affect studies, reader response theory, literary ethics, multimodality and

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[1] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London; New York: Continuum, 2006).

cognitive poetics. Drawing on affect theory from Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick[2] and utilising

Félix Guattari's logic of affects to consider the performativity of language, together with

reader response theory from David Bleich,[3] I consider the role of the reader as an active

participant co-producing the experimental text and suggest that literary affect can inform

and impact a mode of micro-activism outside of the interaction with the text. Building on

Alex Houen's conception of literary 'potentialism'[4] and Shady Cosgrove's proposal that

literary ethics can support social and peace activism[5] this research argues for the affective

power of reading experimental literature as an active engagement that interrogates

structures of social power. Houen refutes Frederic Jameson's postmodern scepticism that

decries a waning of affect, instead maintaining that potentialism as a literary practice asks

how experimentation within literary worlds can reignite an affective critical appraisal of

political power: 'if those worlds can turn potentials into lived experience then they can be

an effective utopic force – perhaps not by way of changing political structures but at least

by altering the way individuals feel, think, and interact with their social environment'.[6]

Similarly Shady Cosgrove maintains that reading can do more than just foster empathy and

has affective power outside of the encounter with the text:

> Perhaps we read and through that process become more empathetic, but that
> empathy must then translate into action/reactions in the world beyond the text:
> reading alone isn't the answer. Reading can lead to empathy but that empathy

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[2] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity.* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003)

[3] David Bleich, *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism.* (Urbana, Il: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975)

[4] Which suggests that literary experiments with style and form hold an affective aesthetic force that has the capacity to challenge and reconfigure how people think about and are affected by constructs of social power. See Alex Houen, *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[5] Shady Cosgrove, 'Reading for peace? Literature as activism – an investigation into new literary ethics and the novel.' *Activating Human Rights and Peace: Universal Responsibility Conference* (2008) <https://ro.uow.edu.au/creartspapers/82/> [accessed 7 November 2023]

[6] Alex Houen, *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 10.

must then be employed in the philosophical, theoretical, cultural and sociopolitical realm beyond the text for it to constitute social action.[7]

Applying this within a feminist context, the thesis offers close readings to demonstrate how the texts in this study offer a feminist critique of dominant frameworks of power that perpetuate inequity.

Positioned at the intersection of several fields of academic theory, the research contributes to scholarship on twenty-first century experimental literature including the critical perspectives on the four authors chosen for this study and offers a new application of Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy within the field of English literature and contemporary literary criticism. Applying their concept of becoming as a theoretical process that undermines static forms to challenge a dominant social order, the thesis offers a series of analytical readings to determine how these key texts engender a feminist critique of established literary, social, and political frameworks. It provides critical analysis of how fictional characters participate in a mode of embodied becoming that challenges notions of static personhood, and demonstrates how the literary innovation within these texts engages the reader in a process of becoming themselves through the reading experience.

## Scope and Methodology

Contributing to the field of Deleuzo-Guattarian scholarship this research draws on the work of Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan. In their edited collection *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature* (2015), Buchanan, Matts and Tynan demonstrate how Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy as methodology can be woven through creative and

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[7] Cosgrove, 'Reading for Peace', p. 237.

aesthetic disciplines outside of the theoretical discourse of more traditionally aligned

subjects such as politics and philosophy. They affirm the use of schizoanalysis as a

transformative methodology or practice rather than a theoretical standpoint with which to

appraise a discipline.[8] This project is a feminist approach that interrogates how the

practice of non-academic reading can mobilise literary activism to engage a wider reading

audience with feminist politics of challenging social paradigms of power and control that

perpetuate inequality. This research is therefore aligned with Hannah Stark's assertion

that a Deleuzian approach to progressing feminist aims is rooted in a politics of

imperceptibility. Stark argues that Deleuze and Guattari's value for feminism lies in the

deconstructive possibilities of becoming-woman as a practice of undermining social and

cultural categories of containment:

> A feminism committed to Deleuze's notion of difference is rich with possibility.
> The vibrant complexity of difference renders identity categories permanently
> unstable and requires a dynamic politics. This is not a politics of representation but
> is attentive to the distinctions between particular bodies and the differential
> processes that engender further difference.[9]

In *Feminist Theory After Deleuze*, Stark traces the various feminist responses to, and

critiques of Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy from both the French and Anglo-American

schools of thought. Centring on the key points of feminist contention with their work, from

Irigaray's perceived erasure of women's embodied specificity to Alice Jardine's critique of

becoming-woman as obliteration of hard-won female subjectivity, Stark makes a case for

the benefits of a Deleuzian approach to rethinking difference.

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[8] Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan, 'Introduction: Towards a Schizoanalytic Criticism' in
*Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature*, ed. by Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan
(London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 1-22 (p. 4).
[9] Hannah Stark, *Feminist Theory after Deleuze* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 96.

The selection of the four Anglo-American authors for this project was based on the particularly affective response I experienced as a reader of their works, as well as the premise that the texts chosen for this study attracted popular mainstream attention and literary accolades, which suggest that their appeal to a wide audience holds much potential for disseminating an affective feminist praxis. It is therefore limited in scope to my own critical readings and seeks to offer a critical intervention in the field of English literature studies specifically covering experimental literary fiction, and in the case of Maggie Nelson's text, the genre of Auto-theory.

Ali Smith's oeuvre has already garnered substantial critical attention and the author has won many literary prizes over the years, whilst also being popular among a wide general readership[10] as Monica Germana and Emily Horton attest, 'reading Ali Smith's work is an experience that will not leave the reader unchanged.'[11] New critical perspectives on the work of Ali Smith are currently emerging with the only full-length book of critical essays on her fiction published before the Seasonal Quartet was released. The upcoming Gylphi Contemporary Writers collection due to be published in the autumn of 2024 brings together more recent scholarship in response to the first Ali Smith Symposium held at Cambridge University in April 2023, during which the author responded to the papers by reading a new piece of fiction. Recent scholarship that aligns most closely with my own includes Jess Orr's 2019 doctoral thesis which provides an examination of the reading characters within Ali Smith's work to uncover how the figure of the reader might respond to a text. Orr argues that Smith prioritises the position of her characters as readers that actively participate in the creation of meaning through their encounter with

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[10] *Autumn* has accrued over 72,000 ratings on the popular book review website Goodreads <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/28446947-autumn?ac=1&from_search=true&qid=U8mcXaHgBs&rank=1> [accessed 3 January 2023].
[11] Monica Germana and Emily Horton, *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 1.

the texts they read: 'it becomes clear through the course of Smith's narratives that her characters might act in the real world as they act towards books: with a more scrutinising eye, with defiance against authority, and with a willingness to challenge and reimagine the discourses surrounding them.'[12] These reading characters then provide a meta-reference for the power of reading and the potential Smith's own readers hold to afford change in their own environments. As Orr attests:

> Smith's readers are also critically involved in this activity, unafraid to challenge aspects of the text they disagree with or find problematic, and are willing to adopt a similar stance in relation to other aspects of their lives. Frequently in Smith's texts, characters who read books are also more likely to question social norms and challenge hegemonic discourses in the wider world, which they find to be socially divisive and oppressive. In this regard, the figure of the reader within Smith's work is also representative of a wider sense of democratic participation and resistance to authority.[13]

This research also sits closely to Alex Calder's work on Ali Smith's literary innovation as an ethics of care that allows readers to discover the inherent connectivity and relationality within the fragmentation of contemporary human experience:

> Premised upon addressability, artfulness demonstrates that the avant-garde edge of contemporary fiction can activate ethical dialogue about relational vulnerability to realize compassionate perspectives through metafiction and experimental narrative styles.[14]

Calder's analysis of Smith's *Artful* (2012) alongside experimental texts by Max Porter and Eley Williams proposes literary innovation or 'Artfulness' as an aesthetic practice that

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[12] Jess Orr, 'Leav(ing) room for the reader: the agency of characters who read in the fiction of Ali Smith.' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of St Andrews, 2019), p. 2.
[13] Ibid., pp. 8-9.
[14] Alex J. Calder, 'Artfulness: Intertextuality, Wordplay, and Precariousness in Contemporary Experimental Fiction', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 63:5, (2022) 547-570 (p. 549) <10.1080/00111619.2020.1865256> [accessed 29 May 2023]

draws the reader into a self-reflexive response to their immediate realities in ways which

can prompt imaginings of alternate realities they might engender:

> Mediating in-between author and reader, artful fiction acts as if in dialogue with a
> reader as an explication of relationality rather than antifoundational performance.
> Such textual mediation exceeds arbitrary language games, but rather enables
> interstitial reflection upon the precariousness of contemporary experience.[15]

Nicole Schrag (2023) and Soňa Šnircová  (2021) both situate Smith's Seasonal quartet

within the metamodernist turn as examples of a literary aesthetics that reflect positive

affective outcomes.  Soňa Šnircová analyses Smith's *Winter* for its metamodernist tactics

of fostering empathy and enabling affective responses of feeling through its interplay of

stylistic forms.[16] While Nicola Schrag argues that Smith's amalgamation of metamodern

forms that play with ekphrasis, real time events, political and social commentary engage a

'porous aesthetic approach' that blurs the boundaries between the spheres of author, text

and reader.[17]

Similar to the critical acclaim and recent emergence of scholarship on Ali Smith's

work, Nicola Barker has garnered favour in broadsheet reviews with her writing described

as 'extravagantly unusual',[18] avant-garde, and weird.[19] Literary journalist Alex Clarke writes

of *H(A)PPY* as,  'this is more than an experiment in form, a writing exercise designed to

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[15] Ibid., p. 551.
[16] Soňa Šnircová, 'Art, Depth and Affect in 'Winter': Metamodernist contexts of Ali Smith's novel', *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai*. Philologia, 66: 2 (2021) 159-174.
[17] Nicole Schrag, 'Metamodernism and Counterpublics: politics, aesthetics and porosity in Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet', *Textual Practice*, 37, 12 (2023), 2019-2038.
[18] Justin Jordan, 'H(a)ppy by Nicola Barker review – visionary satire of a new information age' *The Guardian,* 14 July 2017, < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/14/happy-nicola-barker-review-science-fiction-dystopian-vision> [accessed 6 January 2024]
[19] Alex Preston, 'Nicola Barker: 'If I have a life philosophy, it's ferocious innocence'', *The Guardian*, 11 July 2020, < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jul/11/nicola-barker-if-i-have-a-life-philosophy-its-ferocious-innocence> [accessed 3 January 2024)

divert and wrongfoot both novelist and reader.'[20] A Gylphi collection of Critical Essays is the first collected book of scholarship on the fiction of Nicola Barker, with a singular essay by Eleanor Bryne on *H(A)PPY*: 'The Pursuit of Happiness in H(A)PPY, or What a Difference an (A) Makes.' Other recent publications that align with this research include Tymon Adamczewski's article that proposes Barker's deployment of multimodal communication performs a rupturing of the textual encounter that extends the affective response beyond the reading experience:

> In the case of the novel's materiality, its veering entanglement in the theme of revolution drags the readers into its storyworld and allows them to participate in the subversive dealings of the protagonist. In destabilising its mode of expression, the text also offers an illustration of strategies for charging the materiality of writing with signification.[21]

My use of a Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophical framework as an approach to literary criticism sits alongside several spheres of established and emerging scholarship including queer and crip theory. These theoretical positions embody the concept of becoming-woman in their advocation for an adoption of marginalised positionalities as a way to challenge dominant frameworks of power and control. Erica Gene Delsandro's comparative analysis of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* presents a trans-focussed reading that advocates the generative possibilities of adopting trans-ness as a praxis, one which reconfigures heteronormative paradigms: 'Arguably, both experiments in lifewriting position trans as a reorienting force in cisheteropatriarchal society, offering readers a model of trans attentiveness to apply to

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[20] Alex Clark, 'Nicola Barker: 'I find books about middle-class people so boring – I feel like stabbing myself', *The Guardian*, 22 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/22/nicola-barker-books-interview-love-island-happy> [accessed 03 January 2024]

[21] Tymon Adamczewski, 'Authoring the Readerly Experience: On Materiality, Multimodality and Singularity of Literature in Nicola Barker's *H(a)ppy*' *Avant*, XII, 3 (2021) 1-12 <https://doi.org/10.26913/avant.2021.03.09>

our reading, writing, and living.'[22] Similarly, Lucretia Rose McCarthy highlights Maggie

Nelson's use of self-exposure as a praxis of embodying crip and queer identity. McCarthy

argues that Nelson's centring of a polyvocality of marginalised queer voices defy

heteronormative constructs of objectivity as perpetuated through singular (often male)

figures of authority and instead highlights the elasticity of thought as it moves with, and

through a multitude of subjectivities.[23]

## Research questions and the changing shape of the research

The original premise of this research was to use Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical

framework of becoming-woman as a methodology to examine how the chosen texts

centred becoming through an embodied female specificity. My research questions focus

on how becoming as a concept can be actualised or enacted as a driver for feminist

activism within every day or real-life environments. Becoming-woman is conceptually

striking in its advocation of a marginalised female positionality as the starting point for

undoing patriarchal dominance and my motivation for the research has always been the

positive and generative possibilities that I saw emerging from this philosophical

framework. One of the tensions within the work has been the need to balance the

theoretical and philosophical underpinning with a project that actively seeks to advance

feminist praxis in a meaningful way, and one that has reach outside of academia. It was

therefore important to argue for a notion of literary activism within accessible texts that

garnered a wide general readership, and accounts for my choice of authors whose works

have been awarded literary prizes for accessibility. McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*

and Ali Smith's *How to be Both* won the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2014 and 2015

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[22] Erica Gene Delsandro, 'The Trans Lifewriting of Virginia Woolf and Maggie Nelson.' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 42: 2 (2023) 313-341 (p. 336)
[23] Lucretia Rose McCarthy, 'Radical Exposure: Crip and Queer in Maggie Nelson's Autotheory.' C21 Literature Journal of 21st Century Writings X:X (2023), 1-20 (p. 5).

respectively (then named the Bailey's Prize). At the time of the prize being awarded the key criteria were originality, accessibility, and excellence in writing by women.[24]

Another tension that I have grappled with during the course of this research is the shift between my initial commitment to a specifically female-focussed deconstruction of hierarchical power, to a broader acceptance of the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of becoming-imperceptible as an embrace of multitudinous difference. Since starting my research in 2016, the development of feminist theory and praxis has shifted significantly along with the changing shape of contemporary identity politics and issues around gender and its malleability. It is therefore through this evolving landscape of feminist responses, both theoretical and practical, to systems of patriarchal power that this research seeks to intervene. In Chapter Two I reference two key feminist texts that address systemic gender-based inequalities – Rebecca Solnit's *Whose Story Is This? Old Conflicts, New Chapters* (2019) and Caroline Criado Perez *Invisible Women Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (2019) as well as Laura Bates' Everyday Sexism project to contextualise the feminist aims this thesis seeks to bolster – that of highlighting and undoing embedded structural inequality. By situating this intervention at the level of literary activism, this research suggests a project of reading for change or reading as activism that may further support practical and active modes of feminist challenges to structures of inequality.

In what follows, I investigate the tensions and connections between modernist and postmodernist forms of literary production with particular reference to the use of Deleuzo-Guattarian thought. This forms part of a wider feminist project which I will briefly contextualise here and develop in further chapters. In the troubling contemporary climate of an increasingly polarised society, basic human rights have been rescinded to an

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[24] Carly Robinson, 'The Becoming of Contemporaneity through Experimental Fiction', *Dandelion: Postgraduate Arts Journal and Research Network*, 8: 1 (2017), p. 3. <https://doi.org/10.16995/ddl.361>

alarming degree for multiple groups of people. When I began writing this thesis, I was

concerned with the unfolding political events that required an urgent feminist response in

the face of new restrictions on women's rights, particularly with reference to women's

bodily autonomy and personal freedom. During the course of my research, I have

observed that the rights of women (both cisgender and transgender) continue to be

decimated, along with a wider more sustained attack on the human rights of multiple

groups of people from refugees and asylum seekers, to the homeless and those in poverty,

to the LGBTQIA+ community. Divisive political tactics played out through monopolised

media outlets reaffirmed an ideological binary, leaving no room for nuance. This has fed

into an upsurge of neoliberal individualism and nationalism across Europe and America,

the election of right-wing leaders like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Stefan Löfven, and

the subsequent proliferation of far-right groups. Theresa May's affiliation with Trump

caused protests around the UK during his visit in July 2018[25] and her governmental alliance

with the Democractic Unionist Party, a political party strongly opposed to legalising

abortions in Northern Ireland,[26] caused concern for the prospect of legalising abortion in

Northern Ireland. While the decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland was legally

achieved in 2019, a year after the Eighth Amendment was repealed in Ireland, the

overturning of Roe vs Wade in America ended the national right to abortion and fourteen

states have since enacted near total bans. The practicality of access to abortion services

still remains precarious with new challenges to bodily autonomy and safety being brought

in both the UK and America as more power is given to the police while rights are stripped

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[25]Natasha Rees-Bloor, 'Anti-Trump protests in the UK -in pictures', *The Guardian*, (2018)
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/gallery/2018/jul/13/anti-trump-protests-in-the-uk-in-pictures> [accessed 11 November 2023]
[26] Sam Coates, 'Theresa May Facing DUP clash on Northern Ireland Abortions', *The Times* (2018)
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dup-ready-to-square-up-to-may-on-northern-ireland-abortions-bill-zj3x608v7> [accessed 11 November 2023]

from citizens.[27] The #MeToo movement and the murder of Sarah Everard brought the

issue of violence against women to the attention of the mainstream media yet this

violence continues to go unrecorded, belittled or written off as tragic isolated incidents

rather than a systemic cultural problem.[28] Practical intersectional feminist action and

activism is ongoing with awareness-raising, protest marches and lobbying of parliament in

response to social justice issues of trans rights, reproductive autonomy, sexual

discrimination, the gender pay gap, sexual and domestic violence all stemming from

endemic cultural sexism and misogyny that disproportionately affects people of colour.

Laura Bates has done great work raising the profile of the structural sexism and inherent

cultural misogyny that continues to oppress women through her online 'Everyday Sexism'

Project and popular books that provide accessible feminism through recounting relatable

anecdotal experience. In her 2022 book *Fix the System, Not the Women* she calls for

institutional change in key societal areas of criminal justice, policing, education, politics

and media:

> The sexism that runs through these institutions is normalised and exacerbated by
> the gender inequality in our culture. Our day-to-day attitudes and behaviours
> towards women prepare us not to notice the extent of the problem or how deeply
> embedded it is in the very bones of our society. The only meaningful way to move
> forward is to embrace root-and-branch reform across these institutions – the kind
> of bold reboot that nobody will even entertain as long as we keep thinking the
> current system is normal, 'this is just the way things are', 'nothing is wrong'.
> Nothing will truly change until we acknowledge that the problem is with the
> system, not the women.[29]

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[27] As well as the Conservative Government's legal changes restricting the right to protest through the 2022 Policing Act and the 2023 Public Order Act <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/advice_information/public-order-act-new-protest-offences/> [accessed 12 November 2023], see also police intervention in women's healthcare: Maya Oppenheim, ''Deeply Sinister': Police testing women who have miscarriages for abortion drugs', *The Independent* (2023) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/police-testing-abortion-drugs-miscarriage-b2439733.html> [accessed 11 November 2023]

[28] The MeToo movement is an organisation founded by activist Tarana Burke supporting victims of sexual assault that went viral in 2017 as people across the globe used it to highlight the magnitude of sexual violence. See < https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/> [accessed 12 November 2023]. The rape and murder of Sarah Everard by Police Officer Wayne Couzens made headlines because the perpetrator used his authority as a police officer to abduct her, yet the murders of hundreds of other women murdered by men are not given as much, if any media coverage.

[29] Laura Bates, *Fix the System, Not the Women* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2022)

The turn of these global events has engaged a new wave of grassroots feminism.[30]

However, the contemporary moment also harbours the risk of apathetic acquiescence as individuals hide behind their screens in passive voyeuristic compliance or opt for empty performative gestures. The aim of this research then is to identify a feminist project of activism within literary innovation that engages readers with critical thinking and new lines of thought. This thesis suggests that accessible experimental texts can work as a tool for socio-political engagement for a wide readership, to stimulate the self-reflexive consciousness of readers and promote a collective response of awareness and activism that may propel social change.

## Reading cultures

While this research alludes to reading cultures and online communities of readers that engage with books using social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, it does not directly analyse reader responses to the texts in this study and therefore does not provide qualitative data on the affective results of reader response other than my own. The projected impact of this research however is a theoretical grounding that could support further research using qualitative methods including focus groups or interviews with readers that may offer insights into the actuality of affective response, or a quantitative analysis of reader responses from the aforementioned reading community platforms.

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[30] Feminist activism through music (Feminist Punk such as The Baby Seals, Dream Nails, The Tuts, The Menstrual Cramps), the use of social media, petitions and blogging to highlight feminist issues and campaigns from organisations such as Pregnant Then Screwed and Laura Bates' Everyday Sexism Project. See <https://pregnantthenscrewed.com/about-maternity-discrimination/> [accessed 11 November 2023], <https://everydaysexism.com/> [accessed 11 November 2023].

## Outline of chapters

Chapter One explores the literary background of this project with reference to Deleuze and Guattari's model of minor literature – a category they define as literature that destabilises language in its signification and meaning, to undermine dominant frameworks of order. Tracing a connective history from the experimental narrative styles of modernist authors cited by Deleuze and Guattari, to the literary innovations of twenty-first century writers, I map a trajectory of experimental writing to demonstrate how these ongoing literary experiments stimulate and engage an affective reading practice that carries weight outside of the reading experience. Interrogating a history of feminist literary innovation to situate it within a framework of minor literature affirms a connective background to the work of the contemporary authors in this study and suggests that the formal experimentation and disruption of narratorial norms deployed therein engage the reader with a mode of affective becoming-woman.

Chapter Two outlines how the Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophical framework is used as methodology to analyse the texts chosen for this study. In developing their conceptual framework of becoming as a process of change, and schizoanalysis as a technique of literary analysis, it provides a new definition of this specific subset of experimental writing as the co-production of schizo-narratives that emerges between writer and reader. In their use of formal fragmentation these schizo-texts disrupt the reading experience, encouraging the reader to reflect upon their own fragmentary mode of being. Exploring rhythmanalysis as methodology it suggests how the examination of rhythms emerging from embodied experiences and patterns of everyday lived reality can lead to a becoming for author and reader through the production of the schizo-narrative. Connecting these schizo-narratives to a contemporary feminist politics of literary activism that has the power and potential for further impact outside of literary and academic

structures, the thesis suggests that it is the fracturing of the reading experience, and, in turn, of the reader's own subjectivity, that enables a process of becoming.

Chapter Three examines how Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet navigates alternate theories of temporal experience and spatial boundaries that break with a Western philosophical canon, in which the conception of time is predominantly seen as linear and progressive, and space is commodifiable. Smith's emphasis on rhythms, repetition and natural cycles calls attention to alternative temporal modes that speak back to Indigenous Knowledge and cultural practices which prioritise natural and embodied temporalities and symbiotic living. Highlighting the problematic narrative of a singular constructed notion of temporality, based on a specifically Western patriarchal and colonising perspective, the textual analysis indicates how alternate frames of references are invoked to draw the reader into a mode of questioning that disrupts dominant paradigms of knowledge premised on the supposition of a universal understanding of time and space. In tracing unrecorded and historically maligned Black histories in her book *Don't Touch My Hair* (2019), Emma Dabiri highlights how traditional African cultures prior to colonialism conceived of time as cyclical with 'the belief that the 'past' is not necessarily dispensed with but is in fact in dialogue with the future.'[31] Smith's Seasonal Quartet activates alternative ways of thinking about temporal modes and experience as well as challenging the culturally constructed notions of boundaries and containment that restrict movement and the free flow of bodies.

Chapter Four investigates the use of narrative voice, linguistic rupturing and multimodal forms to convey the fragmented self or schizo-subject as a multi-faceted entity undergoing constant change. By interrogating the philosophical, cultural and literary construction of subjectivity, I discuss how Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY* and Eimear McBride's *A*

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[31] Emma Dabiri, *Don't Touch My Hair*, (London: Penguin, 2019) p. 3.

*Girl is a Half-formed Thing* offer a feminist critique of the unified human subject that may

be represented on the page as an identifiable person or character, in favour of an

entangled corporeal, disruptive subject-in-process. Proposing an alternative conception of

subjectivity utilising the Deleuzo-Guattarian framework of collective assemblages, in which

an individual subject is not a static being but a collection of fluctuating and changing

singularities, this chapter situates the fragmented self and the disruptive body as the site

of becoming. In focusing on the splintering of selfhood, I analyse how these texts recover a

notion of subjectivity from the trappings of identity categories based in patriarchal

frameworks of binary codes, and offer a reconfiguration of subjectivity as embodied

expression of fluid desire.

Chapter Five considers how the splintered or schizo-subjects presented in the

Chapter Four are invoked and utilised to provide social commentary in a wider context of

political urgency. I argue that this reconfiguration of the subject as an assemblage of

shifting multiplicities engages a mode of becoming-woman by defying normative

paradigms of personhood. In this reading, becoming-woman is enacted through the

refutation of traditional constructs of subjectivity and the potential this holds to unpick

existing frameworks of power and oppression. In the textual analysis of Ali Smith's

Seasonal quartet and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, I demonstrate how identity

constructs and their associated power values can be undone from the queer spaces of the

marginalised as a mode of becoming-woman. Applying Hannah Stark's assertion that:

> A feminism of becoming-woman is about undermining the fixity of categories and
> the essentialism that has entrapped women in models from the past. This
> feminism might release us from the stranglehold of prior ideas about gender or
> the prescription of a goal and invites us to be open to the unexpected things that
> feminism might engender.[32]

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[32] Stark, *Feminist Theory After Deleuze*, p. 40.

Highlighting Smith and Nelson's critique of socio-political constructs that centre a white, patriarchal, heteronormative majoritarian, I unpack how the minor position of the marginalised can be invoked to challenge the authority of that dominant majority.

The thesis considers how the concept of becoming can be applied as a useful theoretical tool for a feminist literary activism. One that disrupts patterns of thought and language in order to destabilise the foundations of dominant forms of social order and their associated structures of power and oppression. Becoming-woman as the first step in this process in inhabited as a movement that agitates against the borders of control and constraint, offering an alternative route to navigate change.

## Chapter 1.  The Becoming of Schizo-narratives

This chapter examines Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of minor literature as a philosophical and literary model that engages an affective reading experience.  Tracing a connective history from the experimental narrative styles of modernist authors cited by Deleuze and Guattari to the literary innovations of twenty-first century writers, I map a trajectory of experimental writing to demonstrate how these ongoing literary experiments stimulate and engage a reading practice that carries weight as a creative co-production of affect between writer and reader.

This lineage of experimental writing begins with authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century specifically lauded by Deleuze and Guattari for their literary ingenuity - Lewis Carroll, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf. While the modernist works of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett are also significant in the history of experimental literature and influential to the contemporary authors examined in this research, it is the critically neglected work of avant-garde female writers such as Clarice

Lispector, Gertrude Stein, Anais Nin, Kathy Acker, Anna Kavan, Ann Quinn and Christine

Brooke-Rose in the mid to late twentieth century that I situate as foundational in mapping

the development of a minor literature. Not only did their work push the boundaries of

literary convention but, as Kaye Mitchell observes, it also undermined the male-centred

canon of high literary experiment:

> In these diverse instances of women's experimental writing, we find examples of
> the repudiation of narrative authority (a perhaps disingenuous disavowal of
> narrative mastery) in favor of apparently more "spontaneous," "unconscious," and
> "impressionistic" modes of writing; but we find also a quite deliberate (willed and
> authoritative) manipulation of linguistic and generic forms, alongside overtly
> confrontational, politicized statements.[33]

The female avant-garde writers highlighted in this counter-history of experimental

literature are also significant for the contemporary writers chosen for this study - Ali Smith,

Eimear McBride, Maggie Nelson and Nicola Barker. Beginning with a definition of their

various types of experimental literature, which I regard as a development of modernism

rather than a trajectory of postmodernism, I explore how these writers interrogate the

revolutionary power of experimental literature through key themes, including temporality,

social commentary, political urgency, language and form, subjectivity and voice. The

concept of revolutionary power is one which I will refer to throughout this thesis. As I will

demonstrate, revolutionary power emerges in literary narratives that directly engage

readers in a reflexive mode of socio-political thinking, employing affect to promote new

ways of thinking about received paradigms of patriarchal, hetero-normative capitalist

culture, with a potential to inspire action and/or activism for social change. I will look at

specific examples of such revolutionary power in due course, but first I will set out my use

of the term affect.

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[33] Kaye Mitchell, 'Introduction: The Gender Politics of Experiment', *Contemporary Women's Writing*
9:1 (2015), 1-15 (p. 3)

## Affect

Part of the impetus for this research was my own experience of being affected by certain forms of fiction and non-fiction life-writing; not in the way of feeling an emotional reaction or empathetic affinity to characters or place, but through a reading experience that prompted me to interrogate and question the way I thought about the ideas and themes raised within these narratives, turning my attention inward to my own cognitive processes and the social conditioning which informed that thinking. Throughout Ali Smith's short stories and novels, the gender of the narrator or speaking subject is often not revealed, and I found that during my own reading of these texts I made an assumption that the character/narrator was always female, an assumption based on my own subject positioning and knowledge of the author's gender and sexuality. This assumption was predicated on the thought that the author would be writing from her own subject position and experience including an assumption that the relationships in her books would be focussing on lesbian relationships. However, part of my reading experience triggered a moment of questioning these assumptions where I recognised the need to consider what had led me to these assumptions and why, in the process of my reading, I felt the need to identify those characters with a specific gender or sexuality. This self-reflective questioning prompted a recognition of my own expectations, prejudices and biases and led me to think about the social conditioning that had informed and structured my thought processes in this way. This developed into an interest in how certain types of literature that cross boundaries of genre, and more specifically certain writers, have a significant propensity to affect readers by the kinds of questions they ask *of* readers, and require readers to ask of themselves. The power of specific types of literature to engage readers in a mode of self-reflexivity which then has the capacity to expand into a critique of socio-political paradigms led me to recognise the potential literary works hold as catalysts of political affect. In particular these texts inspired me to consider how this literary affect can be

experienced from within the small-scale operations of our daily lives and intrinsically

linked to a wider context of challenging socially constructed paradigms of power including

gender, sexuality, class and race. As I argue in this thesis, the power of the experimental

literature highlighted within this study is perpetuated through this production of affect;

growing in a rhizomatic movement from the smallest of encounters, up to a politically

engaging act of revolutionary possibility. This notion of revolution may occur by degrees as

the act of reading an experimental text engages the reader first at the level of linguistic

compliance (where the language used cannot support a practice of passive and objective

reading),[34] then offering up questions which demand reflection on socially-conditioned

assumptions and provoking a reaction from the reader's social consciousness to invoke

their own responses to contemporary issues such as injustice, discrimination, sexual

violence, corrupt governments, media propaganda, war and genocide. In considering these

issues through the reader's encounter with experimental writing, it is possible to identify

the formal and linguistic techniques that disrupt an expected reading practice and engages

new cognitive processes in ways that non-experimental texts do not. In this definition of

expected reading practice the reader is a passive recipient of the author's directive,

effectively 'pulling the reader along a predetermined path, carefully displaying their effects

so as to arouse pity or fear, excitement of depression at the due place and at the right

moment'.[35] In contrast, textual innovation propels readers to recognise and reflect on their

own positionality and participation within the meaning making of the text that also carries

potential cognitive responses to relational categories of power embedded in normative

social and cultural frameworks. The reading experience then becomes an active

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[34] My definition here of a passive and objective reading practice is aligned to Umberto Eco's notion of the model reader for closed texts, in which he posits the author's assumption that their reader must understand and interpret the language and textual organisation in the way that the author understands and intends. This is unpacked further in Chapter Two. See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts (*Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 8.
[35] Eco, p. 8.

component in disrupting those frameworks as readers encounter alternative linguistic, temporal and formal positionalities. While non-experimental writing may also draw attention to social and political issues, through realist political fiction or genre fiction that imitates our social structures within alternative world building, the reader is still an observer situated outside of and at a distance to the text.[36] Whereas the reading experience induced by literary experiment ruptures that role of passivity and necessitates active reader involvement to formulate textual meaning as they read. Building on Alex Houen's advocation of potentiality within literary experimentation as a capacity to engage individual agency and power, this research interrogates the potentiality of literary activism. Houen's analysis identifies the American literary experiments of writers such as Alan Ginsberg, Kathy Acker and William Burroughs in the 1960s as a practice of literary performance, where the action of experimenting with form and content renders: 'an affective force to alter particular effects of social power on individuals' capacities for thinking and feeling.'[37] Houen draws on Deleuze and Guattari's advocation of a fluid notion individual potential and power that resides in a capacity of the individual to affect and be affected through literary encounters, arguing that literary possibilities can be rendered into concrete experience. Based on the multiple and shifting relations between a person and their external environment, Houen's textual analysis explores the potential for extending individual affective capacity through exposure to literary interactions that

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[36] Some reader response research suggests readers of genre fiction conform to expected interpretative practices and comprehension modes that apply less inference effort. Rolf Zwann suggests genre expectations trigger reading responses that 'adhere (consciously or unconsciously) to to the constraints of that genre.' Rolf A. Zwaan, 'Effect of Genre Expectations on Text Comprehension' *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 20(4) (1994), 920-933 (p. 931). Chris Gavaler and Dan Johnson's experiments suggest that readers of science fiction exerted more effort in understanding the world building and less on inference effort. See Chris Gavaler and Dan Johnson 'A science fiction (vs.realism) manipulation decreases inference effort, reading comprehension, and perceptions of literary merit', *Scientific Study of Literature*, 7, 1 (2017), 79-108.

[37] Alex Houen, *Power of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 241.

'explore alternative worlds of possibility'.[38] In his case study of Acker's work he argues that

her amalgamation of political issues, bodily and sexual taboo, textual appropriation and

use of the abject, forge a new power of corporeal linguistics that defy regulatory

paradigms and suggest alternative lines of embodied performativity:

> Acker's novels consistently link the regulation of sexuality, desire, and affects to linguistic orders – from syntax and genre to institutional and media discourses. […] because the body becomes the site of fiction in the act of writing or reading it, one incorporates different affective potentials. Whether those potentials are embraced and acted on psychologically and physically depends on the writer and reader.[39]

Scholarship in the field of literary ethics is similarly aligned to Houen's argument about

potentiality. It suggests a practice of reading not only fosters empathy but also has the

capacity to affect our actions in the world around us as a consequence of that empathy.

Shady Cosgrove goes a step further to suggest that reading can contribute to social change

and peace activism when it is accompanied by a definitive action inspired by the textual

encounter. Drawing together critical work on empathetic reading by literary ethicists

Dorothy Hale, Paulo Freire and Martha Nussbaum, Cosgrove suggests reflective practice is

the key component of this reading experience that stimulates consciousness raising

activities:

> Praxis is the combination of being critically engaged and acting upon that engagement. Reading the literary, reading the novel, provides a platform where reflection or critical engagement can take place. It gives readers impetus to consider other imaginings of the world and that is critical to praxis, however it does not operate alone as praxis. Reading provides a site for reflection and that must take place with action. […] (even on the miniscule or unconscious level)[40]

Reflecting on my own experience of affect formation when reading Ali Smith's *Winter,*[41]

the description in the book of the women's protest camp at Greenham Common engaged

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[38] Houen, p. 8-9.

[39] Ibid., pp. 191-192.

[40] Shady Cosgrove, 'Reading for peace? Literature as activism – an investigation into new literary ethics and the novel.' *Activating Human Rights and Peace: Universal Responsibility Conference*. (2008). (https://ro.uow.edu.au/creartspapers/82/) [accessed 7 November 2023]

[41] Ali Smith, *Winter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017).

a motivation within me to participate in a similar form of activism. By offering rich

historical detail that showed how the activism at Greenham made a difference to social

awareness of government decisions about nuclear weapons, Smith's novel influenced me

to be more active and vocal in response to the contemporary social and political changes

within my own temporal moment. I subsequently attended the Women's March in London

in January 2017 held in protest at the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the

United States. It was my first form of participation in public activism and protest, but the

act of marching in solidarity with so many other people had a lasting effect on me. My

activism continues to sustain motivation through an ongoing commitment to highlighting

issues of injustice and inequity and lobbying for social action and change.

Another application of affect theory that informs my analysis is Félix Guattari's

logic of affect. Guattari posits the refrain as having the power to affect the conscious and

unconscious reactions at an individual level, and subsequently through into a wider

collective mobilisation. Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie apply Guattari's 'logic of

affects'[42] in which the concept of the refrain is invoked to disrupt the molecular mode of

living at the level of an everyday micropolitics,[43] to demonstrate how refrains operate

within discourse leading to an affective response in a wider political arena:

> Refrains structure the affective into "existential Territories" (Guattari 1995a, 15).
> If, as we will suggest, affects are intensities, then refrains are affects "cycled back"
> […] Refrains may sometimes be drawn from the discursive, but they break up the
> logic of discursive frameworks, at first in an imperceptible fragmenting of
> frameworks via affective intensity. This affective intensity is "capable of

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[42] Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

[43] The refrain is the repetition of an event which at each instance becomes changed so it is never the same event or image. The term molecular is used by Deleuze and Guattari to refer to an aspect of our lived reality that sits underneath the surface of our everyday lives and experience. The molecular can be likened to an abstract version of our reality at the molecular level of multiplicity and movement. It intersects with and overlaps the molar realm of fixed formations and 'real' lived experience.

overthrowing" (Guattari 1995a, 19) the entire order of discourse in favour of transformation and the new modes of living.[44]

Bertelsen and Murphine use the example of the Tampa crisis in 2001 to explain how the image of the red ship transporting refugees off the coast of Australia acted as a refrain. By publishing this image on a daily basis during the crisis, the Australian media caused the image of the ship to seep into the consciousness of the Australian public and into the political arena as a tool for the Australian Prime Minister to promote nationalist propaganda.

It is this notion of affect through refrain that I would like to suggest is deployed within the texts in this study. My reading therefore proposes that affect through refrain occurs within these narratives in the following three modes. Firstly through the use of metalanguage; when the inadequacies and limits of language are exposed and alternative linguistic practices are deployed, particularly in terms of textual repetition as an act of stuttering that prompts the reader to question why this is happening. Secondly through experimentation with form; when the structure of narrative is made to bend and invert reflecting a new textual rhythm and heightening the reader's awareness of the author/reader/text connection. Lastly through content; where the context of the narrative weaves into a social, political and/or economic confrontations which have the capacity to engage the reader in a form of self-reflexive questioning and cognitive enquiry. In the chapters that follow I will investigate the multiplicities of affect which reach through these texts and cross boundaries of expected reader/author relationships, spreading out into the socio-political arena. It is from within the space of affective reader involvement that a mode of becoming is engaged as the stability of the reader's positionality is disrupted at the same time as the fixity of the text is undermined. The reader then becomes an agent of

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[44] Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie, 'An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers: Félix Guattari on Affect and the Refrain' in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 139.

change as their affective cognitive responses work to co-produce the meaning of the text and create new avenues of thought.

## Revolutionary Literature

Deleuze and Guattari's call for a revolutionary literature is bound up with their concept of becoming,[45] and presents an alternative or schizoanalytic methodology of literary and cultural analysis. I will discuss Deleuze and Guattari's concept of schizoanalysis and its link to becoming more thoroughly in the next chapter but to clarify the context here, the schizoanalytic tactic is an approach which celebrates the fragmented and mobile parts of the individual self *and* wider social context. This offers an opportunity to critique and challenge existing material and ideological constructs that have been formed on the premise of a wholeness of being. These fragmented parts which shift, connect, and break apart, sit in opposition to a restrictive idea of a whole and unified subject operating within a coherent social field. Within this conceptual framework Deleuze and Guattari offer a new way of thinking and being which aligns the potentiality of becoming to a recasting of individuals as subjects in flux, made up of infinitesimal intersecting aspects of self. In this reconfiguration, the human libidinal flow or desiring drive that compels us to act in certain ways and towards certain ends, is released from psychoanalytic narratives of Oedipal lack which infiltrate dominant social structures of capitalism, family and state:

> The task of schizoanalysis goes by way of destruction – a whole scouring of the unconscious, a complete curettage. Destroy Oedipus, the illusion of the ego, the puppet of the superego, guilt, the law, castration.[46]

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[45] They posit becoming as an alternative ontology to the notion of being in which the subject is in a constant state of flux or change. As such becoming can contribute to a subversion of dominant frameworks of oppression including linguistic systems. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 118.

[46] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 355.

By advocating this methodology of schizoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari call for the

destruction of those restrictive paradigms that govern the individual and propose that the

self, thought, and language are dissolved into the multiplicities of their interconnecting

parts, allowing them to be released into a more creative and free-flowing arena of being.

This radical suggestion to escape constrictive modes of categorisation, holds potential for

literary analysis and is well suited to experimental writing as a practical tool for

dismantling perceptions about the self, language and how we think. It is this connection

between the Deleuzo-Guattarian methodology of schizoanalysis and its practical

application through experimental writing techniques that, I argue, is the medium of

revolutionary affect within experimental literature. Writers of experimental works

challenge the reader to participate in the interrogation of linguistic and narrative

conventions and produce an aesthetic force that destabilises the world we think we know.

The act of reading experimental literature demands a response by the reader to reconsider

the normative structures that govern our lives and discover new ways to think about

ourselves as subjects, and our interactions with the world and others. While literary fiction

has been used as a medium to explore philosophical questioning and insights,[47] this

research focuses on the premise that reading experimental works has a distinct capacity to

engender a mode of affective change in a reader's cognitive processes. The reading

experience then acts as a cog turning in a mechanism that has an ongoing affective

process, turning by degrees to invoke revolutionary outcomes. This concept of a revolution

by degrees is one which pervades the work of Deleuze and Guattari, both in their jointly-

authored works and in their solo projects. In Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* (1989 [48] he

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[47] For example see texts such as Umberto Eco's *The Name of The Rose*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and work by Iris Murdoch, all of which use the novel form to interrogate philosophical questions and ideas.
[48] Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: The Athlone Press, 2000).

argues that creativity, art and aesthetics should be employed as tools for engaging a revolutionary practice that is capable of wide-reaching impact:

> The reconquest of a degree of creative autonomy in one particular domain encourages conquests in other domains – the catalyst for a gradual reforging and renewal of humanity's confidence in itself starting at the most miniscule level.[49]

In this sense, the act of reading becomes the catalyst for affective cognitive processes at the 'most miniscule level' where the text stimulates new ways of thinking but holds potential for further change as these cognitive developments may also lead onto behavioural changes.

The writers chosen for this study are situated within a modernist trajectory of contemporary experimental literature and contribute to a feminist critical discourse that disrupts and destabilises heteronormative patriarchal capitalist culture. Jennifer Hodgson positions Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* as a twenty-first century modernist text 'connecting this literary tradition with the recent emergence of a fourth-wave feminism',[50] whilst also locating it as part of a wider continuity of critically neglected female experimental writers including Christine Brooke-Rose, Clarice Lispector, Ann Quin and Brigid Brophy. Similarly aligned, is the work of David James whose project in *Modernist Futures*[51] is to bring together writers who are concerned with:

> the responsibilities of the novel and the responsiveness of the reader who interacts with it, a concern made manifest as an abiding conviction that innovation should enable the critical work that fiction can direct at the world rather than at itself [52]

This research is concerned with literary experiments that disrupt and challenge, and whose literary innovations speak back critically to the world that created it. This form of affect is more than simply the ability of the writer to bring about an emotional response or

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[49] Ibid.*,* p. 69.

[50] Jennifer Hodgson, 'Experiment' in *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction* ed. by Daniel O'Gorman and Robert Eagleston (London: Routledge, 2019) p. 58

[51] David James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[52] Ibid., p. 17.

reaction from a reader, like a sensory pull. Rather, it concerns an affective push into the

inadequacies of language and the need for readers and writers consciously and

consistently to engage with and explore the malleability of language, the destructive

dichotomies of power and freedom, the need to think politically at the level of the

individual and the body, and the drive towards a consistent questioning of socially

constructed paradigms and structures of power.

The texts I will be investigating could be cast as postmodernist narratives that

invoke scepticism of authentic truth, questions about the nature of authorial intent, the

purpose of the text and the role of the reader. However, my concern with a reliance on a

purely postmodern critical lens is that the juxtaposition of self-referential and post-truth

narratives against the current climate of socio-political instability does not allow for action-

based outcomes where readers are mobilised to engage with the issues raised in those

texts. A postmodern critical approach could devalue the proffered experience of the

(specifically female/trans/non-binary) individual by rejecting the legitimacy or authenticity

of the speaking subject offering personal truths based on lived experience, as Sara Ahmed

notes:

> Authorship has also been important to feminism due to the desire to inscribe
> women as writers. The importance of constructing the category of 'women's
> writing' (which is indeed central to many university English curricula) has led to a
> suspicion of the postmodern refusal of the author as a critical tool within feminist
> literary criticism.[53]

While I place great importance on the intellectual development of the individual reader

through these invigorating texts, I am also arguing that the reading experience of

encountering these multimodal forms has the capacity to create a collective response that

may further a feminist politics through literary activism. In reading these texts through a

Deleuzo-Guattarian lens, this project asks if such a reading can stimulate action specifically

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[53] Sara Ahmed, *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 126.

in terms of dismantling gender constructs and destabilising the balance of power

predicated on sexual difference - to encourage readers to apply the questions raised in

these texts to their everyday lives and more specifically, to themselves. I would like to

argue that the medium of experimental writing provides a more tangible platform for

reader engagement and interaction. Specifically texts that cross boundaries of

categorisation to merge fiction, life writing, non-fiction, history and authorial reflection,

opposed to mimetic narratives (realism or otherwise) which allow and assume a distance

to be framed between the reader and text, the reader and the author.

Experimental texts work in the same way as the cinematic technique of breaking

the fourth wall by acknowledging the reader and inviting them in to become part of the

narrative, to share their experiences of the themes in the text, by reflecting on and

questioning their own way of thinking and being.[54] Experimental writing can be considered

a genre that requires the reader to actively participate in the process of meaning-making

and, in so doing, destabilising socially constructed categories of identity and subjectivity

formed around a universalised norm of heteropatriarchy. From a feminist perspective, the

amalgamation of a modernist approach to writing and a Deleuzian commitment to a state

of in-betweenness,[55] affords an opportunity to reshape the textual relationship of writer-

reader as a reading of difference. In reshaping this relationship, the multiplicities of sexual

difference and gender identity can be scrutinised as elements that are inscribed as part of

the reading and writing process through the intervening subject positionings:

> If sexual difference is critical or constitutive of the interpretative process, then
> perhaps it lodges itself between the before and after, between the signature and
> the reading. Such a notion of in-between-ness, of a space neither held in the past
> (guaranteed by the woman who writes) or in the present (made real by the
> woman who reads as woman reading) would suggest that sexual difference is both

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[54] Literary theory on postmodernist metafiction is vast, key scholars in this area include Brian
McHale and Patricia Waugh. See Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, (London: Routledge, 1987)
and Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (London; New
York: Methuen, 1984)
[55] The philosophical concepts of Deleuze and Guattari, explored further in Chapter Two, place great
importance on the in-between as productive spatio-temporal arena of exploration.

structural, delimiting or binding what is possible with a textual relation, and open to being displaced and transformed, in the process of being read differently.[56]

Ahmed's consideration of sexual difference as a meaningful element of authorial and readerly experience inscribed upon the text, should not be confused with an essentialist approach based on the gender of the author or reader. Rather, it suggests an interrogation of the system of value within which these gendered subjects must operate. In line with Ahmed's assertion that the significance of sexual difference in authorship is based in the textual relation itself, I would argue that reader participation operates as an active part of this textual relationship to displace and transform limiting boundaries of gendered positionality. While it is still possible to invest subjective embodied and gendered experience as an important part of authoring and reading, particularly when that experience has been marginalised or historically not adequately represented, it is also important to recognise that the textual relationship unfolds as a process within which it is possible to disarm those inscriptions of power and consider alternative value systems. In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms a schizoanalytic reading makes space for a multiplicity of sexual identities, orientations and modes of being:

> Schizoanalysis is the variable analysis of the *n* sexes in a subject, beyond the anthropomorphic representation that society imposes on this subject, and with which it represents its own sexuality. The schizoanalytic slogan of the desiring-revolution will be first of all: to each its own sexes.[57]

Although I am aligning the post-structuralist theory of Deleuze and Guattari with experimental texts that build on early-twentieth-century modernist and avant-garde techniques, I am advocating for a critical and literary practice that moves beyond categories of periodisation. In the same way that the authors in this study evade

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[56] Sara Ahmed, *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism.* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 128.

[57] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen Lane, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1984), p. 337.

categorisation by amalgamating stylistic, thematic and reflexive forms of prose into

narratives which pose questions and demand responses from readers, I want to move

beyond rigid categorisations and unpack the narrative possibilities of these texts by close

reading to determine what they *do*, and how they *affect*, rather than what they mean. It is

this force of positivity within Deleuze and Guatarri's concept of becoming that is

supported by the critical discourse of Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Clare Colebrook and

Hannah Stark.[58] These contemporary feminist thinkers consider the relation of this post-

structuralist philosophy, within a postmodern context, to the subject of woman, as she is

released from the traditionally configured 'other' of Cartesian thought. In response to

Braidotti's later affirmative discourse around Deleuzo-Guattarian thought, Sara Ahmed

critically engages with their concept of becoming-woman as a philosophical project of

reconfiguring woman as a signifier of the other, considering how postmodern tactics are

utilised to disrupt the phallocratic order of modernity which subjugates the position of

woman as the other:

> A philosophy which plays amidst the heterogeneity of the bodily, and of the
> materiality of the signifiers (of desire) is a philosophy which is *becoming woman*,
> refusing the Law and Truth of modernity in a celebration of the otherness (of the
> feminine).[59]

It is this celebration of alterity in contrast with the heteronormative model of reason that

holds the power to disrupt notions of patriarchal-centred objective truth and reconfigure

ways of thinking as embodied and valid. However, Ahmed does not commit to notions of a

'Deleuzian feminism' or advocate their critical discourse as yet another male-authored and

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[58] Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti, 'Rosi Braidotti with Judith Butler: Feminism by Any Other Name',
*Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 6, 2-3, (1994), 27-61. Elizabeth Grosz, 'A Politics
of Imperceptibility: A Response to "Anti-Racism, Multiculturalism, and the Ethics of Identification",
*Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 28, 4 (2002), 463-72. Claire Colebrook, *Sex After Life: Essays on
Extinction*, vol 2 (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2014). Hannah Stark, *Feminist Theory After
Deleuze*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017)
[59] Sara Ahmed, *Differences That Matter. Feminist Theory and Postmodernism.* (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 69.

-oriented narrative which can help a specific feminist politics. She suggests their concept of becoming is problematic in its capacity to reinforce binary gender distinctions that still prioritise the male subject through an appropriation of the othered positionality of women, at the expense of the embodied female subject. While I understand Ahmed's critical reading of becoming-woman offers a discourse which *could* relegate the specificity of women's real and embodied lived experience outside of the realm of becoming, thus reifying the marginalised subject positioning of woman as *othered*, I do regard the concept of becoming-woman as one which holds enormous potential for new feminist tactics. In particular, by way of mobilising a modernist textual approach that destabilises normative categories of identity thinking. Ahmed's critique of Deleuze and Guattari remains rooted in postmodernist concerns of the loss of the subject, objectivity and truth within a socio-political and textual context that privileges plurality and a multiplicity of difference over traditionally accepted frameworks of philosophical and cultural reference. Whilst I similarly want to challenge the liberal ideology of dominant discourses of power which work to repress and subordinate those who are marginalised or positioned outside of these frameworks of power, I do acknowledge the problematic endeavour of a purely postmodernist reading in line with Jane Flax's critique of the postmodernist deconstruction of woman as signifier representing a body of specific, historical and socially embedded experience.[60] The problem with the postmodern tactic of a deconstructionist ideology is that it has the potential to deny or devalue the challenges of embodied women in patriarchal culture because the very nature of the difficulties which form part of that lived reality is called into question. However, as Hannah Stark attests, there are powerful opportunities for feminism to utilise a Deleuzian philosophy of difference when

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[60] See Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

reconfiguring new ways to think about subjective experience. A Deleuzian politics of difference allows expansion into as yet unknown ways of being and knowing:

> This is what makes a Deleuzian politics of difference open to the future. If we examine this matter in relation to gender (for example), it means that sexual difference need not be limited to an artificially binarized notion of male and female; instead, it enables a continuum of different sexual morphologies, not only as they exist in material reality but also as they may come to exist in the future.[61]

This is particularly relevant when considered in the light of the significant developments of LGBTQ+ experience into mainstream cultural visibility and awareness over the last twenty years. Specifically, the shift in cultural consciousness regarding gender as more than a binary opposition and how trans and non-binary identities are being understood and accepted. Even more so, this Deleuzian politics can be theoretically aligned with the new critical discourse of radical transfeminism as an ethics of anti-inclusion that agitates the boundaries of heteronormative patriarchal capitalism.[62]

## Modernist-becomings

Discussions around modernism as a literary movement are often grounded in the context of the wider modernist period. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artists, writers and philosophers reacted to the shifting social, political and cultural landscape as developments in science, technology, psychology and ideological beliefs triggered a more self-conscious and self-reflexive way of thinking, acting and creating.[63] When beginning her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) Virginia Woolf used her personal diary

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[61] Stark, *Feminist Theory After Deleuze*, p. 89.

[62] See Mijke van der Drift and Nat Raha, 'Radical Transfeminism: Trans as Anti-statis Ethics Escaping Neoliberal Encapsulation.' In *The New Feminist Literary Studies*, ed. by Jennifer Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp 13-24.

[63] See Julie Armstrong, *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014) pp. 16-17.

writing to explore ideas about the process of writing in a new way to create something

bold and original:

> I shall enrich it in all sorts of ways; thicken it; give it branches – roots which I do
> not perceive now. It might contain all characters boiled down; and childhood; and
> then this impersonal thing, which I'm dared to do by my friends, the flight of time
> and the consequent break of unity in my design. That passage […] interests me
> very much. A new problem like that breaks fresh ground in one's mind; prevents
> the regular ruts.[64]

These initial thoughts about the narrative she would begin to shape are spoken in the

same language that Deleuze and Guattari take up to describe how becoming can be

enacted through the rhizomatic fluidity of experimental writing. A style that escapes the

trappings of binary paradigms; 'The only way to get outside the dualisms is to be-between,

to pass between, the intermezzo-that is what Virginia Woolf lived with all her energies, in

all her work, never ceasing to become.' [65]

Woolf struggled to capture the essence of the internal temporal experience and its

effect on the subject, but forming some kind of representation was an integral part of her

work. As well as exploring this through her fiction, Woolf experimented with

fragmentation or 'scene-making' in writing her own autobiographical pieces. She began

Sketch of the Past as a form of creative relief to break up the drudgery of writing

chronologically whilst working on Roger Fry's biography. As both an avid reader and writer

of biographies Woolf's interest in playing with the linear representation of her own life

from within her autobiographical writing goes some way to explore the difficulties she

battled in tracing the ever-evolving subject, as Hermione Lee explains:

> So Moments of Being is an evolving narrative about the process of 'life-writing'.
> She uses the term herself in a passage in "Sketch of the Past" on how impossible it
> is to isolate the individual 'subject of the memoir' from the surrounding forces of

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[64] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary. Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Leonard
Woolf (San Diego: A Harvest Book Harcourt, 2003), p. 79.
[65] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by
Brian Massumi (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 305.

heredity, environment, society, family and relationships, that hold it like 'a fish in the stream'.[66]

This escape from traditional forms of fiction, in particular realist novels which follow a mimetic narrative of representing received reality, has been a continual progression of experimental literary fiction writers who align their work with reinvigorated modernist practices in a bid to push the boundaries of what fiction can do, and how it can provoke and inform new thinking about ourselves and our place in the world. Whilst Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard question whether modernist literary techniques still hold the power to shock readers, having become subsumed into the canon of literary fiction and consequently losing that power of newness, they highlight that contemporary authors Zadie Smith, China Miéville and Will Self avidly hold modernism in high regard as a tactic for contemporary literary growth bearing political weight and urgency.[67] Setting their narratives outside realist paradigms and utilising metaphysical routes of questioning allows writers to explore the process of thinking and writing within a meta-narrative that engages readers in this cognitive reflexivity of relating language to experience, eschewing mimetic representation in an attempt to inhabit a more holistic evocation of messy tangible being. This can therefore encompass reflections on their day to day lived experience, the language they use, and the unconscious bias that inflect their actions and thought:

> Rather than simply subduing the reader with the enchantment of fiction, modernist writing explores what it means to write by making the reader aware of the limitations, falsities, doubts and confusions that are involved in the act of writing, the spell of narrative. Modernist fiction (like the best poetry) is marked by its consciousness of the limits of language.[68]

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[66] Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Autobiographical writings,* ed. by Jeanne Schulkind, (London: Pimlico, 2002).

[67] See *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now*, ed. by Siân Helen Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[68] Adiseshiah and Hildyard, 'Introduction: What Happens Now', p. 7.

It is through manipulating the limits of language that modernist writers can bring about a change in understanding, as readers are expected to do more than passively observe the development of the narrative. Rather, they are engaged in challenging the constraints and obliged to participate in the evolution of language, as David James attests:

> I regard literary innovation less as the product of cultural instabilities than as the very medium that brings the reader, through their intimate engagement with form, into a more ethically involved relation with *how* specific contexts of social crisis, radical injustice or political destabilisation are represented by novelists today.[69]

It is this modernist tactic of experimenting with form to provoke an affective response from readers that James identifies as a significant driver of modernism's continuing legacy and its supremacy over self-referential forms of postmodernist narratives. James cites Fredric Jameson and Caroline Levine as critics who admit that tensions within postmodernism lie in its reliance on modernist and avant-garde tactics of innovation within narrative, despite its rejection of modernist tropes:

> It is this double capacity for immersing the reader and at the same time reflecting on modes of address and perspective, which offers a supple medium for contemporary writers as they mobilise modernist narrative practices after the postmodern.[70]

James situates the continuing practice of literary innovation along modernist lines as a refutation of postmodernism's currency in contemporary literary culture. While two of the authors in this study openly adhere to modernist modes of creativity (Smith and McBride),[71] the work of all four writers can also be aligned to postmodern practices of meta-fiction and self-conscious narrative unfolding which rail against dominant ideologies of truth and knowledge, specifically definitions and representations of gender.

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[69] James*, Modernist Futures*, p. 12.
[70] James, *Modernist Futures*, pp. 19, 18.
[71] Ali Smith and Eimear McBride speak about the influence of modernists Virginia Woolf and James Joyce on their writing styles in interviews and at literary festivals.

Rather than setting up a dichotomy of realism against modernist fiction,

Adiseshiah and Hildyard discuss the problematic lexicon of literary categorisations where

contemporary realist novels incorporate some aspects of modernist literary techniques:

> It seems clear to us that modernism, rather than acting as an inhibition on British writers as it was traditionally seen in twentieth-century literary history, has become a powerfully creative influence on an inspiration to the most innovative writers. This is manifested most strongly through attempts to combine modernist approaches with a commitment to realism that contrasts strongly with the ludic metafiction of the late twentieth century.[72]

As categories of genre and style become easier to blur, with fewer clear-cut distinctions of

how types of narratives pertain to hierarchical structures of literary merit, we move

towards a progressive epistemology of literary production as a more fluid, mutable and

evolving aesthetic. One that is capable of doing more to represent the shifting realities of

our fractured lived experience:

> If writers and readers, in any era, are living through a paradigm shift, the cultural and social changes that occur become a focus of interest for a number of writers, and they experiment with these new representations in their work, so fiction can be seen to be consolidating this shift.[73]

Developments in autofiction and life writing, which combine memoir with other genres

such as nature and travel writing, literary history and geography, encompassed within

poetic prose, provide multifaceted narratives which offer up a new reading experience,

giving the reader unanticipated aspects of knowledge and providing unexpected literary

forms.[74] Like the feminist forms of life writing that burgeoned in the 1960s and 1970s with

the women's liberation movement that coined the term 'the personal is political', and the

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[72] Adiseshiah and Hildyard, p. 12.
[73] Julie Armstrong, *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers*. (London; Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 111.
[74] For example Olivia Laing, *To the River: A Journey Beneath the Surface*. (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011); and Helen Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014) both combine life writing and psychological insight with nature writing.

later autobiographical works published by activists around the early 2000s, these self-

narration texts also have the capacity to speak back to the cultural context of the time

they were produced, forming socio-political commentary and critique. As Kaye Mitchell's

analysis of feminist life-writing suggests:

> Generically, these books test the boundaries between autobiography and history,
> offering highly personal perspectives on a very public movement. At the same
> time, they reveal the continuing importance for feminism of telling these stories of
> self as a way of telling much 'bigger' stories of a particular period, a movement, a
> shifting set of ideas and ideologies, allegiances and conflicts.[75]

As the discussion of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* will show in Chapter Five, the

hybridity of form is utilised to defy the boundaries of genre classifications just as the

narrative itself defies gender and bodily conformity.

## Minor Literature

In their 1975 book *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature*[76] Deleuze and Guattari set out the key

criteria for their concept of minor literature using an appraisal of Kafka's oeuvre as an

example of how this minor literature works in practice:

> The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of
> language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the
> collective assemblage of enunciation. We might as well say that minor no longer
> designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature
> within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.[77]

Taking their first point in which they advocate a deterritorialization of language, Deleuze

and Guattari refer to the process Kafka employed of slipping in between language: 'A

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[75] Kaye Mitchell, ''This is not a memoir': Feminist Writings from Life' in *The New Feminist Literary Studies,* ed. by Jennifer Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 208-221 (p. 210).
[76] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
[77] Ibid, p. 18.

minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority

constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of minor literature in any

case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization.'[78]

Deleuze and Guattari use the notion of 'major' and 'minor' as functions or usages of

language which are bound up with the play of power originating from the position of the

speaking subject. In this sense the major serves as the normalised standard of measure

and the minor is the deviated variable of escape from this standard:

> Let us suppose that the constant or standard is the average adult-white-
> heterosexual-European-male speaking a standard language[..] It is obvious that
> "man" holds the majority, even if he is less numerous than mosquitoes, children,
> women, blacks, peasants, homosexuals, etc. That is because he appears twice,
> once in the constant and again in the variable from which the constant is
> extracted. Majority assumes a state of power and domination not the other way
> around.[79]

Minor literature is not simply the work of the 'others' situated outside of this majoritarian

position, but the use of the major language to disrupt and destabilise itself and the

dominant social order that makes up the majoritarian. The significance of this distinction is

its application within the process of becoming and specifically becoming-woman, as a

tactic for undermining structures of power. As Hannah Stark observes:

> The aim of becoming is to undermine the majoritarian by becoming minor in some
> way. […] Majoritarian/minoritarian is a useful way to think about political
> structures because it challenges the binary distinction between normative and
> non-normative (or resistant) by refusing anyone full access to the position of
> privilege.[80]

As a Czech Jew writing in Prague German, Kafka utilises a language at odds with his own

socio-political positionality and location, placing him at a spatial-temporal disjunct of

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[78] Ibid, p. 16.
[79] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* p. 116.
[80] Stark, *Feminist Theory After Deleuze*, p. 27.

language, culture, and social status which, for Deleuze and Guattari, offered an opportunity for him to write outside of the majoritarian linguistic and social structures. From this seemingly marginal position, Kafka had the advantage of being able to use the majoritarian language of German inflected with the expression of his specifically localised experience to create a revolutionary form of language use; 'He will opt for the German language of Prague as it is and in its very poverty. Go always farther in the direction of deterritorialization, to the point of sobriety. Since the language is arid, make it vibrate with a new intensity'.[81] When Deleuze and Guattari speak of a revolution it is not in the immediate sense of a temporal overthrowing of power but rather a gradual change enacted through a mode of a becoming, which enables a gradual subversion of power structures. This type of revolution then is a means to enable a change of political power through a process of slow turning. A revolution requiring an interaction with various cultural forms including art, literature and cinema to prompt alternative cognitive and linguistic responses; 'Utopia isn't the right concept: it's more a question of a "fabulation" in which a people and art both share. We ought to take up Bergson's notion of fabulation and give it a political meaning'.[82] Whereas Bergson's conception of fabulation[83] held negative connotations based on dichotomised ideologies of religion and social control, Deleuze's use of the term enacts a positive projection of *a people to come* – a collectivity or open society without hierarchy or power structures that cannot yet be envisaged from within our divided social structures which polarises groups of people into 'us and them'.[84] Deleuze and Guattari's reconstitution of Bergson's notion of fabulation is one which operates as a creative force. They envisage it as the human capacity to imagine otherwise

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[81] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 19.
[82] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, trans. by Martin Joughin, European Perspectives (New York ; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 174.
[83] As the human tendency towards myth-making as a foundational ideology of social hierarchies.
[84] See Ronald Bogue, *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010)

and create impossible scenarios through artistic endeavours that outstrip our limited

modes of thinking and being:

> Creative fabulation has nothing to do with a memory, however exaggerated, or with a fantasy. In fact, the artist, including the novelist, goes beyond the perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived. The artist is a seer, a becomer.[85]

In this view Deleuze and Guattari regard the figure of the artist/novelist as having the

power to create new avenues for cognitive exploration and experimentation that can

stimulate new modes of affective responses from those who interact with their creative

output. The creatives cited by Deleuze and Guattari including Virginia Woolf, Lewis Carroll,

and Kafka, are those whose work presents blocs of sensation that engage becoming

through their interaction with the art object.[86]

Clare Colebrook explains how the use of free-indirect discourse employed by

authors such as Woolf and Kafka appeals to Deleuze and Guattari as a tactic that

destabilises language and disrupts the primacy of the speaking subject both in terms of

author and character, leading the reader to consider the language used as part of the

commentary within the narrative, rather than just a medium through which the story is

told. Speaking on the power of minor literature as a means by which a collective

enunciation can be borne, they write:

> *Literature is the people's concern*. It is certainly in these terms that Kafka sees the problem. The message doesn't refer back to an enunciating subject who would be its cause, no more than to a subject of the statement (*sujet d'énoncé*) who would be its effect.[87]

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[85] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994), p. 171.

[86] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994), p. 167.

[87] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 18. Italics in original.

Language becomes active and malleable, a live component of the reading experience which eschews the traditional structure of signifier = signified:

> Free-indirect style presents characters through the styles of language they might use. In such cases the boundary between author and character is undecidable; we are never certain who is speaking, the author or the author in the style of the character. The infinitive, like indirect and free-indirect discourse, also complicates the relation between speakers and language.[88]

In Colebrook's example the final narration in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* [89] employs free-indirect style to belie the increasingly horrific circumstances Gregor Samsa's family find themselves embroiled within, as if Gregor's death were nothing more than an end to an unfortunate series of events that they must now put behind them:

> The greatest alleviation of the situation must be produced by moving house; they would take a smaller, cheaper, but also better situated and more practical apartment than their present one, which Gregor had found for them. While they were talking in these terms, almost at one and the same time Mr and Mrs Samsa noticed their increasingly lively daughter, the way of late, in spite of the trouble that had made her cheeks pale, she had blossomed into an attractive and well-built girl. Falling silent, and communicating almost unconsciously through glances, they thought it was about time to find a suitable husband for her.[90]

As the family turn away from their recent fantastical and traumatic experience of seeing their son and brother turned into a giant insect, the language in the passage above details the return to mundane bourgeois discussions and casts them in the position of the abject. They are the monsters, seemingly removed and unaffected by Gregor's suffering and death, refusing to acknowledge the impact of their own increasingly denigrating behaviour upon his state of mind and ultimately causing his death. This juxtaposition of an alarming sequence of events with an oblique narrative disrupts the reading experience by displacing

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[88] Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 110.
[89] Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. by Michael Hofmann (London: Penguin Books, 2007).
[90] Ibid., pp. 145-6.

the primacy of narrative plot. The resolution to the conflict of the narrative is not a satisfactory ending but a disturbing indictment of bourgeois society, calling on the reader to question the behaviour of the Samsa family based on social expectations and conventions. The narrative style replaces the expected end point of reader satisfaction with questions and uncertainty, prompting a reappraisal of the reading experience as a more interactive involvement between reader and text, one in which the text emits blocs of sensation to affect the reader in a rhythmic act of becoming. Where the reader becomes part of the process of creating textual meaning, rather than a reading practice that assumes a process of uncovering and understand authorial intent or finding meaning through conventional realist narratives.

Literature with a philosophical bent has long been the remit of literary fiction with authors such as Albert Camus, Iris Murdoch, Leo Tolstoy, Jorge Luis Borges providing social commentary, insight into the complex mechanics of human relationships and posing thought provoking questions from within a compelling and engaging fictional narrative.[91] The radical difference that Deleuze and Guattari highlight with Kafka is his ability to twist the use of language away from a simple method of conveying information or telling a story, towards using language as a tool for cognitive exploration which actively engages the reader and requires them to consider and question the nature and function of language itself, as well as reflecting on the way it allows the reader to reconsider the narrative being told. Kafka's use of language then is that which breaks the function of representation and signification and destabilises the assumed objectivity of language where the reader is a passive recipient of the narrative. When reading Kafka, the thinking subject must inhabit the spaces opened up by the rupture of linguistic representation and

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[91] Examples include Camus's *The Stranger* (1942), Murdoch's *A Severed Head* (1961), Borges's *Labyrinths* (1962) and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869).

question the medium of communication as much as the social commentary of the stories

themselves:

> Kafka's novels and short stories "don't make sense" but rather present us with a
> world to be entered, investigated and experienced in different ways: Kafka's
> writing, we are informed, is "a rhizome, a burrow" and what we must first pay
> attention to is "what the map of the rhizome is and how the map is modified if one
> enters by another point". In contrast to this emphasis on movement, Deleuze and
> Guattari identify their enemy as the freezing of the understanding, the
> introduction of "the Signifier and those attempts to interpret a work that is
> actually only open to experimentation"[92]

Skeet identifies the correlation between the act of reading Kafka as a problem to be

considered, and the nature of the work as experimentation, whereby the point of entry

into the text is variable and different for each individual reader bringing their own cultural,

political and biased subject positionings to bear on the narrative they encounter. These

socio-political and cultural connections are incumbent upon our relationship with language

and therefore each reading of this experimentation with language enables a trajectory of

multiple effects and reactions in response to, and as part of the literary machine. The

reader enters the literary machine as a component of change, each reading will transform

the machine and keep it in a continual state of flux.[93] Referring to Deleuze and Guattari's

assertion that the animal is part of the burrow-machine,[94] Skeet maintains that; 'we must

understand "animal" as both the writer and the reader. In other words, while we enter

into Kafka's work as readers our reading also becomes part of the literary machine and can

be connected with the problems occupying Kafka through his writing.'[95] This connection is

a form of interaction between reader and writer that engages both parties in this cognitive

exploration allowing for the propagation of ideas to develop into wider contexts of affect

within a collective assemblage. Affecting political change might not have been Kafka's

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[92] Jason Skeet, 'On the Flyleaves of Modernism: Deleuze and Guattari's Kafka', in *Understanding Deleuze, Understanding Modernism.*, ed. by Paul Ardoin, S. E. Gontarski, and Laci Mattison (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 61-74 (p. 61).
[93] See Skeet, 'Flyleaves of Modernsim', p. 64.
[94] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 7.
[95] Jason Skeet, 'Flyleaves of Modernism', p. 63.

intention when he wrote the majority of his works, considering his instructions to friend Max Brod to destroy all of his unpublished manuscripts upon the event of his death, however his posthumous fame and subsequent canonical status within literary fiction has established him as one of the greatest innovators of modern fiction setting a precedent for literary experimentation. Dialogue between author and reader is more obvious in a contemporary setting where access to, and contact with authors is not only easier to establish but openly encouraged through mediums such as social media and audience interaction at literary events and festivals. But aside from the possibility of literal conversations between contemporary readers and authors in their present moment, the textual exchange of reader response and interpretation with authorial experimentation still holds power in its capacity to rupture established cognitive patterns and affect the way readers think, feel and respond to their own environments. This collective reading public, then, holds the affective power to disrupt and challenge ways of thinking that have bolstered long-held hierarchies of power.

Deleuze and Guattari take up Kafka's assertion that literature is the people's concern[96] to highlight the vast possibility of its collective reach. Arguing that the themes arising in his short fictions *Josefine, the Singer, or The Mouse People* (1924)[97] and *The Investigations of a Dog* (1934)[98] emphasise the revolutionary power of the collective as a force for change. Deleuze and Guattari regard Kakfa's work as facilitating connections of assemblage as a transitional moment of political change. By reading and thinking through structures of power we as readers can enliven change. In the same vein, a connection between the social conscience of the author and the political engagement of the reader deserves scrutiny where narrative forms act as the medium by which this dialogue unfolds.

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[96] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 18.
[97] Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*.
[98] Franz Kafka, *Investigations of a Dog* (London: Penguin Classics, 2018).

Contrary to Virginia Woolf's adherence to the notion of art for art's sake, her own understated political activism infiltrated her work and informs a continued legacy and influence on subsequent writers, including Ali Smith, whose overt use of social and political commentary engages readers in contemporary debates. From her social commentary of the treatment of working class veterans in the character of Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) or the exposure of male privilege and women's oppression in the characters of Mr and Mrs Ramsey in *To the Lighthouse,*[99] to Woolf's grassroots affiliation with the Labour Party, the Women's Co-operative Guild and the People's Suffrage Federation, her work echoes with revolutionary forms of minor literature - activism rooted in minor, mundane and ordinary action but which invariably cemented her political agenda as an integral core of her being and writing.[100]

The modernist writers praised by Deleuze and Guattari including Woolf, Joyce and Beckett sought to develop the potential of this self-reflexive reading praxis using new writing techniques that turned fiction inwards towards the workings of the individual subjective mind. Fragmented, poetic and stream of consciousness prose, non-linear narratives and multiple, shifting perspectives destabilised literary conventions and challenged the reader into an active position of reader-in-process that stimulated cognitive flexibility. Modernist writers moved away from linear representations of life towards a more fluid prose style that imbued the text with philosophical analysis of how the human mind works. As Julie Armstrong attests; 'Modernist work departed from linear chronology to show how anti-linear thought processes more accurately convey how the world is perceived.'[101] The techniques they employed exposed the erratic, sometimes confusing

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[99] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. by David Bradshaw, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)
[100] See Clara Jones, *Virginia Woolf Ambivalent Activist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).
[101] Julie Armstrong, *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers.* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 30.

and rhizomatic nature of how we think, experience time, and interact with the world

around us. These representations of interiority emphasised how private and personal

experiences that embodied rhythms of repetition, difference and cyclical thought patterns

were at odds with spatio-temporal constructs that prioritised linearity and singularly

definable experience. This new language was celebrated by Deleuze and Guattari as an act

of becoming engaged through minor literature:

> A minor literature 'repeats', not in order to express what goes before, but to
> express an untimely power, a power of language to disrupt identity and
> coherence. Joyce's *Dubliners* 'repeats' the voices of Dublin, not in order to stress
> their timelessness, but to dislocate the fractured or machine-like quality – the way
> in which words and phrases become meaningless, dislocated and mutated through
> absolute deterritorialisation. What Joyce repeats is the power of difference.[102]

This deterritorialization of language and identity within these modernist narratives opened

up possibilities for destabilising and recasting ideologies of linguistic representation and

temporal experience. Advocating the power of dwelling in the in-between spaces in order

to eschew binary modes of thinking, Deleuze and Guattari praise Woolf's tactics for

enabling becoming:

> The only way to get outside the dualisms is to be-between, to pass between, the
> intermezzo – that is what Virginia Woolf lived with all her energies, in all of her
> work, never ceasing to become.[103]

Woolf's writing, they argue, occupies the liminal spaces associated with the figure of the

girl as emblem or origin of becoming-woman. The figure of the girl will be discussed

further in Chapter Two but its significance here is that the girl, in her in-betweenness and

as a molecular entity, is representative of the power of liminality as a disruptive force. The

girl, in between childhood and adulthood, and the furthest away from the molar subject of

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[102]  Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 119.

[103] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* p. 305.

man, has the capacity to slip through and break social and embodied codes inscribed by

the 'dualism machines' of opposable terms that molar subjects are necessarily tethered to:

> Thus girls do not belong to an age group, sex, order, or kingdom: they slip in
> everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes; they produce *n* molecular sexes on
> the line of flight in relation to the dualism machines they cross right through.[104]

 In the next section, I unpack how modernist strategies and the figure of the girl are taken

up by contemporary author Eimear McBride in a meta-modernist strategy of becoming.

## Contemporary modernist strategies

Modernist writers attempted to harness the rapid and tumultuous rhizomatic nature of

thought and convey the meanderings of the mind onto the page. Beatrice Monaco cites

Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* as a project which 'sought to transform narrative to

encompasses the richness of ontological being.'[105] In a development of the modernist

stream of consciousness style of Joyce and Woolf, Eimear McBride's writing conveys

internal thought that replicates a pre-language encounter between self and world.

McBride has published three novels, *Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013), *The Lesser*

*Bohemians* (2016), and *Strange Hotel* (2020), all of which employ an innovative use of

language to express the central protagonist's inner monologue in a way that conveys their

immediate responses to their interactions with the world and others.[106] McBride strives to

capture this processual cognitive mapping as a liminal state in-between thought and

speech. Her linguistic innovation works to express this malleable state without dimming or

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[104]Ibid., p. 305.

[105] Beatrice Monaco, *Machinic Modernism: The Deleuzian Literary Machines of Woolf, Lawrence and Joyce* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 18.

[106] Eimear McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (Norwich: Galley Beggar Press Limited, 2013), *The Lesser Bohemians* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), Strange Hotel (London: Faber & Faber, 2020).

diluting original thoughts through the process of transcribing it into language. The

experience of reading *Girl is a Half-formed Thing* is to be so drawn in by the language that

the reader aligns with the subjectivity of the central protagonist as the narrative unfolds.

The use of fragmented sentences, repeated words, pauses, gaps and amalgamations of

sounds come together to produce a new way of inhabiting the character from within her

own subject position, rather than an external overview that a standard third or first-person

narrative would afford the reader:

> Two me. Four you five or so. I falling. Reel table leg to stool. Grub face into her
> cushions. Squeal. Baby full of snot and tears. You squeeze on my sides just a bit. I
> retch up awful tickle gigs. Beyond stopping jog and flop around. I fall crack
> something. My head banged. Oop. Trouble for you. But. Quick the world rushed
> out like waters. Slap of. Slap of everywhere smells kitchen powder perfume soap
> of hedges in the winter dogs and sawdust on a butcher's floor. [107]

McBride invites the reader into an embodiment of the character using the tangible

experience of events viscerally conveyed through this linguistic innovation. It is the

physicality of the language that allows the reader to feel the brutality of the whole journey

of the unnamed narrator as she progresses through the narrative. The reading experience

therefore becomes a process of affective assault, drawing on the use of sounds and

rhythm to engage the reader's senses. McBride acknowledged that the purpose of

omitting character and place names was to help the reader slip into the story from their

own subject positioning and locality without the barrier of character and location

identifiers causing the expected distance or separation between reader and character:

> So, firstly, I avoided all tangible information about time and place, leaving my
> inevitable Hiberno-English to fill in those gaps. Similarly, all characters remained
> unnamed in the hope of closing that very basic sense of separateness down. The
> reader experiences the narrative from the girl's perspective, therefore it seemed
> logical they never receive descriptions of her appearance – for who walks around
> describing themselves to themselves? Once all identifying markers were withheld
> the reader was left with what the girl sees, thinks, how her body reacts to what it

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[107] McBride, *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*, p. 7.

experiences and can, from the sum of these, hopefully extrapolate how she feels. I didn't want the reader to feel separate from her or in a position to pass judgment on her actions. I wanted them to feel they *were* her, and that what was happening to her, and inside her, was also happening within themselves.[108]

As McBride attests, this modernist aesthetic technique of breaking the boundaries between reader and text, reader and character, and reader and author connects the reading individual to the political immediacy of the themes raised in the novel. Engaging readers with social commentary and political urgency is explored further in Chapter Five of this thesis, where its significance is highlighted as an affective pull, drawing the reader into a wider context of commonality and communality. They are not just a lone reader absorbed in a solitary activity. Instead, they are engaging in a reciprocal relationship with the text where their reading creates alternate meanings and affects, holding potential for fostering new modes of thinking.

Aligned with Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick's notion of reparative reading as a practice that creates positive affective instances, schizoanalysis as methodology and schizo-narratives as textual objects oppose conventional reading practices that suggest meaning should be uncovered. A schizoanalytic method of literary analysis is not concerned with extrapolating meaning from authorial intention or textual inference but seeks to discover what molecular desires can be mobilised through the reader as they engage in a creative process of reading. Speaking of the rich potentialities afforded by reparative reading practices, Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests:

What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.[109]

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[108] Eimear McBride, 'How I Wrote A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing', *The Guardian,* 10 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/10/guardian-book-club-eimear-mcbride-how-i-wrote-a-girl-is-a-half-formed-thing> [accessed 27 November 2023] (para. 5 of 7)
[109] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 150-151.

The idea of manipulating language to make it vibrate, twisting it onto a different axis to produce writing that does something new and different, and by drawing awareness to the spaces in-between language, is at the heart of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature. The process of reading this kind of experimental writing presents us with new ways of looking at the world, a way of re-evaluating heteronormative capitalist paradigms of constraint and suggests alternatives to these hierarchies of power. The act of reading literature that experiments with language and form in this way holds enormous potential for rethinking accepted operational structures that regulate our lives. If linguistic codes can be broken to produce fresh thinking and alternate possibilities of expression and meaning, then a self-reflexive reading practice can also hold the capacity to re-evaluate the social, political and economic ties that bind us, with a possible view to initiating change from within these structures.

Deleuze and Guattari's refutation of psychoanalysis as a dominant cultural framework and their proposal of schizoanalysis in its place, also provides a more positive and productive theoretical site for thinking through ideas around desire as a motivating force for social change:

> Where paranoiac unconscious desire 'territorializes' – in terms of nation, family, church, school, etc. – a schizophrenic one 'deterritorializes', offering a subversion of these (capitalist) totalities. [...] Deleuze and Guattari's "material psychiatry" becomes a political factor in its attempts to release the libidinal flow from what they see as oppression rather than repression.[110]

Deleuze and Guattari's reconceptualisation of desire away from a psychoanalytical framework,[111] provides a much more positive approach to thinking about desire as a

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[110] Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 4th ed. (Harlow, Essex: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997), p169.
[111] Where the Oedipal narrative constructs lack as the motivating force for desire.

creative energy force without restrictions. One which has the capacity to disrupt from the molecular to the molar, thereby encompassing a capacity for social and political change in the form of the collective assemblage. Where a collective assemblage is a temporary collection of heterogeneous elements that express a particular character for the moment they are collected together. Assemblages are constantly shifting, breaking apart and reforming with new elements in a constant process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. This is productive for thinking about connectivity outside the boundaries of identity and subjectivity:

> Instead of situating politics in the interiority of a sovereign subject, Deleuze grounds it in the spaces that connect all of us to one another and to the world we inhabit. To conceive of a politics that focuses only on those connective spaces involves a fundamental shift from thinking in terms of discrete subjects, with particular motivations and agency, to examining those spaces in-between discrete beings – the spaces where the action is taking place.[112]

Deleuze and Guattari's rejection of the individual subject in favour of a collective assemblage is expressed through their admiration of Kafka's method, one which inflates subjective experience from the microcosm - intimate and familial, to the wider structures of society - law, economics and bureaucracy. As private experience becomes public issue and the plight of the individual is shown as affective of the collective:

> In what sense is that statement always collective even when it seems to be emitted by a solitary singularity like that of the artist? The answer is that the statement never refers back to a subject. […] From this arises two principle theses in Kafka: literature as a watch that moves forward and literature as a concern of the people. The most individual enunciation is a particular case of collective enunciation.[113]

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[112] Stark, p. 111.
[113] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 83.

So although Deleuze and Guattari hold up the figure of Kafka as the lone bachelor or

singular writer, at one remove from the majoritarian society he critiques, his literary work

forms the undercurrent of social change for the people to come:

> Language is, for Deleuze and Guattari, a working part of a social assemblage, a
> collective concern and not that of an individual subject of enunciation […] A new
> statement does not represent the people, it is not about the people or intended
> on their behalf, nor does it provide a metaphor for the situation of a minority. A
> statement becomes literary when a singular writer uses it in such a way their
> individual enunciation precedes the collective conditions of enunciation,
> expression preceding content, and the writer writes for a people to come: "the
> actual bachelor and the virtual community – both of them are real – are the
> components of a collective assemblage".[114]

In *Metamorphosis*, Kafka employs the scenario of an extremely bizarre and surreal bodily

transformation from human to non-human to interrogate and critique the reactions and

responses of the bourgeois family as a mode of socio-economic normativity. Similarly,

Jason Skeet remarks how, in Kafka's *Letter to the Father*, Deleuze and Guattari find the joy

and humour in his usage of such absurd exaggeration of paternal control as a method of

inscribing his own personal problems onto the larger map of the social collective,

constrained by socio-economic entrapments.[115] The comedic exaggeration is the means by

which the reader can navigate an escape out of the text into the macrocosm. The

implication that Kafka's father was the sole cause of detriment to his life, is to assume that

a subject is bound to authoritarian control without autonomy, agency or freedom of

personal choice. If, as Skeet suggests, reading Kafka's assignation of blame with humour

and absurdity allows the representational mode of the narrative to be skewed and the

reader taken on a different path to the traditional empathetic support or rejection of

character, then the reader is offered an alternative choice which they must map for

themselves. Deleuze and Guattari's innovation is to find comic absurdity in a text

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[114] See Skeet, 'On the Flyleaves of Modernism', p. 69.
[115] See Skeet, 'On the Flyleaves of Modernism', p. 70.

seemingly full of scathing judgement towards a paternal figure. This, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, is the power of experimentation within Kafka's work that maps a line of flight for becoming with no set objective or agenda.[116] Kafka's writing then is a form of deterritorialization, or making the familiar unfamiliar in order to view everyday situations and relationships from a different perspective, and with a more discerning critical gaze.

## Experimental Feminist Agendas

The development of this form of affective modernism can be traced through to avant-garde writers such as Anaïs Nin, Clarice Lispector, Christine Brooke Rose, Ann Quin, Kathy Acker and Anna Kavan who experimented with form and language to highlight gender stereotypes and associated biases inherent within the avant-garde literature produced by their male contemporaries. Bringing a politically engaged feminist agenda to the fore, where embodied female specificity, and in particular the diversity and multiplicity of female sexuality could be written outside of a patriarchal language:

> Writers like Susan Sontag and Ann Quin, seeking to nullify the assumption that language imparts cultural "truths," thwart the process of critical interpretation, breaking the complicity between reader and writer.[117]

The techniques used by these avant-garde writers such as fragmentation and the use of a non-standard speaking voice, bring the consciousness of the present moment to bear upon the reading experience, asking questions of the reader about how language is used, and why the author made those specific linguistic choices. In effect, these techniques sharpen

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[116] Ibid, p. 71.
[117] Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, 'Contexts and Continuities: An Introduction to Women's Experimental Fiction in English', in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, ed. by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 3-51 (p. 27).

the thread which runs from author to reader rather than adhering to a more traditional

model of author as disseminator of information and reader as receiver.

This is evident in Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva*, where she attempts to capture the

essence of the subject as an evolving process within the fleeting nature of the now:

> Is my theme the instant? the theme of my life. I try to keep up with it, I divide
> thousands of times into as many times as the number of instants running by,
> fragmented as I am and the moments so fragile-my only vow is to life born with
> time and growing along with it: only in time itself is there room enough for me.[118]

Lispector's struggle to write *Água Viva* and her uncertainty about what exactly she was

trying to write, feeds into the fluid nature of the piece with all its connotations of

movement and change. The authorial uncertainty breathes through the text with form

reflecting content. From its self-reflexive philosophical questions and rambling

confessional tone to the mundane distractions of the everyday, the author as subject is

presented to the reader as an ever-shifting entity much like the 'living water' of the title

and its many possible translations.[119] Lispector's fragmentary prose plays with syntax and

grammar, with questions often followed by uncapitalised words as a diverted continuation

of the previous sentence. Like the living water of her title, her sentences run on and into

each other, giving the reader an impression of a moving body in flow, diverting here and

there like the path of a stream when it comes up against a rock. The body of the subject is

brought to the forefront of the narrative in the repeated refrain of the embodied present,

'I want to feel in my hands the quivering and lively nerve of the now and may that nerve

resist me like a restless vein. And may it rebel, that nerve of life, and may it contort and

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[118]Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva, trans by. Stefan Tobler,* ed*.*by Benjamin Moser (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 4.

[119] Benjamin Moser quotes Lispector describing her preferred connotation of *Água Viva as "a thing that bubbles" see* Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva, trans by. Stefan Tobler,* ed*.*by Benjamin Moser (London: Penguin, 2012), p. xiii.

throb.'[120] By placing her body in the text as an instrument of the self-in-process, Lispector

examines how that embodied subject reflects and adapts each instant as part of their

evolving subjectivity. Through writing and painting, the act of creative expression forms a

bridge between the everyday realness of the world and a more abstract place that the

body inhabits in relation to the self. Like the Deleuzo-Guattarian dimensions of molar and

molecular, Lispector describes an alternative space where transformation of self occurs,

and pushes back towards a more concrete reality:

> No, all this isn't happening in real facts but in the domain of – of an art? yes, of an artifice through which a most delicate reality arises which comes to exist in me: the transfiguration happened to me.[…] To interpret myself and formulate me I need new signs and new articulations in shapes found on this side and beyond my human story. I transfigure reality and then another dreaming and sleepwalking reality, creates me.[121]

The need for creative expression and experimentation unimpeded by rules, is paramount

to Lispector's project of self-discovery, self-reflection and understanding. The concept of

an alternative sphere at a remove from the reality of everyday, is used to facilitate this

creative thinking and expression, where the subject is made and unmade instant by

instant. Like Lispector, the work of Ann Quin also seeks to capture the fleeting present and

ever evolving subject.

Ann Quin's short story 'Ghostworm' similarly draws on modernist experimental

techniques, using fragmented sentences in an amalgamation of first and third person

without speech marks. The effect is that the narrative moves between the internal

thoughts of a woman seemingly arguing with her dead lover, and the third person

narration of her feelings and actions:

> I'll take the ashes to his wife tomorrow. Idiot. No not again – go away. Never. Get off my back. You're obsessed. I'm not you were. I am. She saw eyes between skin shadows on glass. The full moon that's what it is, nothing else. Move on. Out. Into. Back. Forward. Why can't you just be a memory with the rest. Bottled. Hooded.

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[120] Lispector, p. 13.
[121] Ibid., pp. 14 & 16.

Closed sequence. I'm still young. You're old, a hag, bitch, spider-woman. Mean damn you Irish bastard let go.[122]

This immediate conflict of speaking subject within the first paragraph engages the reader in a dialogue with the text – who is speaking? Are there two voices or is the conversation the imaginings of the speaking I? What is the movement between these two conflicting voices and what does it mean for the reading experience? These short sentences, back and forth dialogue with an uncertain figure, and incisions of third person narration all blend the narrative together into a form which allows the written text to portray a jumble of thoughts and action as they occur in a real time unfolding.

Quin's writing style in 'Ghostworm' and in several other pieces within the edited collection of her work *The Unmapped Country* (2018) hold an affinity with Eimear McBride's fragmentary prose style in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, which employs the same tactic of allowing the reader to be part of the narrative as an embodied aesthetic experience rather than an objective observer. This style also emulated Quin's own mode of being; shunning routine and living a somewhat nomadic hand-to-mouth existence which fed into her abstract creative process: 'Day to day living for me is sort of coping inasmuch as I want to work I find the immediate moment gives one a whole experience, and therefore I hate anything to be very rigid of set.'[123] In this interview with her friend and fellow writer Nell Dunn, Quin talks of her need to write, the importance of experiencing the present moment, and the difficulty of communication using a language of rigidity. Quin's writing represented her own mode of living in the instantaneous moment and offers a way of communicating using language invested in the experience of the immediacy and tangibility of everyday life, both in its banality and diversity. As Jennifer

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[122] Ann Quin, *The Unmapped Country. Stories and Fragments*, ed. by Jennifer Hodgson (Sheffield: And Other Stories, 2018), pp. 125-150 (p. 125)
[123] Nell Dunn, *Talking to Women* (London: Silver Press, 2018), p. 185.

Hodgson attests in her introduction to *The Unmapped Country*; 'Quin is peculiarly attuned to the grotesque details, to what she calls the 'eggy mouthcorners' of ordinary life.'[124] In *A Double Room*, Quin uses fragmentation to convey the internal mental breakdown of the protagonist following the disappointment of a long anticipated sexual encounter:

> She watched herself. Her body. Her lumps of flesh solidified. Love love what is it – what's happened are you all right? She opened her mouth. The scream couldn't. Wouldn't. Be forced out. It lay. Struggled. Thumped within the blood cells. Ribs. That closed in on the scream. That became separated. Someone else's scream. The child. The girl. The virgin. The woman. Until they joined forces. Screamed at the person outside who refused to collaborate.[125]

This fragmentary prose style, similar to the techniques employed by Eimear McBride and Ali Smith, brings the reader into the realm of the instantaneous moment by showing an everyday experience through the prism of extraordinary language that allows individual strands of colour to shine - highlighting the nuances of personal experience. This manipulation of syntax to jar the linear communicative value of language carves out spaces where a specific female experience can be conveyed in an affective modernist style. Hodgson alludes to a 'kinship between Quin and some of the most audacious writing of the twentieth century and beyond'[126] and connects modernist writers like Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen to the later avant-garde writers such as Chris Kraus and Kathy Acker.

Acker sent shock waves through the literary landscape with her textual manifestation of the punk counterculture scene. Born out of her active participation in a variety of subcultural communities, she mixed taboo content, marginalised perspectives including explicitly sexual language and incestuous relationships, with references to literary canon, high art and critical discourse. Ellen Berry traces Acker's influences through

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[124] Jennifer Hodgson, 'Introduction' in Ann Quin, *The Unmapped Country. Stories and Fragments*, ed. by Jennifer Hodgson (Sheffield: And Other Stories, 2018), pp. 7-12 (p. 10).

[125] Ann Quin, 'A Double Room' in *The Unmapped Country. Stories and Fragments*, ed. by Jennifer Hodgson (Sheffield: And Other Stories, 2018), pp. 31-50 (p. 43).

[126] Hodson, 'Introduction' , p. 11.

European avant-garde, French surrealism, German expressionism, practices of

improvisation, theories of conceptualism and French poststructuralist theory including

work by Deleuze and Guattari as an amalgamation of stylistic stimuli which fed into her

use of the negative aesthetic. Berry positions this negative aesthetic as a stylistic practice

that highlights the abject and basest of experiences and people. In doing so, Acker exposes

systems of power and oppression that cast such people into these categories of

subjugation and reinforce their repression.[127] Acker engaged with these radical critiques of

western patriarchal culture through experimental practices of appropriation and

reconceptualisation to challenge boundaries of literary practice. Mixing explicit

descriptions of female bodily functions and agency with direct *and* purposeful misquotes

from various literary and theoretical sources, her textual amalgamation pushes an agenda

of socio-political critique through the instrument of the female body. As Berry notes, Acker

incorporates an exploration of this radical bodily force of desire in *Blood and Guts in High*

*School* (1984) with a direct quote from Deleuze:

> EVERY POSITION OF DESIRE, NO MATTER HOW SMALL, IS CAPABLE OF PUTTING TO
> QUESTION THE ESTABLISHED ORDER OF A SOCIETY; NOT THAT DESIRE IS ASOCIAL;
> ON THE CONTRARY. BUT IT IS EXPLOSIVE; THERE IS NO DESIREING-MACHINE
> CAPABLE OF BEING ASSEMBLED WITHOUT DEMOLISHING ENTIRE SOCIAL
> SECTIONS.[128]

Aligning this Deleuzo-Guattarian assertion of desire as both productive and destructive

with her depiction of Janey, Acker's novel, much like McBride's, confronts the reader with

a form of female bodily agency that encourages the sexual violence enacted upon her.

These vivid descriptions in both novels depict viscerally painful scenes in which the

protagonists use the only cultural power afforded to them – their bodies and sexuality – in

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[127] Ellen E. Berry, *Women's Experimental Writing: Negative Aesthetics and Feminist Critique*
(London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), see p. 41-42.
[128] Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School*, (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 125

a bid to claim agency and demand love from male figures of dominance and power. Alex

Houen's analysis of *Blood and Guts in High School* also demonstrates how Acker's linguistic

and formal experimentation, influenced by her reading of Deleuze and Guattari, works to

highlight, disrupt, and destabilise the order words of language that are imbued with and

regulate social power:

> the significance of language for Deleuze and Guattari is largely what it does
> performatively in constituting order of things. Yet because order words are
> regulated by institution and social convention they also tend to enforce reiteration
> as linguistic 'redundancy'. For Acker's Janey, such repetition is linked to the way
> social order seems propagated robotically through language, such that even
> feeling becomes autopathically redundant. In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari are
> closer to Hawthorne in asserting that the performative power of order words
> depends on social conventions and contexts of usage which are not essentially
> fixed.[129]

In re-ordering language away from grammatical conventions Acker's text exposes the

performative power in this re-ordering process and imagines new ways to defy and break

away from existing confines of social power.

The writing of Kathy Acker, Anais Nin, Ann Quin, Eimear McBride and Maggie

Nelson can all be linked back to a practice of *Écriture feminine* which employs a tactic of

writing difference through bodily specificity.[130] Advocated by French Feminist thinkers of

the 1970s Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva to decry the claims of the liberal

humanist conception of a universal rational subject. They elevated the importance of

embodied thinking and writing as a tool to overcome divisive heteronormative barriers to

equality. As Cixous suggests in *the Laugh of the Medusa* (1976)*, '*Women must write

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[129] Alex Houen *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing Since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 164.

[130] Hélène Cixous developed the concept of *écriture féminine* as texts which explore the Derridean notion of *différance*, in that they 'undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic, split open the closure of the binary opposition and revel in the pleasures of open-ended textuality.' Toril Moi, *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 108.

through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck

partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes'.[131]

Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy supports this vein of feminist critique of patriarchal

value systems that associate the male body with a universal subject, as it rejects the notion

of the subject as the foundation of thought.  Instead, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that

the subject is a site inscribed by multiples of socially constructed forms, layered with

unacknowledged bias and signifiers which must be re-mapped outside of these constraints

and thought anew as a being in process, one which constantly engages with the multiple

points of difference it encounters. Hannah Stark acknowledges how Deleuze and Guattari's

philosophy rejects all previous Cartesian models of subjectivity that marginalise woman to

the position of the other or exclude her from the universal model of the subject.

Stark discusses the importance of violence in Deleuze's ideas on learning and

understanding; 'Thought, then, is not about learning a particular method or achieving

mastery of an established body of knowledge but can be understood as what Deleuze

describes as the 'infinite task' (DR:166) or learning based on encounters and shocks'.[132]

This notion of thought generated by violence or shock synchronises well with the affective

reading experience engendered by the modernist, avant-garde and experimental writers in

this study. Texts by Kathy Acker, Eimear McBride and Maggie Nelson all use a form of

violence within their writing to engage the reader in an encounter of shock to thought.

This violence is enacted both by the deconstruction of language and through the use of

controversial, taboo or shocking subject matter that renders an uncomfortable position of

reader perspective in which they must make an active choice to engage with the text and

participate in the work required of them by the author. Both Acker and McBride use the

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[131] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1.4 (1976) 875–93. (p. 886). <https://doi.org/10.1086/493306>
[132] Stark, *Feminist Theory After Deleuze*, p. 21.

deconstruction of language in their texts to suggest the breakdown of the subject, with the

central characters of Janey in *Blood and Guts in High School* and the unnamed narrator in

*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* both experiencing bodily denigration at the hands of the male

characters they encounter, and as a wider critique of patriarchal control over and

destruction of women's bodies. The extent of this overwhelming domination is reinforced

by the self-destructive actions of these two characters resulting in their eventual

disintegration of self as Berry explains:

> If, in the opening pages, Janey is a child who behaves as an adult, as the novel
> continues her diction regresses to what might be called an infantile state of a-
> subjectivity. For instance, this selection from part two of the novel features the
> following outburst of self abasement in block letters splayed out across the page:
> "PUKE GOOGOO ME YUMN SHIT SHIT SHIT FACE ME SHIT SMEARS ON MY HANDS I
> STINK I GOO GOO I STINK REAL GOOD I STINK WHEN I SMEAR SHIT ACROSS MY
> FACE LOTS I'M A OFFENDER END OF me who is this?" (106-107). The novel's final
> pages are composed almost entirely of pictographs, suggesting that language itself
> has become impossible.[133]

Acker and McBride challenge the *Bildungsroman* genre by inverting the expected character

progression and development from child to adult. Their use of explicit language and

typographical deviation viscerally renders the physical effects of violence enacted on the

female subject. The relentless repetition of sexual violence through both texts

demonstrates how patriarchal culture is saturated into social and cultural expectations

that perpetuate the abuse and control of women's bodies by male perpetrators. In

McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* the language breaks down in times extreme of

trauma. In a scene towards the end of the book where the unnamed narrator is brutally

beaten and raped the language and syntax become corrupted in a reflection of this bodily

trauma: 'Puk blodd over me frum. In the next but. Let me air. Soon I'n dead I'm sre. Loose.

Ver the alrWays. Here. mY nose my mOuth I'.[134] McBride employs a technique of language

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[133] Berry, *Women's Experimental Writing: Negative Aesthetics and Feminist Critique,* p. 45.
[134] McBride, *A Girl,* p. 194

scrambling, misspelling and irregular capitalisation to saturate the reader with the tangible

physicality of the immediate trauma as it unfolds in the text. This formal and linguistic

innovation is a method that brings the reader into the closest position of alignment with

the protagonist as David Collard confirms; 'What happens to the anonymous girl is never

described *to* the reader but directly experienced *by* the reader. This is unsettling, often

distressing, and also startingly original – nobody has ever written quite like this.'[135]

Collard's tribute to McBride and her novel claims originality despite his acknowledgement

that her writing style is a 'repurposing of modernism by (and for) a female sensibility'[136]

and while her main influence was her encounter with James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Collard also

references Ann Quin as an example of one of many experimental women writers who can

be traced as a literary predecessor to McBride's innovative style. The correlation between

the stylistic devices and extreme content in the novels of McBride and Acker demand an

affective readerly engagement using language that stutters, in order to bring a level of

affect that resonates through the embodied subject. Acker sought to break linguistic and

narrative conventions by re-routing language through female bodily experience and

knowledge. Amy Nolan employs a self-reflexive approach to Acker's work, weaving her

own personal embodied experiences to bear on her critical analysis of Acker's texts.

Identifying commonalities and points of intersection between Acker and herself, Nolan

reflects on the productive possibility of writing through bodily experience, and particularly

that of sexual abuse to expose an endemic patriarchal value system that perpetuates

misogyny within the dominant cultural order. Acker, Nolan argues, advocates freedom

from oppression under the powers of patriarchy by inhabiting liminal spaces, both bodily

and social. In doing so she explores marginal spaces that foster creativity and interrogates

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[135] David Collard, *About a Girl: A Reader's Guide to Eimear McBride's A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (London: CB editions, 2016), p. 27.
[136] Ibid Collard, p. viii.

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alternate subject positionings, including gender non-specificity and ambiguous modes of being.[137]

This also feeds into the work of Maggie Nelson in *The Argonauts* as a text which reconfigures ideas about family, gender and relationships through the innovative use of literary form. Using a mix of personal life writing, theory and criticism together with a self-reflexive meditation on the personal and political paradigms of being in the world, *The Argonauts* opens up a space for re-thinking ideas on language, motherhood, family connections and bodies in flux. Documenting her relationship with artist Harry Dodge, Nelson begins with a confession about her unease at not knowing the preferred pronoun to use despite maintaining a sexual relationship with him. She advocates the specificity of the individual outside of gendered binary oppositions and more explicitly the embodied specificity of the two individuals entering into a relationship and invokes the critical discourse within Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet's *Dialogues* as the theoretical context to her lived experience:

> Nuptials are the opposite of a couple. There are no longer binary machines: question-answer, masculine-feminine, man-animal, etc. This could be what a conversation is – simply the outline of a becoming.[138]

In Nelson's text this quote is discernible by the italic prose and the names of Deleuze and Parnet in the margin to acknowledge the original text is it taken from, but the idea sits within Nelson's prose as part of her own line of thought. The dialogue between Deleuze and Parnet discusses the notion of becoming as a mode of being which strives to be constantly in-process, in flux and in-between, fleeing from categorisations and binary

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[137] See Amy Nolan, 'Writing a Sacred Self: Kather Acker and Wonder', in *Reading and Writing Experimental Texts - Critical Innovations*, ed. by Robin Silbergleid and Kristina Quynn (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) p. 199

[138] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville House UK, 2016), p. 8.

paradigms. It is a concept which permeates throughout *The Argonauts* as Nelson exposes

and questions the overwhelming compulsion of heteronormative culture to appropriate

the subjective self and demand that limiting categorisations be adhered to.

Another experimental writer who precedes Nelson and McBride in writing the

embodied experience is Anaïs Nin. Writing in the 1930s Nin wrote fictional and

autobiographical erotica, touching on taboo subject matter and putting her own

experiences at the heart of her writing. Nelson follows in the trajectory of Nin to

interrogate the revolutionary power of writing which engages the body and embodiment

as a mode of thinking and being to disrupt heteronormative paradigms. Certainly, Nin's

great passion for body specificity and embodied writing is reflected in Nelson's ethos

within *The Argonauts*, although Nelson and Acker urge for a multiplicity of self to escape

gender identity politics, Nin writes from a specifically female and feminine subject

positioning, where the act of writing the female bodily and emotional specificity works to

'reconnect what has been fragmented by excessive intellectual analysis'.[139] Nin wrote the

specificity of the female body in lyrical prose as a challenge to heteronormative patriarchal

literature, culture and meaning making that privileged rational, linear order. As Sharon

Spencer notes in quoting from Nin's own diary, her feminist project wrought a musicality

and the rhythmic fluidity of the female body into her textual experimentation:

> In August 1937, a conversation with Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell, and his wife,
> Nancy, provoked Nin to defend her subjective, lyrical, flowing fiction. Later, she
> reflected:
>
> Henry and Larry tried to lure me out of the womb. They call it objectivity.
> But what neither Larry nor Henry understands is that woman's creation, far from
> being like man's, must be exactly like her creation of children, that is it must come
> out of her own blood, englobed by her womb, nourished by her own milk. It must

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[139] Sharon Spencer, 'The Music of the Womb: Anais Nin's "Feminine" Writing', in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, ed. by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989) p. 165.

be a human creation, of flesh, it must be different from man's abstractions. (*Diary, 1934 – 1939 235*)[140]

While Nin's approach of associating female specificity to biological reproductive function would be considered problematic in its essentialism by today's standards of feminist narrative theory, her impact and influence on literary innovation is significant as a mode of forging a female centred ontology and paved the way for further embodied writing that proponents like Acker, McBride and Nelson developed to further trouble constructs of patriarchal cultural dominance.

The connective history between a Deleuzo-Guattarian minor literature traced through this chapter towards an experimental, female-centred writing practice illustrates how these authors mobilise the body and embodied female experience as a site of power, resistance and possibility. Articulating this experience as a positive alterity that challenges patriarchal cultural inscriptions of the body, these texts occupy the space of becoming-woman from within a viscerally affective and tangible subjectivity. Highlighting fluid expressions of female desire, bodily trauma resulting from male violence, and the lived reality of female experience within a culture that devalues that gendered positionality, these narratives work to undermine fixed categories of subjectivity and how they relate to frameworks of patriarchal power.

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[140]Ibid

## Chapter 2. Schizo-Narratives of Becoming

'Deleuzian aesthetics must be grounded on the principle that works of art momentarily

reconfigure our passive synthesis'[1]

In this chapter, I will be examining the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of becoming in depth,

to demonstrate how the feminist experimental writing identified in the first chapter

performs this becoming as a form of schizo-narrative. This term will be explained in more

detail further into the chapter but as an initial explanation, I use the term schizo-narrative

to define a text that offers a heightened reading experience occupying and stimulating

rhythms of response that are suggested by the text's own fragmentation and splintering

into multiple trajectories of thought. A schizo-narrative is not bound by genre and often

crosses literary categorisations incorporating fiction and various forms of non-fiction, but

Julie Armstrong's explanation of the experience of reading and writing experimental fiction

is helpful here to highlight this notion of a heightened reading experience:

> Writers who are aware that fiction is capable of doing much more than simply
> telling a story will become more accomplished, self-aware, insightful practitioners.
> In addition, by reading experimental fiction, a reader's views on story telling will
> be revised and they will become more sophisticated readers, ones who have the
> tools and vocabulary to enjoy a richer, more diverse experience of fiction, which
> can be very inspiring and rewarding.[2]

This diverse reading experience is also invested in a different mode of work expected of

the reader according to the type of text they encounter. For example, Umberto Eco

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[1] *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature*, ed. by Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts, and Aidan Tynan
(London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 68.
[2] Armstrong, *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers*, p. 6.

differentiates between closed and open texts which require the reader to operate differently as part of the reading encounter. A closed text aims 'at pulling the reader along a predetermined path, carefully displaying their effects so as to arouse pity or fear, excitement or depression at the due place and at the right moment.'[3] Eco offers examples of closed texts as the Superman comic strips and the novels of Ian Fleming which present a set format of narrative structure and reader expectation. While each reader has their own subjective response to a text, these 'closed' texts bring the collective readership through the same trajectory of narrative and plot but offer a multitude of possible interpretations depending on the position of each individual reader. He posits that the Superman stories could be read as romance rather than adventure as an alternative mode of thinking through potential interpretations. Contrastingly, Eco posits that open texts such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*[4] 'work at their peak revolutions per minute only when each interpretation is re-echoed by the others, and vice versa'.[5] The ambiguity of 'open' texts conversely draw in the possible interpretations because the production of the text is bound up with the consciousness of the reading subject as a process in flow. It requires the reader's interpretation as a necessary function of the reading experience in order to build upon the text itself as part of its own ongoing production:

> When reading *Ulysses* one can extrapolate the profile of a 'good *Ulysses* reader' from the text itself, because the pragmatic process of interpretation is not an empirical accident independent of the text *qua* text, but it is a structural element of its generative process.[6]

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[3] Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 8.

[4] Joyce, James, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin, 1992) and *Ulysses* (Richmond: Alma Classics, 2012)

[5] Eco, p. 9.

[6] Ibid.

Eco maintains that the author of an open text does not assume a model reader

interpreting the text in a certain way with a projected outcome, moreover, it is the

plurality of possible interpretations which feed into the text as these readers encounter it.

The multiple interpretations of the text support the openness of the text as an integral

component of its structure. In this sense the experience of reading an experimental text

must be a consideration of the author even before the text is conceived as a finished

product. The imagined reading experience flows backwards into the writing process as the

author considers how the text will function independently, and how they must help the

reader to engage with the text. Similarly, the writing process as an experiment in

author/reader communication flows forwards and towards its imagined recipients,

reaching out across the page as a visceral bond. The writing and reading experience

become intertwined as a flux and flow of tangible interaction, rather than a divisive

separation between author producing a text and reader consuming a text.  An

experimental text then accrues agency only through the reader's interpretation and

involvement, as Geir Farner explains when considering the impact of ambiguous texts

including modernist writing:

> If the interpretation of the text or the model is so evident that all the receivers
> share it, it seems plausible to consider it a part of the work. Such interpretations
> amount to intersubjective filling of gaps.[7]


Schizo-narrative as a narrative form experiments with the process of writing, language and

the textual form to cause ruptures in the flow of reading, inviting imaginative and creative

thought responses as part of the reader's cognitive processing of the text. Roland Barthes'

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[7] Geir Farner, *Literary Fiction. The Ways We Read Narrative Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 103

landmark 1967 essay 'The Death of the Author' suggests textual significance lies with the

reader rather than in authorial intent:

> A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into
> mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is only one place
> where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader […] The reader is the
> space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any
> of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.[8]

The interaction between author and reader is one of rhythm, in which the text emits a

sustained pulse[9] to the reader through the (intentional) ideas conveyed by the author and

onward through the (unintentional) ideas mobilised within the reader. This idea of rhythm

forming, moving and changing through the experience of authors writing and readers

thinking is one which I develop as a progression of recent work in the field of

rhythmanalysis.[10] I argue that Deleuze and Guattari develop Henri Lefebvre's work on

rhythmanalysis[11] through their concept of the refrain to establish a framework for literary

analysis using rhythm. Buchanan et al describe Deleuze's use of the refrain as:

> linguistic blocs stripped of meaning as such and whose importance lies entirely in
> their performative element […] In each case, the goal is to identify how a literary
> text breaks with the 'empirical' deployment of language, that is, language as
> representation which consists in identifying predicates attributed to subjects.[12]

Deleuze and Guattari employ the concept of the refrain throughout their writings on

literature, to move literary analysis away from the investigation of representation and

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[8] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Modern Criticism and Theory. A Reader.*, ed. by David Lodge, Second edition (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2000), pp. 146-150.
[9] Where ideas flow like a vibration or regular rhythmic beat from the text to the reader.
[10] See Yi Chen, *Practising Rhythmanalysis Theories and Methodologies* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).
[11] Henri Lefebvre's Rhythmanalysis project - Henri Lefebvre *Rhythmanalysis*, trans. by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) links to Deleuze's work on *Difference and Repetition* developing the use of rhythm as a concept and methodology to analyse the structures of everyday life as spatio-temporal rhythmic connections.
[12] *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature*, ed. by Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts, and Aidan Tynan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 3.

meaning and channel it towards a more fluid examination of other possibilities available within language. They celebrate language that plays with, and questions meaning. Language that can slip away from rigid definitions in order to free thought from our self-imposed boundaries. Deleuze advocates the work of Lewis Carrol as an example of such language, where Alice's changing form throughout her adventures in Wonderland does not pertain to an ideal or fixed point, she is not small or large, just smaller or larger than she was before. She changes size but in this fantastical world where all forms are at odds with expected reality, there is no standard point of reference for her physical form to be measured against. The concept of size then becomes abstract; she is merely changing, 'This is the simultaneity of a becoming whose characteristic is to elude the present.'[13] The refrain can be identified in the work of Lewis Carrol as a form of echo which reverberates throughout the text. As such, language creates an event like an imprint of something recognisable but slightly different (Alice's smallness or largeness). That event then continues to repeat and change every time, moving away from the original object of perception where its constant mutability may be regarded as a form of becoming.

By understanding rhythmanalysis as a methodology at work within these experimental texts, I demonstrate how they operate on the level of schizoananalysis to create new ways of reading and interacting with this literary form, not just within academia but on a broader scale of engaging critical thinking within a wider audience, thus creating a becoming through the process of reading. The purpose of this framework is twofold; firstly, to determine if a set of criteria can be established to identify the kinds of texts (as discussed in Chapter One) which can be regarded as feminist schizo-narratives. These texts challenge normative and specifically patriarchal forms of literary production such as plot linearity that drives the narrative forward through conflict resolution towards

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[13] Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Constantin V. Boundas, Mark Lester, and Charles J. Stivale (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1990), p. 1.

a satisfying conclusion, characters driven by identifiable motivations who perform roles

according to recognizable patterns of behaviour, and themes which reflect cultural values

representing the dominance of patriarchal structures in our cultural consciousness.[14]

Secondly, to deploy the philosophical questioning embedded in Deleuze's project within

these texts to identify how they work as a mode of writing the subjective self [15] and

exemplifying becoming through the practice of writing and reading. By bringing the three

conceptual areas of becoming, schizoanalysis and rhythmanalysis together, I hope to

advance Deleuzian studies of literature[16] to include a specifically feminist project of

becoming through narrative that contributes to a wider feminist politics within the

contemporary experimental literature outlined in Chapter One.

## Becoming and Becoming-woman.

The concept of becoming is linked to several other ideas and themes which are prevalent

throughout the entire collected works of Deleuze and Guattari including becoming-

woman, molar and molecular politics, majoritarian and minoritarian, collective

assemblages, lines of flight, rhizomes and the multiplicity. My reading of becoming as an

ultimately positive concept interacts with these ideas in a literary context which I will

expand upon in more detail in further chapters with the close reading of experimental

texts. I will first offer a definition here.

Deleuze and Guattari refer to becoming throughout their jointly-authored work

and it is of fundamental importance to Deleuze's entire oeuvre as a rejection of Platonism.

The notion of becoming is directly opposed to the Platonic ideal of being as a fixed or

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[14]See *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, ed. by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam
Fuchs (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 4.
[15] The subjective self as a totality of all the multiple components that make up an individual's being,
including conscious and subconscious thought, the sensory experience of embodiment and the
specific socio-economic and political experience of being that body in the world.
[16] See Buchanan and Marks (2000), Jean-Jacques Lecercle (2002), Buchanan, Matts and Tynan
(2015), Daniel Haines (2015) and Jason Skeet (2017).

stable mode of life that is grounded in the truth of an original foundation. In contrast to

this Deleuze and Guattari reject the idea of subjects and being as a discernible form to be

understood and represented. Rather, they argue that there is no such thing as being, only

a process of becoming which is a constant change and flux. Deleuze and Guattari suggest

that we are all undergoing a constant becoming, albeit at different speeds and rates of

mutability, which denies the apparent evidence of our solid and stable forms. So while we

regard ourselves to be whole entities (people, animals, plants, earth etc) operating

independently within the environments we inhabit, Deleuze and Guattari propose we are

in fact all engaged in a process of change at all times. Change that is interconnected with

our environment and occurring at levels that may not be obviously perceived,

'Movements, becomings, in other words, pure relations of speed and slowness, pure

affects, are below and above the threshold of perception.'[17] The concept of becoming is

not aligned to the physicality of material bodies but works for all forms of life including

thought, creativity, art and evolution, where no distinctions or divisions are drawn

between the site of origin and the unfolding action of these forms. Thought, therefore, is

not tied to the materiality of a stable body but operates as its own becoming. If we

consider thought as a becoming, it will necessarily fluctuate and change, it is not tethered

to a fixed location (human) or temporality. Deleuze and Guattari assert the concept of

becoming as a way of life experienced as a perpetual striving, not to reach a certain end,

but to continually be in process. All becomings, they suggest, can only begin through the

practice of becoming-woman:

> there is a becoming-woman, a becoming-child, that do not resemble the woman
> or the child as clearly distinct molar entities (although it is possible – only possible
> – for the woman or child to occupy privileged positions in relation to these
> becomings). What we term a molar entity is, for example, the woman as defined
> by her form, endowed with organs and functions and assigned as a subject.
> Becoming-woman is not imitating this entity or even transforming oneself into it.

[17] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by
Brian Massumi, (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 309.

> […] these indissociable aspects of becoming-woman must first be understood as a function of something else: not imitating or assuming the female form, but emitting particles that enter the relation of movement and rest, or the zone of proximity, of a microfemininity, in other words, that produce in us a molecular woman, create the molecular woman.[18]

This distinction between molar and molecular is one which is intrinsic to the concept of becoming and which holds tension within this research as a feminist project of engaging a political affect and which I will return to later. My understanding of the molar is on the plane of 'real life' within which we operate as subjects, adhering to the laws and expectations set out by social constructs. Within the molar we regulate our behaviour to the varying circumstances of our lives; in the workplace, at home with family, at social events with friends. It is the performance of a role which changes with each of these environments and the people we encounter within them. The way we respond to others and the expected behaviour that is necessarily bound up as part of that performance is instilled in each of us through the varied influences of our social conditioning, depending on our individual starting points but always centred around the intersections of gender, race, class and sexuality. Within the molar we operate in adherence to codes of social convention and the associated expected behaviours that we perform in response to these codes are perpetually reinforced by dominant frameworks of capitalist heteronormative patriarchy. The opposite of the molar is the molecular which operates at the level of the psyche, like a shadow or reflection of our perceived reality, but which is malleable and fluid, acting as a field of possibilities to affect and disrupt the molar lives we live and are constrained by:

> If molar unities, like the division of classes, races, and sexes, attempt to form and stabilize an identity, a fixity, a system that functions homeostatically, sealing in its

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[18] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 303.

energies and intensities, molecular becomings traverse, create a path, destabilize, energize instabilities, vulnerabilities of the molar unities.[19]

According to Deleuze and Guattari the significance of becoming is in the potential it creates by enabling us to move through and beyond the ordinary tracts of our prescribed movements and organised structures of our molar existence, offering multiple possibilities to allow the unexpected, unplanned and unthinkable to evolve from the deviations of life. They emphasise that becoming is not about transforming from one state of being to another but the perpetual growth of a rhizomatic [20] in-process unfolding. It is not based on a pre-defined starting point of being but must be thought away from the grounding of man/being/subject with the concept of becoming-woman as the gateway to accessing all becomings: 'Although all becomings are already molecular, including becoming-woman, it must be said that all becomings begin and pass through becoming-woman. It is the key to all the other becomings.'[21] Deleuze and Guattari posit that all becomings must begin with becoming-woman because in the molar politics of the social, political, economic frameworks of our everyday lives, woman is positioned as the 'other' in relation to the dominant positionality of man. In order to slip outside of these oppressive hierarchies, the position of the other must be taken on and passed through in order to engage a molecular space of releasing human tendencies to divide, categorise, order and assume power.[22]

Despite their argument that it is not a transitional process with an end goal, the premise and purpose of becoming-woman is paradoxically to reach a state of becoming-

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[19] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism.* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 172.

[20] Deleuze and Guattari take up the biological rhizome as a conceptual reimagining of development, change and growth, opposed to the predictable patterns of roots, a rhizome is unpredictable, diverse, moving in all directions and establishing connections to everything around it. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 7.

[21] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 306.

[22] Deleuze and Guattari were reacting against the hegemony of Structuralists thinkers in France at the time, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes.

imperceptible. Becoming-imperceptible is the point at which we lose our specificity and become indiscernible collections of singularities rather than whole entities comprised of identity. Singularities can be regarded as multiple components of our subjective selves, broken down to an infinitesimal level of singular distinctions. For example, one aspect of a person's subjectivity may be distinguished in simple terms as a white British female, but within those classifications of colour, nationality and gender are an infinite number of singularities that differentiate her from another person with these same characteristics. These singularities are infinitesimal because of the countless possible differences within each of those diversions such as, genetic heritage from parents, grandparents and ancestors traced back through family lines ad infinitum, cultural and social alignments based on geographic locations and communities that person has lived in and passed through, combined with the personal embodied experience of living within a socially constructed female gender. These incalculable singularities all contribute to make up the distinct subjectivity of that person and each singularity sets apart the differences of that person from every other individual. As Claire Colebrook observes, this means the divergence with personhood is celebrated rather than defining characteristics: 'Becoming-imperceptible means no longer knowing who or what we are; it means seeing with greater openness the differences, intensities and singularities that traverse us.'[23]

These concepts have garnered considerable critique from feminist scholars who suggest that this theory is yet another branch of male appropriation of the positionality that women have fought to claim and strengthen, by reducing sexual difference to a field of gender neutrality, seemingly obliterating women's historical struggle for equal rights, representation and value. Elizabeth Grosz discusses these critiques from Alice Jardine,

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[23] Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 130.

Luce Irigaray and Rosi Braidotti[24] which suggest that the concept of becoming-woman

implies a relinquishment of gender specificity and predicates an idealised becoming-

imperceptible that necessarily raises concerns about the practical repercussions for

women and a feminist politics:

> At the least, Deleuze and Guattari can be accused of aestheticizing and
> romanticizing women's struggles, while in stronger terms, they may be accused of
> depoliticizing women's various political struggles and using them precisely to
> neutralize, to render human (and thus to rephallicize), women's specificity, which
> they have struggled so hard to produce and represent.[25]

It is this critique that I find has the most leverage and which I am keen to keep in mind

when considering how best to utilise the concept of becoming within my own research and

through examining the methodologies of rhythmanalysis and schizoanalysis below. Other

points of feminist critique from the late twentieth century still hold relevance for

contemporary women's politics today in terms of gender equity and the legacy of female

exclusion. As Elizabeth Grosz points out:

> In invoking metaphors of machinic functioning, in utilizing the terminology of the
> technocratic order, Deleuze and Guattari, like other masculinist philosophers,
> utilize tropes and terms made possible only through women's exclusion and
> denigration; while not inherently and irremediably masculinist, technocracies are
> in fact masculinist insofar as technological developments have thus far been
> historically predicated on women's exclusion.[26]

Although women have made significant progress in the twenty-first century breaking into

male-dominated workplaces and environments of research, including science, technology,

engineering and maths, feminist concerns of gender equality still hold weight as Caroline

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[24] Alice Jardine, 'Woman in Limbo: Deleuze and His Br[Others]', *SubStance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism*, 13.3–4, (1984), 46-60, Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance. A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*, trans. by Elizabeth Guild (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1991).
[25] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism.* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 163.
[26] Ibid., p. 163-4.

Criado Perez documents in her book *Invisible Women Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*.[27] The book presents detailed evidence to prove how gender inequality is woven into the fabric of our material world at all levels, based on a gender data gap where women are not accounted for in the planning and design of all aspects of society. Criado Perez exposes the data bias inherent in all aspects of structures governing day to day life, ranging from town planning, technology, medical research, education, the media and healthcare. This inherent gender bias works on the premise that the male human subject is the default mode of humanity, an assumption of universality which functions not only to discriminate against women but actively exclude them.

Another important feminist contribution to the cultural awareness of gender bias is that of STEM-based discoveries made by women whose achievements have previously been written out of the history books or side-lined in favour of their male counterparts.[28] Achievements such as this are significant attributes of the feminist politics we have worked so hard to build, and as a feminist researcher I do not find it appropriate to adhere to the fullest compliance of a Deleuzian becoming-imperceptible as it would mean renouncing the need for a female-oriented politics which acknowledges the significant patriarchal oppression still in operation in the molar arena of our contemporary lives.[29] Rebecca Solnit discusses the need for continued activism and intellectual labour to build on the progress and positive change wrought though campaigns such as 'Occupy Wall Street (2011), Idle No More (2012), Black Lives Matter (2013), #MeToo (2017), and the new feminist surges and insurgencies, immigrant and trans rights movement, the Green New Deal (2018), and

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[27] Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women. Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2019).

[28] Matthew Cobb, 'Sexism in Science: Did Watson and Crick Really Steal Rosalind Franklin's Data?', *The Guardian*, 23 June 2015, section Science <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/jun/23/sexism-in-science-did-watson-and-crick-really-steal-rosalind-franklins-data> [accessed 9 July 2019].

[29] I use the collective term we to signify that I am including myself identifying as a woman and as part of a feminist collective seeking to challenge the patriarchy not only on a theoretical level but on a personal and political level.

the growing power and reach of the climate movement.'[30] The foundations of the backlash

against these movements and the drive for change is from 'white people in general and

white men in particular, and especially straight white Protestant men'[31] whose position as

the universal human subject is under threat from those who seek to make their voices

heard and make themselves and their experiences known. Giving up their position of

privilege and being made to not only think about, but also make space for, the experiences

of others outside of that privilege, is the cause of white male discomfort and the attempts

to reinforce white supremacy and patriarchal control. As Solnit argues, 'part of the

population in the United States and Europe is moving backward, trying to take up

residence in the wreckage of white supremacy and patriarchy, perhaps convinced there is

no shelter that shelters us all, that they need to be in places where whiteness and

maleness dominate'.[32] We are seeing this play out in the spread of misogyny and extreme

sexism through online cultures of toxic masculinity perpetuated by high profile figures

such as Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson, that have garnered a disturbingly large

following.[33]

There is much work still to do then, to push back against this domination. At an

ideological level we need to question inherent and unacknowledged gender bias within

the language we use and the theories that have shaped our cognitive practices and ways

of understanding the world. Simultaneously we need to challenge discrimination at a

practical level with continued activism and demands for change. As Criado Perez

demonstrates, we have much that still needs challenging, 'When we exclude half of

humanity from the production of knowledge we lose out on potentially transformative

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[30] Rebecca Solnit, *Whose Story Is This? Old Conflicts, New Chapters* (London: Granta, 2019), p. 2.
[31] Solnit, (2019) p. 13.
[32] Ibid., p. 8.
[33] Dorian Lynskey, 'How dangerous is Jordan B Peterson, the right-wing professor who 'hit a hornets' nest'' *The Guardian* (2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/feb/07/how-dangerous-is-jordan-b-peterson-the-rightwing-professor-who-hit-a-hornets-nest> [accessed 10 December 2023]

insights.'[34] Sustained feminist critique of the patriarchal structures which order and control

our everyday lives is a significant destabilising force, that asks us to reflect upon the values

and assumptions we have internalised as part of our educational and experiential

development as gendered beings. In this way, feminist critique offered by writers such as

Criado Perez and Solnit, questions the very foundations of the way we live in relation to

these gender roles. It prompts us to scrutinise our own perceptions of the positions

assigned and denied to women in social, cultural, economic and political structures. The

action of interrogating these paradigms in turn opens up the possibility for challenging

them, thus working in a similar way to the deconstruction of molar concepts as offered by

the Deleuzo-Guattarian project of becoming-imperceptible. Reading this project through a

feminist lens opens up the potential for becoming-imperceptible to be adapted as a

philosophical tool for feminist challenges to the patriarchy.

Whilst Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge the need for women to maintain

credence in their molar politics, they must also strive to become-imperceptible and

abandon the binary hierarchies of power which oppress them:

> It is, of course, indispensable for women to conduct a molar politics, with a view to
> winning back their own organism, their own history, their own subjectivity: "we as
> women.." makes its appearance as a subject of enunciation. But it is dangerous to
> confine oneself to such a subject, which does not function without drying up a
> spring or stopping a flow...It is thus necessary to conceive of a molecular women's
> politics that slips into molar confrontations and passes under or through them.[35]

It is therefore a privileged point of access that Deleuze and Guattari suggest women

occupy in relation to becoming. From our location of molar marginality, as women we are

able to elide the constraints of a majoritarian position which seemingly holds men within a

position of dominance and power, yet in the same instance we must continue to

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[34] Criado Perez, *Invisible Women*, p. 312.
[35] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 304.

deconstruct these major/minor paradigms whilst we operate within them. It is noted by

Jerry Aline Flieger that Deleuze and Guattari rely on the juxtaposition of molecular

confrontations and molar politics to destabilise gender polarities whilst at the same time

celebrating the positionality of women within them. Referring to their use of Virginia

Woolf as an icon of becoming-in-action, Flieger notes that:

> This passage highlights a productive irony: here Deleuze cites a feminist icon, the very emblem of 'identity' for women, the original tenant of a 'room of one's own', claiming to put down roots, a 'plot' or place from which to speak. But Woolf is also Deleuze's chosen poet of deterritorialization, or itinerant moves, of becoming-imperceptible, 'like grass', articulating an inarticulate politics of the 'point' which destabilises and sends a tremor through any party 'line'.[36]

Virginia Woolf is quoted and referenced throughout *A Thousand Plateaus* as the paragon

of a writer who denies, or writes away from her own gendered embodiment, but whose

writing activates a becoming:

> When Virginia Woolf was questioned about a specifically women's writing, she was appalled at the idea of writing "as a woman." Rather, writing should produce a becoming-woman as atoms of womanhood capable of crossing and impregnating an entire social field, and of contaminating men, of sweeping them up in that becoming. Very soft particles – but also very hard and obstinate, irreducible, indomitable. The rise of women in English novel writing has spared no man: even those who pass for the most virile, the most phallocratic, such as Lawrence and Miller, in their turn continually tap into and emit particles that enter the proximity or zone of indiscernibility of women. In writing, they become-women.[37]

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that women occupy the primary position through which to

access becoming. Becoming-woman is simultaneously open to everybody including men,

who must also navigate through the position of subjective marginality with which women

are principally associated, in order to evade their own social, political and economic

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[36] Jerry Aline Flieger, 'Becoming-Woman: Deleuze, Schreber and Molecular Identification.', in *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, ed. by Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 38-63 (pp. 61-62).
[37] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 304-5.

privilege. While I do adhere to the positivity and potential benefits of the concept of becoming-woman, I find this passage problematic, not least because Deleuze and Guattari do not seem to acknowledge their own androcentrism as if they are immune to, and unaffected by, the very systems which enabled their own success as published academic theorists occupying a territory within the dominant majority of patriarchy and academia. Issues of class and race are alluded to in terms of certain groups of people who also occupy marginal spaces within the molar framework of capitalist patriarchy,[38] yet seemingly neglected as obstacles for these people to overcome while they still must battle with the molar confrontations that Deleuze and Guattari cannot understand from the privilege of their own subject position as elite French intellectuals. I also find it difficult to reconcile the assertion from Deleuze and Guattari and Virginia Woolf herself that she did not write 'as a woman' which in part stemmed from her privilege as a white woman of the upper class, and also from her drive to prove herself as a writer of comparable capability and talent to her male contemporaries. Thus writing about gender specificity was eschewed in favour of demonstrating herself to be as equally objective as male writers were assumed to be. In her essay 'Women and Fiction', Woolf acknowledges the importance of women writers to represent their lived experience authentically but then posits that this is not something to aspire to for the future of women's writing:

> In the past, the virtue of women's writing often lay in its divine spontaneity […] It was untaught; it was from the heart. But it was also, and much more often, chattering and garrulous – mere talk split over paper and left to dry in pools and blots. In future, granted time and books and a little space in the house for herself, literature will become for women, as for men, an art to be studied. Women's gift will be trained and strengthened. The novel will cease to be the dumping-ground for the personal emotions. It will become, more than at present, a work of art like any other, and its resources and its limitations will be explored.[39]

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[38] See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 321.
[39] Virginia Woolf, 'Women and Fiction' in *On Women and Writing* (London: The Women's Press, 1979), pp. 43-52 (p. 51).

Therefore, by taking Virginia Woolf as their only female example of an author whose writing demonstrates becoming, they use this historical adherence to first wave feminist notions of ingratiating into gender objectivity to maintain the primacy of becoming-imperceptible.

The scope of becoming-imperceptible is examined in a literary context through Deleuze and Guattari's insistence on the primacy of the impersonal and the collective utterance, opposed to the specificity of the individual, both in terms of characters within narrative and that of authorial intention. They commend Kafka's writing process as an example of objective authorial intention, where he is seemingly able to disengage from his own personal connection to language and its associated meanings to write with a lexicon devoid of these connections, 'towards the impersonal and world historical levels in which he could exist as a pure singularity, marked only by the initial 'K'.'[40] While I adhere to Deleuze's advocacy of Kafka's literary project as a proponent of experimental literature, one which enables his readers to move outside of binary sign/signified ties of meaning, I do not agree with the sentiment that his authorial process enabled him to elide his own subjective positioning in the molar configurations as a German speaking Jew living in Prague. Rather, I think his subjective specificity was the necessary condition of his innovative writing style.

I argue below that the molar conditions and the specificity of the author's subjective experience are the necessary preconditions for the experimental nature of their work. My adaptation of becoming therefore shall be true to the Deleuzo-Guattarian project of reconfiguring thought in the molecular but its purpose will be to confront and destabilise molar dichotomies as part of a feminist politics that must necessarily continue

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[40] Aidan Tynan, *Deleuze's Literary Clinic: Criticism and the Politics of Symptoms,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 15.

to operate. The purpose of this study is concerned with analysing aesthetic techniques of becoming-woman as a mode of feminist disruption set against a context of the current state of global political regression towards right wing thinking, particularly the erosion of women's rights in the United States (see, for example; Barbara Stark's assessment of the Trump administration's actions to rescind women's access to abortion, healthcare and the concurrent normalisation of sexual harassment that has taken place in the US since Trump's inauguration,[41] the backlash against feminist thought and activism from conservative women's groups asserting female subordination,[42] the state level legal decisions that prioritise the life of the foetus over the rights of the mother and feed into the erosion of abortion rights.)[43]

The works of contemporary experimental literature highlighted in this study are examples of texts which, I argue, reconfigure molecular thought through their experimentation with form and language, [44] yet also destabilise molar dichotomies by addressing contemporary feminist issues such as sexual violence, bodily autonomy and gender performativity. I suggest that this reconfiguration of thought wrought through an affective reading experience may impact upon on a broader embodied and practical form of becoming. One that holds power as a process of agitation to affect the everyday lives of the readers encountering these texts. Therefore, by engaging with becoming on a conceptual level, as an ongoing process of challenging and questioning modes of thinking, together with supporting a sustained feminist critique of patriarchal culture, readers

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[41] Barbara Stark, 'MR. TRUMP'S CONTRIBUTION TO WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS', *Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 24.2 (2018): 317–44.

[42] See Ronnee Schreiber, *Righting Feminism : Conservative Women and American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[43] See E. M. Dadlez and William L. Andrews, 'NOT SEPARATE, BUT NOT EQUAL: HOW FETAL RIGHTS DEPRIVE WOMEN OF CIVIL RIGHTS.', *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 26.2 (2012): 103–22 and Elise Andaya, '"I'm Building a Wall Around My Uterus": Abortion Politics and the Politics of Othering in Trump's America', *Cultural Anthropology*, 34.1 (2019): 10–17.

[44] Where molecular thought is at the level of the subconscious psyche thus not restricted by structures of language, logic, fear or sense.

encountering this material have the opportunity to disrupt and destabilise that culture. A practical example of this would be feminist challenges to inherent masculine bias within the process of recording and canonising knowledge. Rebecca Solnit references the gendering of the spaces we live in, where value is conferred upon the achievements of men but dismissed or not acknowledged for women.[45] This is evidenced by the streets and landmarks named after famous men, which demonstrate the extent to which women have been absent from the naming and the statuary of the cityscape they move through. As well as this lack of representation, Solnit addresses the acknowledgement that women cannot operate with the same degree of freedom as men within these spaces. Similarly, Laura Bates' ongoing "Everyday Sexism" project which collects anecdotal data, and her subsequent series of books, expose the pervasive effects of culturally embedded sexism and normalised misogyny.[46] Speaking about the multiple experiences of sexism that every girl and woman has endured, Bates highlights how this reinforces the learned knowledge that a woman's interaction with the world around her is always inhibited by men:

> Both could only arise from a society in which the sexual objectification, harassment and oppression of women were commonplace and in which the superiority, privilege and entitlement of usually white, heterosexual, non-disabled men went unchallenged. We'd all been thinking of these stories as individual problems – our own personal, coincidental lists. But they weren't. They were connected. And that meant the problem wasn't with us; it was with the system.[47]

In recent years there has been a plethora of popular non-fiction publications on wide ranging forms of feminism that address these issues and discuss feminist tactics outside of the academic arena of feminist theory. These books offer disruption at the level of the individual consciousness, by fostering awareness of injustice and may consequently lead

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[45] Solnit, *Whose Story is This?* p. 137.
[46] Laura Bates, 'Everyday Sexism Project' <https://everydaysexism.com/> [accessed 1 May 2020]. Laura Bates, *Everyday Sexism* (London: Simon & Shuster, 2014).
[47] Laura Bates, *Fix the System, Not the Women,* (London: Simon & Shuster, 2022), p. 12.

onto practical effects. Caroline Criado Perez successfully campaigned for a statue of suffragist Millicent Fawcett to be placed in Parliament Square after she reflected and questioned why there were eleven statues of men and none of women in the home of British democracy, and for female representation on British currency when the only image of a women on British bank notes was due to be removed in 2013.[48] Laura Bates' Everyday Sexism project has exposed the continued harassment and inequality women face in the workplace and in society in general. Mainstream feminist activism such as this, challenges patterns of thought entrenched in patriarchal bias and can result in changes to our material environment and the conditions we live by – offering a practical becoming that affects a molar politics.

Beginning at a conceptual or molecular level, becoming can be engaged through cognitive disruption to trigger a practical or molar becoming that has the capacity to enlarge the scope of becoming from individual to communal. This notion of becoming as a concept that has potential to reach outside of its philosophical beginnings, and towards a tangible affective tactic within diverse arenas, holds powerful potential for feminist scholars and activists. In a similar project to my own, Amaleena Damlé addresses the potential benefits for feminist thinking in utilising becoming to reconfigure ideas about the body in contemporary women's writing in French. Damlé's theoretical approach also refers to the possible extension of becoming affecting a wider environment outside of theoretical concerns:

> For Deleuzian feminists, deconstructing molar politics involves thinking through the possibilities of becoming-minoritarian in the terms of a micro-politics of desire. For desire […] is ultimately revolutionary through its flows and assemblages it has the capacity to transform and destabilise the molar.[49]

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[48] Caroline Criado Perez, 'Caroline Criado Perez: Campaigns', <https://www.carolinecriadoperez.com> [accessed 13 January 2020], n. dat..
[49] Amaleena Damlé, *The Becoming of the Body: Contemporary Women's Writing in French.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 53.

In this vein, the Deleuzian reconfiguration of desire as a productive force of creation is a necessary constituent of the affective power of writing to cross over from the virtual to the real. The act of writing is a form of artistic creation which enables the writing subject to engage a form of becoming as part of this productive flow of creativity. Damlé interrogates how this creativity produced from desire speaks to the female embodied experience, specifically with regards to sexual desire, motherhood, inhabiting an objectified body, and offers a strong connection to creative female output.

I shall now turn to the notion of schizoanalysis to analyse how this concept can be utilised in relation to a feminist politics of writing the subjective self.

## Schizoanalysis

My utilisation of schizoanalysis will be a pragmatic application of Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming to highlight texts which further a feminist project of destabilising paradigms of patriarchal power and oppression. These systemic forms operate at a practical level as already discussed in relation to Criado Perez's exploration of gender bias within material living conditions, and at an ideological level, as evidenced by Solnit's critique of the continued prioritisation of the masculine right to speak and uncontested truth of the male voice within the collective cultural consciousness.[50] My critical analysis of the texts in this research demonstrates how these they question the standardised nomenclature and structure of language, but also function as an act of rupturing which allows previously marginalised and silenced voices and experiences to penetrate into the collective cultural

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[50] By collective cultural consciousness, I refer to the shared set of beliefs and common assumptions which purport to be representative of the majority of people within a society or cultural collective, and how those common assumptions impact upon the thinking and behaviour of that collective group of people.

consciousness. In this chapter I'd like to argue that this rupturing, which occurs within

experimental feminist literature, is an active form of schizoanalysis:

> Schizoanalysis has one single aim – to get revolutionary, artistic, and analytic
> machines working as parts, cogs, of one another […] That's what we're interested
> in: revolutionary schisis as opposed to the despotic signifier.[51]

Deleuze and Guattari formulated the notion of schizoanalysis in response to the

restrictions of psychoanalysis. The problem they saw with Freud's psychoanalytic therapy

was that it purported to resolve conflicts of the subject in order to bring about a unified or

'whole' self, formed from the successful resolution of the Oedipal complex which Freud

posited as a universal process of human development. Schizoanalysis, on the other hand,

is based on the notion that the human subject is not a unified whole but a composite of

multiple and movable parts, constantly in flux and ever changing. Drawing on the

condition of schizophrenia,[52] Deleuze and Guattari regarded the multiple splintered self of

the schizophrenic as representative of the potentiality of the unfettered, shifting

multiplicities of human subjectivity without the restrictions of socially constructed

impositions of language, law and social expectations of the molar.

> The schizoanalytic argument is simple: desire is a machine, a synthesis of
> machines, a machinic arrangement – desiring-machines. The order of desire is the
> order of *production*; all production is at once desiring-production and social
> production. We therefore reproach psychoanalysis for having stifled this order of
> production, for having shunted it into *representation*.[53]

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[51] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, trans. by Martin Joughin, European Perspectives (New
York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 24.
[52] Deleuze and Guattari assert their differentiation between schizophrenia as a condition that
Guattari treated as part of his clinical practice and schizoanalysis as a productive theoretical
proposition. See Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, trans. by Martin Joughin, European
Perspectives (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 23-4
[53] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert
Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 337.

Schizoanalysis therefore is productive desire, opposed to the Freudian notion of desire predicated on lack. Schizoanalytic desire is that which is able to create material structures not just ideological changes. If we relate the potential of schizoanalytic desire back to the goal of becoming-imperceptible, the schizoanalytic narrative enables the plethora of singularities within each individual to be unshackled from the totality of the whole, thus releasing the divergence of those singularities to be expressed and explored in and of themselves. It is a political site too, opening up a space between reform and revolution, but Deleuze and Guattari don't say how this might be actioned in reality. Deleuze and Guattari published *Anti-Oedipus*[54] in reaction to the realisations among French intellectuals after the events of May 1968, that the desire for political and social change was not brought about by a drive of revolutionary power from the masses. The student led revolution which began in a suburb of Paris, inspired a general strike involving millions of workers and resulted in serious rioting and disruption across the city. The potential for revolutionary action to overthrow President Charles de Gaulle did not materialise and the movement lost momentum. For Deleuze and Guattari, the outcome or failure of May '68 was balanced against the event itself as an act of becoming which held more potential than the act of revolution itself:

> May 68 was a demonstration, an irruption, of a becoming in its pure state.[…] They say revolutions turn out badly. But they're constantly confusing two different things, the way revolutions turn out historically and people's revolutionary becoming. These relate to two different sets of people. Men's only hope lies in revolutionary becoming: the only way of casting off their shame and responding to what is intolerable. [55]

In contrast to the shock of a chaotic revolutionary surge, Deleuze and Guattari offered up schizoanalysis as a means through which to enact subtle transformation that reverberates

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[54] Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.
[55] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972-1990,* trans. by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 171

through to a wider context with far reaching impact. This mode of schizoanalysis is a

revolution by degrees which Deleuze suggests starts in the middle – our current point of

orientation from within whatever spatio-temporal, socio-political and economic location

we currently occupy.[56] The middle represents the current point of existing structures and

hierarchies, and specifically capitalist frameworks of value, that we find ourselves

operating within as part of our daily molar lives. If we begin to agitate and challenge these

structures in the present moment and the everyday spaces within which we orient

ourselves, we are already initiating a form of becoming. This challenge will then have the

potential to infiltrate and reach out to all corners of social, cultural, economic and political

spheres motivated by our desire for change. A desire as a productive force.

Deleuze and Guattari advocate the power of the collective as a force which could

drive change towards an ultimate aim of becoming-imperceptible, where becoming-

imperceptible is the collective everybody/everything opposed to strengthening the

position,  influence and significance of the individual subjective self. Deleuze and Guattari

turn again to Woolf to bolster their argument, quoting her Diary entry from November 28

1928, to explain the premise of becoming-imperceptible as a distancing from molar

subjectivity:

> "Eliminate all that is waste, death, superfluity," complaint and grievance,
> unsatisfied desire, defense or pleading, everything that roots each of us
> (everybody) in ourselves, in our molarity. For everybody/everything is the molar
> aggregate, but *becoming everybody/everything* is another affair, one that brings
> into play the cosmos with its molecular components.[57]

While I have some reservations about the concept of becoming-imperceptible as an

ideological mode of being to strive for because of the need as previously mentioned, for

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[56] See Buchanan, Matts, and Tynan, *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature,* p. 9

[57] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 308.

women to engage in a molar politics as unified subjective beings, I uphold the notion that

the power of the collective (when affected by the collective consciousness of a group) can

foster a productive medium for rallying change. In this thesis, I am arguing for the power

of the collective forged through readers' encounters with schizo-narratives as a means to

enact this revolution by degrees. The potential literary texts hold to encourage readers to

individually and collectively question the basic components of our molar foundations such

as language, epistemology and desire can lead to a productive force of intensity which

drives change, as Buchanan, Matts and Tynan explain:

> But for schizoanalysis, literary delirium has the distinctly political capacity to give
> consistency to new and unheard of agencies by affecting language as a whole:
> literature allows readers to discern desire (as a constituting –constitutes force)
> without the conditions of readability by which we normally grant the efficiency of
> statements.[58]

By engaging with literary texts in a schizoanalytic capacity, particularly experimental texts

where narratives are not plot bound, language deviates from rules of grammar and syntax

and formal properties are disrupted, the reader is opened up to the affective forces of the

textual object.

## Deleuze and Guattari as experimental practitioners.

Returning to the notion of revolution through art and aesthetics,[59] and with a particular

interest in the affective potential of literature, Deleuze and Guattari offer up schizoanalysis

as a form of creative multiplicity which they not only advocate but also practise within

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[58] Buchanan, Matts, and Tynan, *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature,* p. 12.
[59] Where aesthetics considers the judgements we make about art and the affective responses
sustained by notions of beauty, originating from A.G. Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750) and later
taken up by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) and Friedrich Schiller in
the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1795).

their own collaborative work. Their own technique of writing collaboratively cements this

idea of desiring machines as a productive force:

> Félix sees writing as a schizoid flow drawing in all sorts of things. I'm interested in
> the way a page of writing flies off in all directions and at the same time closes right
> up on itself like an egg. And in the reticences, the resonances, the lurches, and all
> the larvae you can find in a book.[60]

For Deleuze and Guattari, the process of writing is as important as the finished piece. The

act of writing opens a gateway for rhizomatic thinking to emerge and for a creative rhythm

to be established. This is evident in their own style of writing where their own reflections

on the text appear as revisions, and in the form of *A Thousand Plateaus* itself - comprised

of a series of non-sequential sections or plateaus. Deleuze and Guattari insist the plateaus

can be read in any order and the book does not have to be read in linear fashion or as a

whole. The notion of a work compromised of individual plateaus rather than component

chapters of a complete work feeds into the Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophical project

promoting rhizomatic multiplicity of thought. For example in the plateau on becoming

where they quote Virginia Woolf reflecting on her writing technique of assimilating

experience without pinning it to her own memories, they reconsider their own

terminology, 'Wherever we used the word "memories" in the preceding pages, we were

wrong to do so; we meant to say "becoming," we were saying becoming.'[61]

## Collective consciousness – collective action

Using the concept of rhythm as a methodology for thinking about creative expression and

affect, I will be exploring how the writing process exudes a pulse or sonar from writer to

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[60]Deleuze, *Negotiations*, p. 14.

[61] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* p. 324.

reader and onwards into a collective consciousness. I refer to collective consciousness here

as 'the shared acquired awareness, reflectivity and mental states that result from

membership in a group or collective.'[62] Alexandra Walker uses this definition to consider

the impact that collective consciousness can have upon the actions of a self-defined group:

> A collective identity or self exists when people think, feel, and act primarily as group members rather than as autonomous individuals in the temporal and spatial context of that group. These new 'collective selves' have unique ideas, rituals, values, symbols, and behaviours.[63]

When considering the collective consciousness of a group of disparate readers then, I

argue that the work required of a reader of experimental literature, acts in the same way

as a cohesive collective by garnering a sense of commonality. It is through the dual work of

encountering an alternative form of prose and acknowledging the subjective and affective

ideas arising from this encounter, that generates a collective consciousness of becoming.

Denise Riley explores this idea in her essays interrogating how language affects us as much

as how we are affected by language. As such her work comes 'closer to apprehending

language's affect as that outward unconscious which hovers between people, rather than

swimming upward from the privacy of each heart.'[64] Riley considers language as a medium

that brings us together in forms of commonality – communication, feeling, understand, yet

also splits us apart in divisive rhetoric and misunderstanding.

A collective re-appropriation and reworking of normative linguistic frameworks

holds rich potential for feminist modes of theoretical enquiry and practical application. The

advancement of gender equality afforded by the ideological and practical forms of feminist

activism demonstrates how traditional ideologies and socio-political structures regarding

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[62] Alexandra Walker, *Collective Consciousness & Gender* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 2
[63] Walker, p. 3
[64] Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion. Language as Affect* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 3-4.

gender were destabilised and overturned as a mode of collective desire that fed into

collaborative action:

> It is argued that feminism was a fundamental step in the collective consciousness relating to gender justice, because women collectively needed a surge of energy to enter masculine territory and the public sphere. This surge of energy emerged from the individual consciousness of many individuals, and particularly those feminist suffragettes engaged in transnational work [...] Their energy came in many forms: anger, volatility, passion, resentment, enthusiasm, emancipation, and excitement. All of these collective emotions were essential in the leap for women from the private sphere into the public sphere, and the young women in various parts of the world who now automatically enter the public sphere without question are undoubtedly the beneficiaries of the feminist project.[65]

In a continuation of this feminist project of destabilising patriarchal hegemony, challenging

and changing individual cognitive processes through a seemingly solitary practice of

reading is a tangible starting point for mobilising a collective desire for change. Beginning

at the micro level of the individual reader reflecting on their interaction with the

experimental text, leads onto broader affective possibilities as the wider general

readership builds up new cognitive interventions. The collective consciousness of these

readers is engaged in a mode of becoming. The trajectory between the thoughts of the

author and those of multiple readers, maps a web of connections between this collective

consciousness with every individual response to the text. This engagement may allow the

reader to reflect upon the traditional form of conventional narratives as outlined in the

introduction, but also question the accepted structures which regulate our lives and

thinking. As Rebecca Solnit argues, it is the reshaping of ideas that changes our material

world:

> We live inside ideas. Some are shelters, some are observatories, some are windowless prisons. We are leaving some behind and entering others. At its best, in recent years, this has been a collaborative process so swift and powerful that those paying close attention can see the doors being framed, the towers arising, the spaces taking shape in which our thoughts will reside – and other structures being knocked down. Oppressions and exclusions so accepted they're nearly

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[65] Walker, *Collective Consciousness*, p. 119.

> invisible become visible en route to being unacceptable, and other mores replace the old ones.[66]

Therefore, in order to change the material conditions of our lives, we need to open ourselves up to new ways of thinking, invoke new ideas and allow ourselves to move out of those oppressive preconceived narratives. [67] This is the basic premise of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming.

Much of the secondary material written about Deleuze and Guattari involved sustained attempts to break down and define their particular style of philosophy. Cutting through the dense and often confusing prose to identify the plethora of concepts and terms, scholars of Deleuze and Guattari have provided definitions and examples of the philosophy in easier to read texts than their original works. While I would like to offer a similarly neatly-sectioned breakdown of my use of the three conceptual areas I have highlighted for this chapter, it is Deleuze and Guattari's challenging style of writing that I would also like to analyse here and as I explore their ideas. It is therefore unavoidable that these concepts intertwine and flow in and amongst each other, so some overlap will naturally occur within my own prose.

## Rhythmanalysis as methodology

Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan suggest that throughout his oeuvre Deleuze advocates the notion and practice of writing in process when considering the work of literature. Writing in process is a practice which 'breaks the 'empirical' deployment of language'[68] so that the use of language is not simply a referent for meaning, but rather, an

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[66] Solnit, *Whose Story Is This?*, p. 3.
[67] The use of the pronouns we and our, refers the feminist project that I situate myself within of collectively advancing the rights of women and gender non-conforming people within current systems of inequality and oppression. This requires the participation and contribution of men to destabilise these patriarchal narratives.
[68] Buchanan, Matts, and Tynan, *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature,* p. 3

action which performs or enables becomings to occur and perpetuate.[69] It is this concept

of writing in process that I would like to take up here, linking it to the specific Deleuzo-

Guattarian concepts of schizoanalysis and becoming as outlined above. The writing process

and the subsequent reading experience both flow with rhythms which intersect and

develop from author to reader and back again. I will explore how the notion of

rhythmanalysis can be deployed as a methodology and suggest how this methodology can

lead to a becoming for author and reader through the production of the schizo-narrative. I

will then connect these schizo-narratives to a contemporary feminist politics within

literature which has the power and potential for further impact outside of literary and

academic structures.

Using Henri Lefebvre's methodology of the study of rhythms[70] as a spatio-temporal

lens to analyse the structures of everyday life, I shall examine how the personal rhythms of

the authorial writing process, the subsequent reading experience and the broader rhythms

of the socio-economic literary marketplace, interconnect and enable these narratives to

impact upon the wider consciousness of the reading public.[71] In his introduction to

Lefebvre's book *Rhythmanalysis*, Stuart Elden suggests that Lefebvre may have been

influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's work on rhythm but this is as yet an unexplored

avenue of research. Deleuze and Guattari develop their ideas on rhythm[72] as the event

which emerges out of chaos created by what they refer to as, 'the transcoding of milieus'.

They posit the concept of milieus as vibratory; 'a block of spacetime constituted by the

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[69] Ibid, p. 3

[70] Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

[71] This idea of the wider consciousness of the reading public refers to the general consciousness and knowledge of readers who encounter the same books, regarding the themes and content of those texts and how they encourage readers to respond to socio-political events. An example might be the cultural consciousness surrounding the allegory of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* for the Trump administration in the USA.

[72] See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* pp. 342-386, and Gilles Deleuze *Difference and Repetition,* trans. by Paul Patton (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 223-292.

periodic repetition of the component',[73] to reconceptualise ideas about events, actions

and change. A milieu might be the environment, context, situation, surroundings,

language, time of day etc and multiple other aspects of coded experience. They place

emphasis on events as points of action which enable rhythm to emerge from chaos and

interrogate the way in which this process can be applied to various socio-political and

economic ontologies. The event of May 1968, for example, although outwardly a failed

revolution, emitted its own rhythm which had a significant effect on the subsequent

poststructuralist work and political allegiances of a number of other French thinkers

including Derrida, Barthes, Lyotard, Baudrillard and Foucault who saw this protest

movement as an indicator of hopeful democratization.[74]

Deleuze and Guattari's notion of milieus transcoding is a simultaneous interaction

and passing through, whereby each milieu is slightly changed or affected by an alteration

from the experience of this interaction:

> Transcoding or transduction is the manner in which one milieu serves as the basis
> for another, or conversely is established atop another milieu, dissipates in it or is
> constituted in it. The notion of the milieu is not unitary: not only does the living
> thing continually pass from one milieu to another, but the milieus pass into one
> another; they are essentially communicating.[75]

This can be illustrated in their example of the wasp and the orchid[76] in the introductory

plateau on rhizomes to show how the rhythms of each independent entity (wasp and

orchid) connect in a critical spatial-temporal point to produce a new rhythm – the orchid's

physical mimicry of the wasp's external characteristics lures the wasp in to transport its

pollen. A connection of species through rhythm allows for the production of a new

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[73] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* p. 345.

[74] See Mark Poster, *Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: In Search of a Context* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 13.

[75] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 345

[76] Ibid, p. 11

territory[77] for that moment, only to disperse leaving both agents in altered states to their former conditions. For Deleuze and Guattari, rhythm emerges as a process in a state of in-between-ness which allows communication between two states and where two milieus transcode.  By rethinking biological, natural and social processes as a cohesion of rhythmic pulses interacting and pulling apart, Deleuze and Guattari illustrate how these multiple rhythms are born from the infinitesimal repetitions and differences of their originating agents and bear a territory:

> Bird songs: the bird sings to mark its territory. The Greek modes and Hindu rhythms are themselves territorial, provincial, regional. The refrain may assume other functions, amorous, professional or social, liturgical or cosmic; it always carries earth with it; it has a land (sometimes a spiritual land) as its concomitant; it has an essential relation to a Natal, a Native.[78]

The refrain or Ritornello serves to demonstrate how a territory is drawn by repetition of a rhythm. Deleuze identifies 'refrains' as linguistic blocs stripped of meaning.[79] The first example Deleuze and Guattari use in the plateau *Of the Refrain* is that of a child singing to himself in the dark for comfort.[80] The repetition of the tune builds a temporary home or territory – comfort out of the chaos of fear. Once this territory is established by the act of rhythm, it must be left, and the subject (child) must go through a deterritorialization. It is not only the rhythm of the sound but also of the language that acts as the refrain. We use language in our molar configurations, where speech and writing, as forms of communication, act as a constant translation of signifier (words) and signified (meaning) for the purpose of understanding one another. The use of language in standard patterns

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[77] The Deleuzian concept of territory refers to more than a geographical space or location but also encompasses a form of expression which is constantly being made and unmade as a reterritorializing and deterritorializing. See J Macgregor Wise, 'Assemblage', in *Gilles Deleuze Key Concepts*, ed. by Charles J. Stivale (Chesham: Acumen), pp. 78-79.

[78] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 344.

[79] Buchanan, Matts, and Tynan, *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature,* p. 3

[80] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 343.

and forms, such as the rules of grammar and accepted vocabulary, perpetuates and

reinforces the circle of sign-signifier relation where words must always relate back to a

pre-determined meaning. Deleuze suggests a way out of this linguistic standard through

the use of nonsense and esoteric words as a medium of molecular disruption of language.

Nonsense language is stripped of meaning as it does not refer directly to something else

and must be considered without a prior knowledge of what it means. Deleuze's essay on

Lewis Carroll posits him as an exemplary author of minor literature in his nonsense fictions

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) for his

portrayal of disturbed and constantly fluctuating realities amalgamated with surrealist

projections of alternative states of being.[81] Both his use of nonsense language and the

content of the Alice stories work in the service of dismantling conventional use of

language, literary frameworks and established modes of thought.[82] The amalgamation of

words to make new vocabulary and meanings caused a jarring of existing and expected

lexicon for the reader. Disrupting the signifier-signified structure allows the text to break

from existing language paradigms and create new forms, as Charles Stivale and Judith

Poxton explain:

> Lewis Carroll's deployment of "the esoteric word" (e.g. the portmanteau word "'frumious' = fuming & furious"(LS:44)), which functions, says Deleuze, "not only to connote or to coordinate two heterogeneous series but to introduce disjunctions in the series", a variable movement [...]of "connection", of "conjunction" and of "disjunction" between series.[83]

The deployment of themes such as the smile without a cat and the traversal of mirrors into

altered realities moves beyond the genre of children's fantasy literature into destabilising

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[81] Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
[82] Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, pp. 21-22.
[83] Charles Stivale and Judith L. Poxon, 'Sense, Series', in *Gilles Deleuze Key Concepts*, ed. by Charles Stivale (Chesham: Acumen, 2005), pp. 65-76 (p. 69).

questions of reality and thought. Rhythm permeates the text in Carroll's writing where places, characters and language are in a constant state of mutability, moving between recognisable and unfamiliar forms (a word or image) which repeat and pulse like an echo. When the reader considers Alice's changing size or the Cheshire cat's disappearing body, it is through the rhythm of recognition and incomprehension which works to create its own form of expression.

Considering the concept of rhythm within literature, we understand that a text has a cadence, whether it has a poetic flow or movement, but what of the rhythm of text to reader? Deleuze and Guattari argue that rhythm emerges from critical points and acquires qualities of expression (colour, sound, movement): this is when rhythm begins to establish its own expression and territory based on these qualities, as with the example of the child singing. The child's song marks out a zone of safety which emerges from the rhythm, where the child is surrounded by his own expression of sound in a territory he has created for himself. Deploying this conceptual framework within a literary context, the territory of a narrative is established first by the author but then deterritorialised when it is inhabited by the reader who brings their own rhythm to the text. So, while a scene or character may be described in microscopic detail by the author, each reader will perceive it differently depending on their own knowledge, experience, perception and biases. The power of expression lies in the articulation of unfolding thought processes rather than the idea being expressed, and the capacity for that expression to lead onto other thoughts and ideas; 'the material of the idea is not sought in a representative content but in an expressive content…through which the idea refers to other ideas'.[84] Relating their conceptual development to a biological example, Deleuze and Guattari maintain that the aesthetics or outward appearance of a natural agent (plant, animal, human) i.e. its

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[84] Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy.*, trans. by Robert Hurley (San Francisco, CA: City Light Books, 1988), p. 75.

expressions, comes before all other functional requirements such as breeding. A natural

world example they use is that of tropical birds with bright coloured plumage where the

outward appearance of colour as an aesthetic component of the bird's make up, is in and

of itself an expressive quality, and does not have meaning only in relation to attracting a

mate:

> Take the example of color in birds or fish: color is a membrane state associated
> with interior hormonal states, but it remains functional and transitory as long as it
> is tied to a type of action (sexuality, aggressiveness, flight) […]The question is not
> whether color resumes its functions or fulfils new ones in the territory. It is clear
> that it does but this reorganization of functions implies first of all that the
> component under consideration has become expressive and that its meaning,
> from this standpoint, is to mark a territory.[85]

If we consider expression as a mode of aesthetics that speaks its own language, without

being tied to a notion of cause and effect, it can be thought of as a singularity which emits

a multitude of possible affects. The colourful bird will attract a mate, or be identified as a

specimen for observation by a bird watcher, or be singled out as prey by another bird. Its

outward expression or aesthetic has multiple possible repercussions and affects depending

on who it interacts with and when this interaction takes place. Like the ripple of a stone

dropped into water, these expressive qualities fan outward and impact on any number of

different aspects of life as a rhythm or patterns of behaviour. Similarly, with literary

expression, the rhythm of a text contains patterns of authorial intent which may or may

not be perceived and understood by a reader, but the ripples of affect fan outward in

different trajectories for each reader at each point in time. The expression of the author

changes then into its own form or territory according to the singular point of contact and

connection it makes with each encounter. The narrative stands alone as an expressive

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[85] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 347.

quality that emits individual rhythms through each reading, through each reader at each specific point in time.

To offer an example relevant to the literary texts under examination in this thesis, a reader in the spring of 2020 may have a completely different perspective on and experience of reading Ali Smith's *Spring*[86] during the lockdown period of the Corona virus pandemic than the first time they read it in the previous year's spring. Smith's commentary on the treatment of detained refugees may resonate in a completely new way with a reader who has now experienced some form of restriction (albeit minor by comparison) on their own personal freedom. The aesthetic quality of the novel has changed for that reader, not as a result of any intrinsic quality within the narrative but due to the changed social and political landscape and the positionality of the reader at that current point. The territory of text-reader-effect is made anew based on their experience, knowledge and feelings at that point in time.

Deleuze and Guattari use natural world examples in the chapter 1837: Of the refrain, as a precursor to the socially constructed territory humans have created for ourselves. Art is the precursor to action where the expression of the aesthetic is a primary force to engage other rhythms in a practical dialectic. All rhythms originate from a specific point in space and time, be it large scale like the student-initiated riots of May 1968 in France or small scale, like the first marks of the author's pen on the page. However, the interaction of one element with another creates rhizomatic points of departure for further rhythmic shifts and new patterns of production i.e. when the riots stopped and life in Paris returned to 'normal' the theoretical work produced by Deleuze, Guattari and their contemporaries was a direct effect of the event of May 1968. The philosophical work produced following the events of May 68 is an expression of qualities and part of a rhythm

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[86] Ali Smith, *Spring* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019).

of production and affect that flowed directly from the territory of the riots. This example shows how events stimulate a productive repetition triggered by a singular point or event in space and time, that causes critical singularities (as infinitesimal points of diversion) or alternative points of action to emerge. These points are multiple and hold the potential to offer up possible new trajectories of thought.[87]

Taking up the conceptual framework of rhythmanalysis as a model, I would like to suggest it can be deployed as a methodology within the field of literary analysis in the following ways, each operating within specific and nuanced spatio-temporal conjunctions. The process of transcoding milieus within a literary context has multiple possible forms and effects. Firstly, the milieu of the author and that of the page is a critical point where rhythm is created from the interaction and experience of writing, whereby the process of thinking is transcoded with the act of writing. The words inscribed on the page are mediated through the tool of language and a rhythm is established as part of the writing process. Secondly the relationship between reader and author also operates as a process of transcoding between the text and subject where the language of the text contains infinite possible modes of affect upon the reader, based on the specific and individual subject positioning of each reader. This mode of transcoding occurs both as an internal operation within the subject at the level of thought generation and reflection, both at a conscious and subconscious level, and simultaneously at the external point of space and time where the socio-political subject is interacting with the world. If we think about our own experiences of reading a text we know that at the sentence level, we have off-shoots of thought in response to each of them. Fleeting as they may be, some of these off-shoots disperse into the realm of the forgotten the moment after they have come about, whilst others hold sufficient power that we might mark them down in the margins or jot them

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[87] See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 345

down into a notebook to be returned to later for further consideration. All of these innumerable thoughts in response the textual interaction mark the singularities of interaction and affect that reconfigure the subject as a fluid mass of changeable singularities.

For Deleuze and Guattari the process of transcoding between milieus is a significant aspect of becoming and it is this aspect of relational interaction that holds power for initiating change when thinking about how human subjective experience can be reconfigured through the prism of singularities. They describe transcoding as the manner in which 'a code is not content to take or receive components that are coded differently, and instead takes or receives fragments of a different code as such.'[88] While their use of the term works at the conceptual level of the molecular, we might also frame this exchange and overlap of codes in molar terms that have real world affects and impact. For example, a text written by Kathy Acker in the 1980s functions as a representation of the milieu (block of coded space/time) from within which she wrote, based on her personal life experiences, bodily encounters, political agenda etc. This textual representation of her milieu has the capacity to transcode with a reader from the same period in a way that may resonate or alienate. Similarly the textual encounter of the same book with a reader in 2020 may produce a transcoding of elements in a completely different way to that of the 1980's reader based on the geographical, social and political location of those specific readers. The process of transcoding is a form of communication within which the codes of each space/time block are connected (for an instant or longer) then break apart, leaving an indelible mark or echo of affect at the point of contact. By Deleuze and Guattari's definition the transcoding of milieus leaves them open to chaos, and it is the rhythm of connection that saves milieus from falling into chaos. If we think about an encounter of

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[88] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 346

one body with another and the infinite possibilities of connections, changes and affects

between the transcoding of one milieu and another within this encounter, rhythm is

established at the point of transitory and fleeting connection:

> Action occurs in milieu, whereas rhythm is located between two milieus, or
> between two intermilieus, on the fence, between night and day, at dusk, *twilight*
> or *Zweilicht*, Haecceity. To change milieus, taking them as you find them: Such is
> rhythm.[89]

Applying this to a textual encounter, the territory is a play of closeness and proximities

where points of singularities intersect, in the way that a single word or sentence on the

page could trigger a memory, thought or idea in the reader creating a sense of familiarity

and connection or detachment and conflict. The distance between author and reader can

be called into question. The practice of writing is often used as a tool to better understand

ourselves and our place in the world, but literary output is the creative expression that

stands as a product of the mind of the author. Applying a Deleuzo-Guattarian analytical

approach helps us regard the text as more than simply an end point of this creative

expression. Rather, the textual object becomes the middle point in an ongoing encounter

between author and reader. This textual encounter thus allows a reader's reflective

response to be an effect upon the text. In this context, rhythm is generated from the

process of transcoding that unfolds as part of the reading experience - from the milieu of

private internal thought (of the reader) and that of public external culture (the textual

object).

Deleuze maintains that rhythm is always at the threshold of imperceptibility. It

arises from the in-between of infinitesimal, this is the critical point of difference. [90] It is

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[89] Ibid.,, p. 346

[90] Infinitesimal is used to denote an incalculably small measure, therefore the infinitesimal in-
between points of difference are so many and varied, it is impossible to perceive and trace them all.

from this critical point that rhythm acquires qualities such as colours and sounds and

becomes expressive and develops territories in the play of distances, proximities and

space. To illustrate their argument Deleuze and Guattari use examples from the natural

world and claim that it is expression and aesthetics which hold primary force over

embodied impulses. Deleuze effectively switches around the thought processes

surrounding patterns of evolution with the sequential order being disrupted and rethought

on new grounds. [91] Turning this Deleuzian approach towards literature then, we can

navigate rhythm emerging from events in fiction to elucidate a political urgency which

allows for a becoming in process. In my reading, this rhythm occurs at the intersection of a

Deleuzian event as Claire Colebrook explains 'not another moment within time, but

something that allows time to take off on a new path', and the narratological event

defined by Seymour Chatman as '*actions* (acts) or *happenings*. Both are changes of state.'[92]

A narratological event or point of action within the text that comprises an element of the

plot, combines with the affect induced within the reader to create a point of thought

divergence distinctive to each particular reader. This critical point of affect is specific to the

point in time and location of the reading subject and as such creates a trajectory of

becoming. I argue that becoming occurs in literature when the author engages the pack

(interpreted here as readers) through the text acting as contagion or virus infiltrating the

consciousnesses of many individuals and building a common mode of affect.  Deleuze and

Guattari introduce the notion of the pack when setting out their premise of becoming-

animal; 'What we are saying is that every animal is fundamentally a band, a pack. That is

has pack modes, rather than characteristics, even if further distinctions within these

modes are called for.'[93] They go on to explain that the packs are created by contagion, like

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[91] In the example mentioned above where scientific rationale argues that the bright plumage of birds leads to the success of attracting a mate as a logical order of natural being.
[92]  Colebrook, p. 57. Seymour Benjamin Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 44.
[93] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p264.

a virus that infects and disrupts, rather than forged through connections of filiation or hierarchy.[94] If we consider the text as the basis for contagion, it has the capacity to disrupt and infiltrate any recipient who reads it.  The notion of the pack can be understood to work the same way as the group motivation drawn from a collective consciousness or commonality of affect in response to the same text. The public awareness and interest in Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* [95] and its 2019 sequel *The Testaments*[96] *i*s an example of this commonality of affect*.* The image of the subjugated and oppressed handmaid infiltrated the cultural consciousness with the symbolism of the handmaid used in protest marches during 2017 and 2018 against the infringement of women's reproductive rights and gender discrimination, building up the publicity and excitement surrounding the publication in *The Testaments* in 2019.

The disruption of conventional linguistic modes within experimental narratives causes vibrations to occur from text to reader in the repetition and rhythm of the text as it resonates through the pack as a community of readers. The cognitive affective reactions in response to the text is the effect of the contagion disrupting the status quo and stimulating new lines of thought. These responses then push against the molar boundaries and distort the structure of the molar/molecular dualism. In a Deleuzo-Guattarian sense, the author then is the gateway between the pack (the reading public) and the border (accepted paradigms), keeping one foot in the molar field of communication but with just enough force to deterritorialize the world order through experimentation. Deleuze and Guattari encourage us to experiment, as they write:

> Schizoanalysis, or pragmatics, has no other meaning: Make a rhizome. But you don't know what you can make a rhizome with, you don't know which

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94 See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p266.
95 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage Books, 1996).
96 Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2019).

subterranean stem is effectively going to make a rhizome, or enter a becoming, people your desert. So experiment.[97]

Becoming is necessarily made up of intensity and desire. The potential of a becoming through experimentation within literature encompasses this intensity and desire and offers a rhizomatic affect that branches out into the collective consciousness and paves the way for the collective enunciation of the 'people to come'. Deleuze and Guattari's reference to an anticipated future collective or the "people to come" furthers the prospect of becoming through reading where a text may be written with the power to affect many future readers and draw those readers into a conversation across boundaries of time and location, as Buchanan and Marks explain:

> Ultimately, the political task of writing consists in 'inventing' a people who do not yet exist. In the same way that writers do not write with their ego, so they do not write on behalf of a people. The collective emerges, in this way, from the writer's creation of pre-individual singularities[98]. The 'collective' in Deleuzian terms, is a form of 'delirium', speaking *with*, writing *with*.[99]

This act of conversation with a "people to come" is never more prevalent than through the medium of writing. An author will write with the hope that their work will be read by people in the future, not just the immediacy of the text's publication date but possibly far in the future, of next generations – these are the people to come. Those who have not experienced the present moment captured within the narrative, but who engage with the text to forge a connection with that temporality. An author may always hope for their

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[97] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 277.
[98] Pre-individual refers to the notion of a fluid and malleable subject that is not identifiable as a coherent and whole self or individual bound up with an associated politics of identity. The pre-individual is the state before identity claims and categorises a body as a nameable subject. It is therefore comprised of changeable singularities that diverge and intersect with no discernible order or framework.
[99] *Deleuze and Literature*, ed. by Ian Buchanan and John Marks (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 4.

writing to achieve longevity - the prospect of their text encountered by people from a different time period who are able to glean some kind of understanding about that life from a different temporality. As such the textual object holds an infinite potential of affect within the writing. In Ali Smith's *Winter*,[100] reference to the Greenham Common women's peace camp protest against nuclear weapons in the 1980s speaks to future generations of the power of collaborative action and protest. Smith plays with tense and our perception of time as she reflects on the impact of the Greenham protest from the perspective of the present looking into the future:

> In just under a year from now on a sleety December Sunday more than 30,000 women from all across the country, all across the world, will line up round the base fence, nine miles of fence and nine miles of people. They'll join hands in a human fence. This will be organized by chain letter. Embrace the base. Send this letter to ten of your friends. Ask them to send it to ten of their friends. They think of themselves, the protestors, as wakers of sleepers.[101]

A reader encountering this passage in 2017 will be able to reflect on the power of protest and activism and its potential for change in the year that worldwide protest marches were held against President Trump and the misogyny he represents. Smith's timely reminder about the impact of human collaboration and resistance offers a connection between these two periods in time and offers a question to the reader about how we understand temporal progression and linear time.

The affective power of literature and the notion of revolutionary literature for the purpose of this thesis is based in an idea of text as a trigger or starting point. The act of reading a piece of experimental feminist writing sparks a light inside a reader and keeps it burning, as the cognitive effort required to absorb the narrative means that the reader necessarily engages with the text in a more active reading experience:

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[100] Ali Smith, *Winter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017).
[101] Smith, *Winter*, p. 279.

Fundamentally, a reader approaching experimental fiction needs to suspend their autopilot expectations and discover new ways of seeing. Readers are required to become more active and less passive.[102]

In her discussion of the interaction between the reader and the literary work, Geir Farner considers ambiguous texts such as lyric poetry and modernism to argue that the lack of a common mental model[103] within ambiguous texts (and here I am linking in experimental narratives as a similar mode of ambiguous text) requires a significant action of interpretation on the part of the reader in order to process the message of the text.[104]

Deleuze and Guattari seem to support the idea of the author of minor literature as a key figure in moulding the collective consciousness of readers. Discussing Melville and Kafka as examples of writers whose work influences the reading public, they maintain the significance of the position of writer as public intellectual: 'Even in his failure, the writer remains all the more the bearer of a collective enunciation, which no longer forms part of literary history and preserves the rights of a people to come, or of a human becoming.'[105] A becoming enabled through reading literature suggests a significant proportion of power can be attributed to the affect that a text can instil within a reader.

Buchanan, Matts and Tynan advocate the benefits of a schizoanalytic literary criticism and foreground Deleuze and Guattari's appreciation of the 1950s Beat Generation of writers as signalling a reconfiguration of critical literary thinking. Deleuze and Guattari's reinterpretation of desire as a positive and creative force of production, allows the unconscious to be thought of as mode of desiring-production away from the

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[102] Armstrong, *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers,* p. 7.
[103] Farner explains the mental model as 'the *explicit* elements of the action, but also includes *implicit* elements that all readers fill in identically because they share the same prior knowledge.' Farner, *Literary Fiction. The Ways We Read Narrative Literature*, p. 96.
[104] Farner, *Literary Fiction. The Ways We Read Narrative Literature*, p. 103.
[105] Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical,* trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael Greco, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 90.

psychoanalytic burden of trying to identify a perceived lack by way of explaining actions

driven by desire in the Freudian sense.[106] This desire-production does not follow a straight

path and therefore contains contradictions and diversions. Buchanan et al highlight the

work of Jack Kerouac to explain how this desiring-production encompasses both the

deepest sense of creative output as he is entranced by the freedom travel affords in *On

the Road*, but also invites the contradictory pull of social expectations and obligations as

he returns to the Catholicism and conservative politics of the American heartland. 'Literary

authors are singled out by Deleuze and Guattari for their propensity to manifest both

regimes at once [desiring-production and social production] and to provide us with a kind

of 'map' or diagram of desire.'[107] Deleuze and Guattari point to the affect produced from

reading these texts and the deconstructive potential they hold:

> Strange Anglo-American literature: from Thomas Hardy, from D.H. Lawrence to
> Malcolm Lowry, from Henry Miller to Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, men who
> know how to leave, to scramble the codes, to cause flows to circulate, to traverse
> the desert of the body without organs. They overcome a limit, they shatter a wall,
> the capitalist barrier. And of course they fail to complete the process, they never
> cease failing to do so. The neurotic impasse again closes – the daddy-mommy of
> oedipalization, America, the return of the native land – or else the perversion of
> the exotic territorialities, then drugs, alcohol – or worse still, an old fascist
> dream.[108]

Deleuze and Guattari saw the potential in the innovative style of writing presented in

experimental works by Miller, Kerouac and Ginsberg which challenged social conventions

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[106] Freudian and Lacanian theories of psychoanalysis posit desire as a drive to fulfil a lack within the socially constructed gendered subject. This is based on unconscious Oedipal complex motivations that suggest male and female gendered identities are formed in early childhood response to bodily difference where the little girl experiences 'penis-envy' due to her perceived lack and the little boy harbours castration anxiety. These theories posit the phallus as signifier of 'having' and the associated binaries of positive/masculine whereas the absence of the phallus is constructed as 'not having', negative and feminine. In Freudian and Lacanian scholarship these signifiers reinforce adult desire as a mode of yearning for something the subject perceives they do not possess. See Rosalind Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender. An Introductory Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).pp. 40-46 & pp. 158-161

[107] Buchanan, Matts, and Tynan, *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature,* p. 13.

[108] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 158.

and expectations, but they also recognised the problematic undertow of capitalism as the over-arching dictatorship of social order. The problem they identify with capitalism is its foundation in the psychoanalytic premise of desire configured as a reaction to a perceived lack. While capitalism thrives on the desire of the collective to fill this inherently assumed lack with available products, commercial production continues to form the foundation of this socio-economic structure. So, while these experimental texts held the potential to break though that social order, they did not go far enough and were still necessarily bound up and constrained by it. This thesis proposes that to further challenge this cultural narrative of lack embedded within Western patriarchal capitalism, the position of 'other' must be invoked. It is only from the margins, that a positionality of estrangement from the norm can be utilised to destabilise the framework of normality. As Audre Lorde argued 'For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.'[109]

It is this cue from Audre Lorde that I take my fundamental opposition to Deleuze and Guattari's assertion that becoming and its primary threshold of becoming-woman, cannot be undertaken from within the molar realm and is not to do with the actuality of subjects operating within the day-to-day space of real life. While I am advocating a Deleuzo-Guattarian approach of reconfiguring thinking about how we operate as subjects that perform set roles within the over-arching structure of the social, political and economic world as an abstraction, I am also suggesting that we must build this theoretical challenge into our daily lived experience and social interactions to bring about real life and real time change to counter global issues of growing inequality, wealth disparity, climate change and the rise of far-right politics. This molar becoming as a form of everyday

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[109] Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), p. 91.

agitation like the #MeToo movement and the Everyday Sexism project necessarily evolves

into activating a molecular becoming, as awareness raising of injustice, sexism and

misogyny is brought to prominence in the collective consciousness of the global

population to engage feminist disruptions and challenges to the patriarchal structures

embedded within our everyday lives.  Prior to the overturning of Roe vs Wade by the U.S.

Supreme Court in 2022, Barbara Stark examined the erosion of women's rights in the U.S.

at the hands the Republican party. She outlined how the legal challenges made by the

Trump administration affected the rights of women everywhere not just within the United

States:

> This Article has focused on the response of American women and their supporters
> to Trump's physical, rhetorical, and fiscal attacks. It has pointed out how human
> rights law can be used to counter or deflect such attacks. But, human rights law
> also connects Americans to the rest of the world and shows how this President
> seeks to undermine the human rights of women everywhere.[110]

We have since seen the subsequent banning of abortion across fourteen states in 2023

since Roe v Wade was overturned and the need for urgent feminist responses to challenge

this denigration of human rights.[111] Leigh Gilmore argues that the global participation of so

many women in testimony to sexual harassment during the #MeToo movement engaged a

new form of feminist response that demanded accountability from perpetrators. As such

this collective response held significant power that 'resonated within a long history of

feminist activism and allied with other historical and contemporary social justice

movements.'[112]

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[110] Stark, *Feminist Theory After Deleuze*, p. 342.
[111] Carter Sherman and Andrew Witherspoon, 'Abortion Rights across the US: we track where laws stand in every state' *The Guardian*, 10 November 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2023/nov/10/state-abortion-laws-us> [accessed 19 December 2023]
[112] Leigh Gilmore, 'Graphic Witness: Visual and Verbal Testimony in the #MeToo Movement' in The New Feminist Literary Studies, ed. by Jennifer Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 25-40 (p. 25).

The act of laying bare injustices and questioning paradigms that perpetuate them, is a necessary step towards destabilising these structures and bringing about change. Feminist responses such as Stark's are significant in contributing to current feminist scholarship and highlighting the problem on a theoretical level but the presence and reach of these academic narratives are limited to within the academy and a limited audience outside of academia. On the other hand, non-academic works of twenty-first century popular feminism, as analysed by Jennifer Cooke within the categories of manuals and manifestos, have a far wider readership but with varying degrees of affective reach. Cooke argues that while the more mainstream feminist manuals perpetuate a neoliberal approach of individual action and self-improvement to overcome gender-based inequalities, whereas the form of the manifesto is more attuned to a collective feminist strategy of demanding systemic and structural change. [113] Both categories however require readers to actively seek out and engage with this form of feminist theory. As indicated in my first chapter my concern is how these feminist politics can engage with and affect a wide general reading public, in order to motivate and drive real change and promote activism as a means to combat forms of oppression.[114] The accessibility and scope of contemporary fiction and genre bending literature then, is a medium that has that capacity to reach and affect a much broader audience than academic scholarship and feminist manuals and manifestos. My focus on twenty-first century experimental feminist writing as a medium for affective influence, suggests that feminist activism can be mobilised

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[113] She cites texts such as Caitlin Moran's *How to be a Woman* (2011), Laurie Penny's *Unspeakable Things*: Sex, *Lies and Revolution* (2014), Roxanne Gay's *Bad Feminist* (2014) and Emer O'Toole's *Girls will be Girls: Dressing up, Playing Parts and Daring to Act Differently* (2015). Jennifer Cooke, 'Feminist Manuals and Manifestos in the Twenty-First Century' in The New Feminist Literary Studies, ed. by Jennifer Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 194-207.
[114] The Trump administration rescinded not just women's rights but LGBTQ+ rights through reinstating the ban of transgender people in the US military <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/1/22/16905658/trump-lgbtq-anniversary>, the persecution of migrants and those living below the poverty line <https://civilrights.org/trump-rollbacks/> and subsequently the increase in censorship and book banning across schools in the United States <https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/> [accessed 19 December 2023]

through the form of the schizo-narrative by way of a fractured reading experience and fracturing the reader.

## Writing in process

The process of writing is a mediated practice, whereby an author's thoughts are assimilated, processed and captured within a framework of linguistic codes that impose pre-determined meanings and assumptions. It is this selection procedure of a specific lexicon and syntax wrapped up in the subjective and personal style of the author that is a controlled process of expressing their being through writing.  As well as using the content of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy as a basis for my theoretical framework, I would like to also refer to their style of writing as an example of the experimental narrative form that acts as a mode of becoming. 'Deleuze and Guattari's development of a schizoanalytical method really comes alive in a form of dramatic language-use that is self-consciously performed in order to be  replayed or re-enacted by their readers'.[115] Iain Mackenzie and Robert Porter suggest that it is the dramatic nature of the language used in Deleuze and Guattari's political philosophy that acts as a performance delivering the message through the method. Deleuze evaluates how literary texts 'break the empirical deployment of language/language as representation'.[116] As is evident from the connections made in the first chapter, Deleuze and Guattari champion the types of experimental texts by writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce which break this representational mode and enmesh the reader into the performance of the text as it plays out through the experience of reading. This self-reflexive mode of reading not only affords an opportunity for the

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[115] Iain MacKenzie and Robert Porter, 'The Drama of Schizoanalysis: On Deleuze and Guattari's Method.', in *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature*, ed. by Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts, and Aidan Tynan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 43–60 (p. 47)
[116] Buchanan, Matts, and Tynan, *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature,* p. 3.

reading subject to approach the text from an alternative standpoint[117] and experience a more stimulating mode of encountering a text, but also challenges distinctions of discipline which traditionally categorise a text into genre (fiction, memoir, theory etc) and the discourse that critiques the text. My approach is therefore in line with the post-structuralist feminist critique of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray as an emphasis of writing difference, developed from the Derridean notion of *différance* as disruption, where meaning is constantly deferred: 'Throwing the field of signification wide open, writing – textuality – acknowledges the free play of the signifier and breaks open what Cixous perceives as the prison-house of patriarchal language'.[118] Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray all combine poetic writing with their own theory critiquing the Western male canon of philosophical and psychoanalytic thought from Plato to Freud.[119] They advocate a writing of difference which speaks of the female experience, situating this difference as positive and joyful. Where critical and philosophical ideas are imbued as part of the stylistically literary prose, the distinction between categories of texts breaks down as the performance of literary aesthetics leads onto more complex thinking. As with Deleuze and Guattari's own writing, experimental writing forms the basis of their philosophy, 'If schizoanalysis can be considered philosophy and nothing more, it nevertheless presupposes a crucial shift in the relation between literature and forms of writing normally called theoretical'.[120] Abandoning linearity and urging their readers to approach *A Thousand Plateaus* differently, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the plateaus can be read in any order and the reader can dip in and out of the text as they like.[121] So, while they

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[117] As an actively engaged participant who must re-consider the very linguistic foundations upon which a text is built and the subsequent consequences of reappraising language and meaning.

[118] See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 105.

[119] See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[120] *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature*, ed. by Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts, and Aidan Tynan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 4.

[121] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. ix.

maintain that it is pure philosophy, they don't offer or advocate a linear philosophical development within their own narrative as traditional Western philosophical texts do.[122] This relinquishment of a linear narrative sequence lends itself to a more experimental nature of approaching a text which is also mirrored in the works of the writers I am examining in this study. I consider blurring of lines of categorisation to be part of the nature of experimental writing so while the texts of three of the authors in this study (Ali Smith, Eimear McBride and Nicola Barker) are labelled as works of fiction, this research aims to show how they operate as schizo-narratives, blurring the line of fiction and non-fiction, jarring the virtual and the real in the vein of philosophical fiction.[123]

Their very particular choice of lexicon, semantic and syntactic meanderings are measured not only for the message they are trying to convey but for the effect of the form upon the reader in a modernistic style of writing-in-process, whereby thought patterns unfold through the process of writing the text. In this way, reading the works of Deleuze and Guattari as literature, opposed to a tome of political philosophy where concepts are identified and propositions evaluated and applied, Iain MacKenzie and Robert Porter suggest instead they should be regarded as literary champions. An exercise which would allow their political philosophy to be excavated through close and careful reading of their texts as performative literature, including humour, sarcasm and a desire to make the reader look that little bit closer as a way of relating to the text. As MacKenzie and Porter suggest, 'this notional sense of significant happenings and political transformations at the level of desire and in the context of everyday life is ultimately what the method of

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[122] 'Philosophy, nothing but philosophy.' Brian Massumi quotes Deleuze in his translators foreword to Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. ix. From the early Greek philosophy of Socrates and Plato to twentieth century analytic and continental philosophical texts.
[123] Examples of philosophical fiction include Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time. Volume 1. The Way by Swann's.*, ed. by Christopher Prendergast, trans. by Lydia Davis (Penguin Classics, 2002); Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. by Matthew Ward (Vintage International, 1992).

dramatization aims at.'[124] Performative language then is that which has an effect on the reader not through implied meaning but through the cognitive connections and thought trajectories inspired in the reader in response to the allusions made in the text. It is the result of the author's linguistic and formal choices that create a force of impact upon the reader as they engage in the textual encounter. Previous scholarship by Alex Houen on the affective qualities of experimental literary techniques explores the idea of literary potentialism as 'a literary or performance practice that presents experiments with form and content designed to exert an affective force to alter particular effects of social powers on individuals' capacity for thinking and feeling.'[125] Houen analyses American post-modernist writing by American authors Allen Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones, William Burroughs and Kathy Acker that combined innovative formal devises with narrative content that questioned social norms and power, in doing so these texts 'gained currency in debates about individuality and social evolution in America over a particular period.'[126]

Building on from Houen's work, my analysis of contemporary literary innovators also explores how formal experimentation affords a divergence of linguistic performativity to expose and disrupt forms of social power and control. Eimear McBride uses fragmented prose and broken sentence structure to show how the text performs the action of the unfolding narrative sequence. In the passage below the language performs the action, as well as conveying the violent assault being committed upon the protagonist in a more tangible way than a realist description would:

[124] Iain MacKenzie and Robert Porter, 'The Drama of Schizoanalysis: On Deleuze and Guattari's Method' in *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature*, ed. by Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts, and Aidan Tynan (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 57
[125] Alex Houen *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing Since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 241.
[126] Ibid., p. 255.

> Puk blodd over me frum. In the next but. Let me air. Soon I'n dead I'm sre.
> Loose.Ver the aIrWays. Here. mY nose my mOuth I. VOMit.Clear. CleaR. He stopS
> up gETs. Stands uP. Look. And I breath.[127]

As well as linguistic choices, Deleuze advocates narrative styles that include gaps, pauses

and ambiguities such as the works of Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett and Lewis Carroll.

These stylistic devices have been employed and developed throughout experimental

works from Laurence Sterne[128] to the authors analysed in this thesis, and serve to show

how the text as an object of performance can better convey individual experience and the

challenges of living in a contemporary world beset by global crises than a realist

representational narrative is able to do.[129]

Aidan Tynan draws the distinction between traditional literary language which

situates a combination of political investment  and poetic language at one remove from

everyday language use and embodied human experience, opposed to Deleuzian notions of

literary language of 'silence and bestial noise.'[130] This fracturing of consistent literary

language, broken up by noise or animalistic utterance is a technique of connecting poetic

form to the rhythms and nuances of specific embodied human experience which run

through and within the experimental narrative form as expression of becoming:

> The literariness of literary language, then, is precisely *not* its linguistic eloquence
> or communicative efficacy but, rather, the very non-communication it renders
> through its stuttering and stammering, inarticulate breaths and cries. In other
> words, there is a zone of immanence, available to criticism, in which the mute
> illiteracy of the living body is joined to the pure impersonal formalism of the
> work.[131]

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[127] McBride, *A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing*, p. 194.

[128] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. by Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[129] See Armstrong, *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers*, p. 194.

[130] Aidan Tynan, *Deleuze's Literary Clinic: Criticism and the Politics of Symptoms* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh  University Press, 2012), p. 13

[131] Ibid., p. 13.

The work of the experimental author to manipulate language away from a pure method of communication where words refer to established meaning,[132] and more towards language as a flow of rhythm, inspires new thinking in the reader. This rhythmic flow is an expression of affect rising from the experience of reading the text, incorporating self-reflexive lines of questioning and engaging a perpetual becoming, and is the ultimate Deleuzian goal of what a work of literature can do.

As Buchanan, Matts and Tynan write; 'Schizoanalysis disturbs the division of labour separating author, critic and theorist, insisting on their difference in regime but not on their difference in nature.'[133] Schizoanalysis is also a practice of challenging and transforming the relation between theory and practice in any field. It advocates interdisciplinarity and destabilises genres, offering up a writing process which melds theory and philosophy with literary prose in both fiction and non-fiction. For example, contemporary autobiographical literature grounded in telling the author's real-life experience, has attracted critical acclaim and is no longer distinctively literary fiction or bound to one genre. Books such as Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* and *Bluets,*[134] Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun,*[135] and Sheri Fink's *Five Days at Memorial,*[136] offer philosophical and sociological insight and open up lines of questioning about all aspects of human behaviour within a compelling novel like format.

The linguistic structure of Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half Formed Thing* created an affect upon me as a reader in that its fractured pacing immediately caused me to halt my regular reading style, question my assumptions about language and linguistic

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[132] In the Saussurean sense where language is used to convey meaning based on the common shared understanding of words as signifiers for objects/concepts.
[133] Buchanan, Matts, and Tynan, *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature,* p. 4
[134] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville House UK, 2016). Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009).
[135] Amy Liptrot, *The Outrun* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2016).
[136] Sheri Fink, *Five Days at Memorial. Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013).

structures and read more carefully, paying attention to each word and the way it was

assembled.  While the lack of sentence structure in the initial few pages was difficult to get

to grips with, the language was not. The words were understandable, but the layout of

them on the page was not. I had to work to read in the rhythm of the voice telling the

story rather than assume the position of an objective reader. This break in narrative

structure allowed me to read in a different way; to become fully and totally subsumed

within the mind and thoughts of the character and follow the journey of what is essentially

the becoming of her character, from within the text and not outside it as an impartial

observer.

David Bleich supports the role of the reader in the affective interpretation of a text

as a method of literary analysis based on subjective reader response: 'literature exists on

the basis of the subjective re-creation of the reader.'[137] To explain this subjective re-

creation, he discusses how the category of poetry does not alter once the form is ascribed

as a poem. It will always be understood as a poem, but that during the act of reading, its

essence does not reside within its form but rather 'its subjective re-creation by a reader

and in his public presentation of that re-creation.'[138] This notion of the re-creation of

literature he attributes to three characteristics: perception, affective response and

associated response. Bleich discusses subjective perception of a work of literature where

several readers will give differing opinions on what a text says or means. Using the case

study of five different responses which give widely varied accounts of the same poem,

placing emphasis on different lines, words and emotions, Bleich maintains how perception

of the poem is a subjective reconstruction because the subjective response of each reader

is the driving force behind how it is then reproduced (or explained). Affective response is

where the reader describes the affect they felt while reading the poem, whereas

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[137] Bleich, *Readings and Feelings*, p. 97.
[138] Ibid.,  p. 21.

associated response occurs when the text triggers thoughts based on the associations brought to mind during the reading process. These last two are evidently the most fluid and changeable from reader to reader as they pertain to specific subjective experiences and point of reference. It is this subjective perception, affective and associated responses to textual encounters that are of interest to me in relation to the experimental texts analysed in this thesis. While the scope of this research doesn't allow a qualitative data collection to measure reader responses, I shall be investigating a theoretical approach to affective reading.  As mentioned in the introduction the literary criticism and cultural theory surrounding the "affective turn" from the 1990s is a wide field of scholarship responding to the limitations of poststructuralism and deconstruction in speaking about embodied subjective feeling.[139]  My use of affect in this research references Félix Guattari's logic of affects as detailed in chapter one, together with the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Denise Riley building on J. L. Austen's conception of language as performativity. [140] Utilising these theoretical interrogations into the productive function of language as performance, I will explore how language operates with these experimental texts to challenge the notion of representing a knowable and truthful reality, whilst at the same time working actively to produce affects which reshape reality through the textual encounter of the reading experience. It is the mode of the encounter, between language, text and reader that gives rise to the productive affective experience.

Tracking affective reader response theory through to the specifics of experimental literature, Alison Gibbons uses the conceptual framework of cognitive poetics with particular reference to a theory of a textual multimodality, where communication and

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[139] See Patricia T. Clough, 'The Affective Turn. Political Economy, Biomedia, and Bodies', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 206-225 (p. 206).
[140] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity.* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2003); Denise Riley (2005).

representation do not work solely through language but engage multiple forms such as visual, spatial and aural. I argue that the experimental literary works cited in this study actively engage a multimodal cognitive poetics through content and form. Alison Gibbons discusses how experimental works of literature incorporating multimodal forms work to produce meaning in a different way to conventionally structured texts because the intersection of divergent forms stimulates an unexpected/alternative cognitive response from the reader. These forms include unusual textual layouts and page design, varied typography, use of colour in type and imagistic content, concrete realisation of text to create images (as in concrete poetry), devices that draw attention to the text's materiality including meta fictive writing, footnotes and self-interrogative critical voices.[141] Cognitive poetics therefore relates the structure of a work of art to psychological and cognitive experience. Gibbons interrogates how novels position the reader in the literary experience through the cognitive processes which are triggered as a result of their reading experience; 'cognitive poetics seeks to look at form, style, and language in literature in context but through the conviction that structures of language and literary devices are expressions and materialisms of patterns of human thought.'[142] Cognitive poetics is a useful tool for considering the relationship between reader and text, and the subsequent relationship between text and world. My analysis of the texts in the following chapters consider how the multimodal forms enhance the power of the textual encounter through the medium of cognitive poetics and performative language, as the reading experience becomes an event that may have an affective bearing upon an individual's response to relational structures of power and oppression.

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[141] Alison Gibbons, *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*, Routledge Studies in Multimodality (New York; London: Routledge, 2012), p. 2.
[142] Gibbons, *Multimodality*, p. 26.

In his reading of Deleuze's impact on literary scholarship, Bruce Baugh also highlights performative language as a means by which language can operate in a specific spatial and temporal sphere to cause a particular effect and bring about a change in the world.[143] The example given is of the authority afforded to a person (in this instance a justice of the peace conducting a marriage ceremony) and the language used in a specific location (declaring a man and woman as husband and wife). Therefore, the action of speaking these particular words within a ceremonial format alters the status of their relationship and their socio-economic standing (from one of impermanence to a supposed fixity). If we consider that all language has the power to bring about a change or effect depending on the people involved, the scenario within which the language is being used, the temporal and spatial arena and the subjective interpretations in thought and speech which follow on from that language, we have an infinite amount of possible effects from each linguistic choice. Baugh applies the concept of performative language to literature, asserting: 'Language can achieve effects quite apart from the representation of ideas and things even when symbolic or metaphorical representation was the author's aim.'[144] Deleuze, then, is advocating the possibilities of action which can erupt out of the text regardless of authorial intention;[145] the 'primary function of language is to affect others.'[146] Baugh elaborates, arguing that the effect produced by the narrative on the reader is necessarily bound up in the specifically subjective parameters of the reading experience, so that the effect on one person at a given moment in time with their particular circumstances will not be the same for another who has a different level of knowledge,

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[143] Bruce Baugh, 'How Deleuze Can Help Us Make Literature Work', in *Deleuze and Literature*, ed. by Ian Buchanan and John Marks (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 34–56.

[144] Baugh, 'How Deleuze Can Help Us,' p. 49.

[145] Roland Barthes famously proclaimed 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' placing primary importance in literary criticism on the reader's own interpretation and moved the focus away from authorial intentionality. See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Modern Criticism and Theory. A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge, Second edition (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2000).

[146] Baugh, 'How Deleuze Can Help Us,' p. 49

education, socio-political status, etc. Baugh points out that Deleuze does not acknowledge this important variation in reader reactions to a text based on subjective status. While much of his philosophy and literary theory is directed towards a whole world/objective view, the very nature of the reaction to language is a personal and subjective one, particularly when thinking about the subject positioning of becoming that he proposes. A feminist approach to this discrepancy is to highlight the gender bias within linguistic structures and socially constructed epistemologies which privilege man as the universal human subject and position woman as other.[147] Readings of literary texts will therefore be significantly different for people of different genders as they access the text from specifically varying subject positions. While Deleuze advocates the process of becoming-woman as a technique to slip through and beyond the trappings of hierarchical structures, we can apply this also to linguistic structures and the objectivity of the authorial voice including writerly conventions such as plot, character development, dialogue, etc. Feminist writing relies on a challenge to these structures to call them into question and disrupt the phallocentric order, so must necessarily address the gendered and subjective world views with which readers approach a text as Deleuze and Guattari concede: 'It is thus necessary to conceive of a molecular women's politics that slips into molar confrontations and passes under or through them.'[148]

Two of the writers with which I am concerned in this study, Ali Smith and Eimear McBride, utilise liminal narrative techniques[149] to jolt the reader out of their usual practice of passive objective observer to enable alternative ways of reading:

> If a reader is deconstructing fiction that has subverted conventional forms and practices, it is important that a new way of deconstructing work is employed.

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[147] See Toril Moi's discussion of Anglo-American and French feminist criticism in *Sexual Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1985).

[148] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 304.

[149] These techniques operate on two opposing levels of language use, whereby the text is able to communicate its narrative of characters and plot whilst pushing the boundaries of communicative language, eschewing standards of grammar, sentence structure and linear narrative forms.

Clearly, the old way of approaching new texts is inappropriate. Readers need to engage with experimental fiction in ways in which they are not familiar; therefore, a different set of reading strategies are required for readers to read, interrogate and interpret texts.[150]

Anecdotal evidence provided by readers online, particularly those who participate in social media platforms such as the bookish corner of YouTube, suggests that the techniques these writers employ creates a reading experience which occupies an intensity of feeling and creates a disturbance of the linear narrative where the reader is made to work, think, reflect and question.[151] This is a reading experience in which exposure to social issues such as the effects of gender bias and paradigms of social control and restriction promotes a reflective reading experience that involves the reader to consider their own positionality within these frameworks. Evoking Martin Heidegger on the creative power of thinking through possibilities rather than actualities, Alex Houen's conception of literary potentialism seeks out the generative potentiality of creative practice in writing that draws together power and individual capacity for action.[152] He interrogates how Kathy Acker and Language poets such as Lyn Hejinian address the political and economic strictures that regulate individual capacity to exercise power through critical reflections on capitalism, socialism and US-Soviet relations within their work:

> The various literary experiments involved in their [the writers in his study] questioning are an important feature of the potentialism that each writer builds, for the experimentation is seen by each to be synonymous with establishing new possibilities of conjoining form, content and affective power[153]

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[150] Armstrong, *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers.*, pp. 6-7.
[151] Jemeljan F. Hakemulder's quantitative study of reader response to stylistic devices shows how textual foregrounding defamiliarises conventional textual referents to increase reader appreciation of the text and prompted shifts in text-related social attitudes. See Jemeljan F. Hakemulder 'Foregrounding and Its Effect on Readers' Perception', *Discourse Processes*, 38.2 (2004): 193–218, <https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326950dp3802_3> [accessed 21 May 2020].
[152] Houen, *Powers of Possibility*, p. 4.
[153] Ibid., p. 20.

Building on Houen's conception of potentialism, I explore how the texts identified in this

thesis create that potential using experimental literary techniques and personally involve

the reader in self-reflexive thought processes. In the following chapters I will set out in

more depth how these techniques require the personal involvement of a reader to engage

in self-reflexivity and active participation within the text, but to illustrate the point here I

will briefly discuss how this formal innovation requires an active readerly participation in a

way that non-experimental texts do not.

As will be discussed in the following chapters, in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*

Eimear McBride is directly addressing the cultural subjugation of women and girls who

suffer sexual abuse. It is through the unfiltered thought processes of the unnamed titular

girl that the reader comes to understand how her agency develops from claiming

ownership of the subject position she has been forced into, by allowing the abuse to

happen, she feels as if she is the one commanding the power of what is happening to her

own body:

> He hits hard. I say don't be done. Don't be done. I don't want this he says I don't
> want. Just till my nose bleeds and that will be enough. So he hits til I fall over.
> Crushing under. Hits again. He hits til something's click and the blood begins to
> run. Jesus he says. I feel sick. But I'm rush with feeling. Wide and. He thinks he's
> bad when he fucks me now. And so he is. I'm better though. In fact I am almost
> best.[154]

 This passage illustrates how the fractured and jumbled thoughts of the protagonist

operate as an unfolding of individual moments; broken down into infinitesimal episodes

that cannot be measured by even the smallest units of time and consequently cannot be

communicated using the structures and language and grammar. So, within one second,

she might have had a multitude of thoughts, all of which are too fast, too fleeting,

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[154] McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, p. 144.

unconnected yet bound together, unrelenting and confusing. These thoughts cannot be

reproduced or represented by the language we speak and write as it is mediated by order.

They are pre-language and therefore must be conveyed in a way that allows the reader to

understand the unfolding process of divergent thought in all its chaos and confusion.

McBride then breaks the language on the page to represent and express the physicality of

the girl's breaking body and mind, pulling the reader into the physical experience and

effect of this violence through their own encounter with the degradation of the textual

body. David Collard and Catherine Riley attest to the affective impact of McBride's

narrative style upon the reader: 'The impact on the reader is direct and convincing and

frequently overwhelming.'[155]

> This makes her novel a sometimes dizzying read, but it allows her to show us that
> meaning is always in flux, always just-becoming, and it heightens the readers'
> sense that they are 'experiencing' what the narrator experiences.[156]

## Schizonarratives – capturing the subject in process

Returning to the idea of writing the subject in process, I would like to suggest the use of

rhythmanalysis as a necessary component of the schizonarrative that enables a mode of

becoming through literature. If we consider Deleuze and Guattari's definition of rhythm as

an event emerging from the in-between states of chaos, the application of rhythmanalysis

within a literary context of becoming is developed through the aesthetic or expressive

qualities formed from these multiple and infinite beats of experience, that are in

themselves stripped of meaning, but create an alternative representation of relational

experience through their expression. In the example above from *A Girl is a Half-formed*

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[155] David Collard, 'Interview with Eimear McBride', *The White Review*, 2014
<http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-eimear-mcbride/> [accessed 13
December 2016].
[156] Catherine Riley, *Feminism and Women's Writing. An Introduction.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh
University Press, 2018).

*Thing*, the rhythm of the stuttering voice conveyed through the text's fragmentation echoes the event of rhythm emerging from the various components of relational experience that are happening in that traumatic scene. From the blows reigning down upon her, to her own insistence that it happen, to the broken dialogue between the two characters, to the physical immediacy of the trauma played out on her body – the level of detail from visible and verbal to conscious, subconscious thought and near transcendence, expresses so much more than just what is happening in that scene. The rhythms of the event weave a pattern of a subject in flux, impacted by each point of intersection and changing as a result of that processual manifestation of being.

Catherine Dale illustrates how Deleuze and Guattari use the figure of Antonin Artaud as an example of the schizoanalytic subject in action. They invoke Artaud 'as a model for their conception of an alternative mode of thought which they call the schizoanalytic. This mode of thought promotes the freedom of desire as a productive force traversing the segmented lines of habitual thought as so many intensities'[157] In Artaud, Deleuze and Guattari saw the essence of schizophrenic thought and productive desire expressed through his mode of being, typified by his performance on stage. At Artaud's last public reading, a performance where he recounted memories and experiences, recited poetry and beliefs, all interposed with cries and screams, he attempted to express true sincerity by displaying the full contrast and contradiction of personhood. Artaud expressed a schizophrenic nature of thought through his actions and performance style which manifested as a primal utterance of the diversity of selfhood without constraint, exposing the impossibility of sincerity of self.[158] As Dale notes,

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[157] Catherine Dale, 'Cruel: Antonin Artaud and Gilles Deleuze', in *A Shock to Thought: Expression After Deleuze and Guattari* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 85–100 (p. 86).
[158] 'He [Artaud] knows that thinking is not innate, but must be engendered in thought' Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 193.

'Schizoanalysis repudiates the notion of self-identification of a self which is gained through the working of social structures, the family in particular'.[159] Schizoanalysis then holds power in its capacity to uncover positive desiring forces, not at the centre of the sovereign subject but at the points of intersection and cross-over where the subject meets the world, at the connections and in-between points that defy categories of ownership and belonging.

For Deleuze, Artaud is the pure expression of the subject in process, the multiple embodied, unfolding thought eschewing the singular of the culturally constructed subject. Artaud regards the mind as an organ to be denounced as an interpreter of meaning, where thought is imbued with bias based on cultural presuppositions of good and evil. Deleuze uses this splintering of mind and thought to develop his conception of the Body without Organs (BwO) and his ideas on difference from Artaud's poetry and performance. Naming one of the plateaus November 28, 1947: How do you make yourself a body without organs? in reference to Artaud's frighteningly manic performance of a radio play *To Have Done With the Judgement of God* [160] where he ends with this statement:

> When you will have made him a body without organs,
> then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions
> and restored him to his true freedom.[161]

Deleuze and Guattari take up Artaud's exclamation and his seemingly schizophrenic mode of expression by positing the Body Without Organs in this plateau as a series of postulates and rejections. My reading of Artaud's influence in this plateau is that Deleuze and Guattari reject the implications of the wholeness of the functioning body as a complete

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159 Dale, 'Cruel,' p. 86.
160 'Hear Antonin Artaud's Censored, Never-Aired Radio Play: To Have Done With The Judgment of God (1947)', *Open Culture* <http://www.openculture.com/2014/09/antonin-artauds-censored-never-aired-radio-play.html> [accessed 10 May 2019].
161 'Artaud: To Have Done With the Judgement of God' <http://www.surrealism-plays.com/Artaud.html> [accessed 10 May 2019].

unit made up of required parts and advocate a practice of relinquishing this notion of

wholeness in favour of a dispersal of individual components. In proposing the abstraction

of the BwO, they are giving primacy and priority to desire outside of biological, social and

political standards and requirements:

> On November 28, 1947, Artaud declares war on the organs: To be done with the
> judgement of God, "for you can tie me up if you wish, but there is nothing more
> useless than an organ." Experimentation: not only radiophonic but also biological
> and political, incurring censorship and repression. Corpus and Socius, politics and
> experimentation. They will not let you experiment in peace.[162]

Ian Buchanan writes, quoting Deleuze, that 'the body without organs is the only 'practical

object of schizoanalysis'[163] and when thinking about the BwO we must appreciate the

concept as outside of literal and metaphorical meanings – it is a philosophical concept

operating outside of linguistic structures, which as Buchanan attests has led to much

inconsistency in its definition throughout the work of Deleuze scholars. Akin to Freud's

death instinct, the BwO is the site, aim and modus operandi of desire.[164] Using the

example of the alcoholic who desires a drink which will eventually lead to the destruction

of the subject, [165] the BwO is the propelling force. Often with repetitive motions to provide

the subject with comfort even if this overrides the self-preservation of the subject, such as

the compelling but baffling urge to throw oneself from a precipice when faced with a steep

drop. The urge is at once for the body to feel the freedom and exhilaration of

flight/weightlessness but combined with the inevitable knowledge of certain death, but it

is not a drive towards death (as in the Freudian death drive) but, rather, a return to the

pre-existence before life began and the human subject must operate as a unified entity.

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[162] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 166.
[163] Ian Buchanan, 'The "Structural Necessity" of the Body without Organs.', in *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature*, ed. by Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts, and Aidan Tynan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 119–36 (p. 25).
[164] Ibid., p. 28
[165] Ibid., p. 31.

Like the pre-language thoughts of McBride's *Girl*, the BwO is a celebration of disparate

parts within a body, moving in flux eschewing the concept of wholeness as a socially coded

subject. As Hannah Stark explains:

> To realize a body without organs is to divest the body of the logic by which it is
> conventionally organized and understood in terms of organs, systems and
> functions.[….]The body without organs disrupts the conventional coding and
> interpretation of the body.[166]

My reading of the BwO is applied specifically in a literary context where experimentation

within literature is the relinquishing of the wholeness of the body and its organisation into

constituent parts. This may be the bodies of characters, the textual body, categorisations

of genre and more broadly the literary marketplace. As Deleuze writes:

> BwO is not at all the opposite of the organs. The organs are not its enemies. The
> enemy is the organism. The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that
> organization of the organs called the organism.[167]

In terms of the text as the body material, the body may be emptied of its organs of plot,

structure (beginning, middle, end), representations of linear time, and conventions of

language use. The BwO is invoked through a creative reworking of the textual body, which

I will demonstrate in the following chapters of close textual analysis, as I consider how the

literary work of the authors in this study engage with aesthetic forms of undoing the

textual body and its associated codes of value. Maggie Nelson and Olivia Laing both

produce texts which manifest the concept of the BwO through their deconstruction of

genre categorisation and rhizomatic approach to narrative structure. In *To The River,*[168]

Olivia Laing documents her journey along the River Ouse following the break-up of a

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[166] Stark, Feminist Theory After Deleuze, p. 74.
[167] Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p. 175.
[168] Olivia Laing, *To the River: A Journey beneath the Surface.* (Edinburgh; New York: Canongate, 2011).

relationship but the text is more than a travel book, incorporating personal reflection and memoir alongside literary history and geography and a meditation on time and memory and human connection to the landscape. Similarly, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* weaves memoir and personal reflection on transitioning and transforming bodies together with critical and queer theory, philosophy, social and political commentary within a text which defies categorisation and draws attention to the relationship of the reader to the text and the methods of classification within the literary marketplace.[169]

Garin Dowd notes that schizoanalysis is not a method or doctrine but is a way of 'exploring the becoming induced in the author by way of their engagement with a literary work or corpus.'[170] In considering the work of Nelson and Laing as schizonarratives, their defiance of genre and categorisation allows their work to permeate through multiple fields of thought and engage the reader in a conversation with themselves as they reflect on this cognitive exploration. The writing moves as a flow connecting and dissecting different ideas and thought processes - for the author at the time of writing, but also for the reader who might approach the text from an expectation of one genre and be surprised to find something completely different. As Geir Farner explains, the expectations and prejudices of the reader may lead them to a certain book with assumptions regarding what they might find upon the page, but their reading experience does not correlate to authorial intention:

> We expect serious literature to express a message, which we often identify as the author's intention. On the other hand, we are seldom equally concerned with the ideological purpose behind popular literature. This is of course why the latter is often not considered literature at all. Apart from the work's status as serious or popular, its affiliation with a particular literary current may influence the reader's expectations with respect to authorial intention. He may be more likely to expect a

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[169] See *Hype: Bestsellers and Literary Culture*, ed. by Jon Helgason, Ann Steiner, and Sara Kärrholm (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2014), pp. 46-48 for a discussion on the use of genre by booksellers.
[170] Garin Dowd, 'Is Critique et Clinique Schizoanalytic?: Schizoanalysis and Deleuze's Critical and Clinical Project.', in *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature*, ed. by Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts, and Aidan Tynan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 119–36 (p. 134).

naturalist or realist work to express a clear intention than one that is surrealist or modernist.[171]

A reader approaching *The Argonauts* may expect a memoir but is confronted with philosophical thought, queer theory and poetry in equal measure to the anticipated life writing. This narrative of diverse and intersecting components encourages the cognitive meandering of the reader as much as it presents that of the author. A schizonarrative works by opposing standards of normalisation, expectations of genre, language structure and form and offers a multitude of possible interpretations and reflective critical thinking opportunities within one textual encounter. Garin Dowd explains how an opposition to writing and reading conventions echoes the modernist mantra to Make it New:[172]

> the great writers (and certainly those admired by Deleuze and Guattari) work at a *molecular* level against the *molar* grain of what they call the 'major' language, actively producing such zones of indetermination. Minor language makes language itself 'stammer' – as the work of Beckett among others attests.[173]

Beatrice Monaco draws a similar comparison with the work of Virginia Woolf in *The Waves;*[174] 'Indeed Woolf admitted that with *The Waves* she was 'writing to a rhythm and not to a plot.' Rhythm is the dynamic bridge between the molar and the molecular, the extrinsic and the intrinsic.'[175] Within modernist and experimental literature the act of writing a rhythm is a practice of schizoanalysis which begins with the author displacing the molecular and breaking through into the molar by playing with the boundaries of language. As Dowd suggests:

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[171] Farner, *Literary Fiction. The Ways We Read Narrative Literature,* pp. 126-7.
[172] Eric Matthew Bledsoe, 'Make It New', *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism. Taylor and Francis*, 2016 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781135000356-REM1131-1> [accessed 21 December 2023].
[173] Dowd, 'Is Critique et Clinique Schizoanalytic?', p. 121.
[174] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).
[175] Beatrice Monaco, *Machinic Modernism: The Deleuzian Literary Machines of Woolf, Lawrence and Joyce* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 174-5.

> Deleuze returns to the idea of a psychotic procedure (which is a critical-clinical procedure, not a clinical interpretation) in the essay on Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener in which Bartleby's formula functions in such a way as to assist Melville in carving out a 'foreign language within language' (Deleuze 1998:72). Language is pushed to its limit and discovers its Outside.[176]

Schizoanalysis is proposed as a 'universal clinical theory' which elides the normality verses neurosis binary perpetuated by capitalist frameworks, by allowing the thinking subject to slip outside of normalised capitalist paradigms and use the rupture of neurotic expression of pure desire as a process of becoming.[177] Eugene Holland suggests Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy in *Anti-Oedipus* is a process of transformation from a regime of defined and categorising concepts to a destabilising force of 'decoding' which revisits established philosophical problematics and requests a re-appraisal and re-evaluation of the way we think about them.[178] As Buchanan attests: 'A schizoananalytic reading of a text should be oriented around the 'pragmatic' moments – embodied in linguistic blocs, refrains, formulae and so on – when meaning swings over to use, where something 'occurs' in the text rather than being signified or narrated.'[179] Buchanan, Matts and Tynan claim schizoanalytical criticism enables the traversal of categorical boundaries towards a new kind of hybrid discourse. I suggest in the following chapters that this hybrid discourse is manifest in the form of experimental feminist writing that stimulates a multiplicity of affect for the reader. The popularity of texts by experimental authors such as Ali Smith, Maggie Nelson, Nicola Barker and Eimear McBride would suggest that the general reading population outside of academia and highbrow literary fiction is keen to move with this traversal and read outside of their comfort zone. Julie Armstrong claims:

> It is evident that a new fiction is evolving, one in which writers are searching for meaning through their work, and are asking philosophical questions about why we

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[176] Garin Dowd, 'Is Critique et Clinique Schizoanalytic?', p. 132

[177] Tynan, *Deleuze's Literary Clinic*, p. 20. Capitalist cultural frameworks have formulated set patterns of behaviour conforming to socio-economic expectations as 'normal'. Any deviation from this version of normal is therefore posited as neurosis in a binary opposition of expected behaviours.

[178] *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Paul Patton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 240.

[179] Buchanan, Matts, and Tynan, *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature,* p. 5.

are here, in a world where meaning seems lost, or at the least ambiguous. This fiction invites the reader to be active and not a passive consumer, because the writers of such works are asking the reader to consider how they view the world and how they live their lives.[180]

Schizoanalysis is itself a practice, operating alongside others to challenge and transform relations between theory and practice in any given field. In the following chapters I will demonstrate with close readings, how the texts chosen for this study can be identified as schizo-narratives of becoming.

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[180] Armstrong, *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers*, pp. 165-166.

## Chapter 3: Spatio-Temporal Disruptions in the schizo-narrative

In this chapter I use textual analysis to demonstrate how the experimental narrative techniques deployed within Ali Smith's seasonal quartet and Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY* disrupt realist representations of spatio-temporality as a mode of becoming-woman, operating through the medium of disruptive characters. By identifying ways in which these authors experiment with narrative temporality and use time as a theme in their novels, I will demonstrate how their authorial practices enact a process of becoming within the text. Deleuze's philosophy of time, most prominently set out in his works *Difference and Repetition*[1] and *The Logic of Sense,*[2] is intrinsically linked to his concept of becoming as a continual process, where events in 'the living present' continually 'pass' the present into the past. At the same time, the singularities and differences of each moment work to create a novel event within the future based on the passing moments of the living present.

## Virtual and Actual Realities.

In order to understand this idea of singularities and difference in a Deleuzian sense, it is important to stress the contrast between the virtual and the actual realms of reality, to avoid equating Deleuzian terms with dominant conceptions of reality. While individual experiences of reality and what this means varies from person to person, I am referring here to a general collective understanding that reality is the basis of our everyday lived experience. To reconfigure thought in a Deleuzian sense requires a letting go of our attachment to whole forms. For example, our understanding of an individual as an identifiable person, or an event as a designated period of time that involves a discernible

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[1] Gilles Deleuze*, Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1994).
[2] Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense,* trans. by Constantin V. Boundas, Mark Lester and Charles J. Stivale, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1990).

occurrence or happening. As James Williams explains, 'The individual is, rather, a series of processes that connect actual things, thoughts and sensations to the pure intensities and ideas implied by them'.[3] As I demonstrate further on in this chapter, Ali Smith reconfigures her characters through the aspect of temporal shifts that defy normative narratological modes of linear character development where a character becomes a better version at the end of the narrative than they were at the beginning. Instead, Smith presents them as subjects in process, affected by and affecting others at each infinitesimal and seemingly insignificant point of connection with the world. They do not start as one thing and end the novels as another. Smith's emphasis on temporal shifts moving backward and forwards subtly suggest to the reader that each individual is made up of shifting singularities – thoughts and sensations, material actualities and circumstances, all are deterritorialised and reterritorialized in a constant flow of change.

Williams applies Deleuze's philosophy of time to critique contemporary modes of time measurement. He uses the example of time management through objective setting, where our time is commodified for capitalist gain as a measure of productive output. Whether in a workplace environment or through private goal-oriented markers of achievement, the contemporary culture of personal productivity mapped against personal accomplishment, fulfilment and self-worth is one which assimilates the human experience of process into a supposed linear temporality as an objective and universal experience of time. The cultural insistence on productivity as a mode of human operation within day-to-day life restricts not only our capacity to diverge from the set path of the productive objectives we need to measure ourselves against but also fails completely to allow for the nuance and deviation of our time outside of these measurable parameters:

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[3] See James Williams *Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 6.

The time between the setting and checking of objectives is not meant to exist as something radically open and flexible. Taken to the limit this is even true of the time of the actual reflection and decision on objectives, since there too a complex weave of activity, passivity, process, emotion, bodies, spaces, thinking and desires is reduced to the law of the objective measurable outcomes. Deleuze's construction of a manifold of times, irreducible to one set of laws, or to a single image or space, shows the violence at work in this objective-setting management of time.[4]

Deleuze's theory of past, present and future existing simultaneously and flowing through one another gives credence to process (as a form of becoming) over product (as a static output of being) and encourages the diversions of events that hold potential to create new events in a rhizomatic free-flow. This reconfiguration of temporal experience is manifested in Smith's quartet through her formal experimentation with temporal markers which trouble a notion of character progression. As discussed later in the section on ending death's finality, Smith eschews linearity and progression. Beginning the quartet with *Autumn* signifies the importance of death and decay as an entry point to a process already in continuation, rather than starting her project with *Spring* signifying the start of a new calendar year or as a point of newness in the botanical year. The books can also be read in any order with no requirement for the reader to read *Autumn* before they read *Winter* or any sequence of continuation.

Deleuze encourages us to think around the edges of discernability, about our interaction and experiences in terms of intensities within a virtual sense of reality. This virtual aspect of reality is connected to the actual reality of our daily lives but, allows a space for inexpressible pure differences to engage pure becomings. Williams uses the example of a coconut to illustrate this point – in the actual realm it is the physical coconut, but in the virtual sense it is the intensities it expresses when encountered with individuals. To hold it, break it open and eat or drink it involves the intensities; 'to become hard, to

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[4] Ibid., p. 17.

become grainy, to become hairy, to quench, to nourish'.[5] These intensities are variations

of experience for each instance and for each individual and encounter (my experience of

the coconut will hold an infinite number of differences to your experience of the coconut;

sensation, nutrition, memory etc). This experience then operates on both levels of the

actual and the virtual. The potential of applying this philosophy to analyse how we

encounter specific forms of literature, for the purposes of this thesis specifically

experimental literature, is in the possibility of these virtual intensities from the reading

process as an impact on the actual individual. Where an individual is not just the person

reading the text but the series of processes connecting thoughts, sensations, and actions:

> Intensities are a necessary condition for explanations of why life is significant but
> uniquely so for each individual. As such, intensities could not be identifiable as
> comparable qualities of actual experiences or objects.[6]

As Williams explains, the Deleuzian sense of an event must be thought through the level of

the virtual, where an impact of sensation from the actual (via a real

interaction/experience) creates intensities that cannot necessarily be expressed within the

actual.[7] The purpose of contextualising the Deleuzian event here, is to establish how real-

life experiences in the actual create affective actions in our virtual realities, thereby

triggering infinitesimal and innumerable differences. Following this line of thought in a

context of spatio-temporality, allows us to reconsider how human experiences of time and

space can be reconsidered as reverberations of a rhythm, rather than a homogenous

linearity that we all follow in the same way.[8] As discussed in the previous chapter, rhythm,

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[5] See Williams *Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition*, p. 7.
[6] Ibid., p. 8.
[7] Ibid., p. 74.
[8] Dictated by a universal notion of time measured in seconds, minutes and hours that progresses forwards in a linear momentum – the development of this idea of homogenously experienced and regulated time is historicised by Stephen Kern in *The Culture of Time and Space 1800 – 1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 11-15.

or the refrain, is an event emerging from the critical singularities or infinite points of difference. If we consider temporal experience not only singular and unique for each person in their actual reality but also unique at the critical points of difference in the virtual realm where each infinitesimal moment of that person's life involves a plethora of possible becomings, we can begin to envisage a multitude of infinite temporal experiences that intersect between individuals and move in rhizomatic rhythms. Envisaging this exponential reaching out of spatio-temporal experience is difficult enough to understand when unpacking abstract philosophical theory but trying to relate it to concrete examples in lived reality is more challenging. Therefore, approaching this new way of thinking through a relational interaction or activity such as how we respond to literature, can help us to visualise what this might look like and give us the tools to reflect on our own deep rooted cognitive preconceptions and how they limit our capacity to think differently.

In analysing time as an interlocking process of connectivity based on singularities and difference, Deleuze undoes the inevitability of a chronological measure of time and gives us the capacity to reconfigure the way we think about our temporal experience. As James Williams suggests:

> For him, [Deleuze] past, present and future are not separate parts of time. Instead, they alternately treat each other as dimensions, where to be a dimension means to be a subsequent process.[9]

The idea of temporal dimensions is a helpful framing device to think about different modes of temporal experience that can occur simultaneously and overlap in the form of singularities, or moments of infinitesimal time that are distinguishable from one another.

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[9] James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's Philosophy of Time. A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 9.

Not just through the measurement of clock time,[10] for example where one second is a different singularity from another, but also in terms of the temporal experience of the subject, split infinitely into singularities of difference that those individual moments can incorporate. Deleuze's philosophy of time links back to his premise of becoming, explored in the last chapter, as a process engaging a multiplicity of singularities, all operating at multiple and intricate levels, opposed to a theory of being as a knowable and definable stasis. In this reconfiguration we have to deconstruct the premise of an event or defined episode of time breaking it down to the infinitesimal instances of difference that separate and distinguish each moment. In James Williams' critical introduction to Deleuze's philosophy of time, he uses the example of an actor recreating an emotion on stage to unpack this theory. The actor may be repeating a performance they have acted previously, said the same words to evoke the same reaction from the audience, but each performance contains an infinite amount of possible and actual differences to mean it can never be a repetition of the same performance. The audience is made up of a different combination of people every performance, the actor themselves can be considered a different person from one performance to the next based on the variance of experience between each of these points in time, even the time elapsed between a matinee and an evening performance will have affected the actor in some small way, so that the repetition of the same lines from a few hours earlier will not be the same performance due to the incalculable differences from one moment the next. The actor doesn't repeat the same performance again and again, they create a new instance of that performance again and again. For Deleuze, then, representation of the pure past is impossible because it is an impossible task to recreate or represent an event that has already happened – there are too many differences at play between the two events. Extending this approach, we also

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[10] Stephen Kern's history of time describes the development of uniform time from the invention of the clock in the fourteenth century to the introduction of standard time at the end of the nineteenth century. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1800 – 1918*, p. 11.

might question the nature of labelling periods of time as events.[11] To use the example above where the duration of a show is considered as an event, breaking this periodisation down to individual scenes or lines spoken by the actors can be further singularised by considering the multiplicities at play as each word is spoken, where changes of tone, register, inflection and facial expression create new instances of that line, that scene, that performance, from moment to moment. The show is not a whole, it is a collective of assembled singularities. Re-thinking our lived experience of time in this way, to consider it as a series of connected singularities all with their own possible trajectories of difference, allows for a more nuanced appreciation of human agency affecting our own unique trajectory within time. I develop this temporal aspect of becoming in the section on Cyclical Rhythms in Smith's Seasonal Quartet, demonstrating how her characters are affected by singular and small points of connection that then change the trajectory of their current path or situation and send them off into unexpected routes that change something about how they think and act.

## Narrative Theory

Understanding Deleuze's philosophy of time is helpful for considering how traditionally conceived notions of temporality can be dismantled as part of the process of becoming. In this case my reading of becoming operates through literary experimentation to stimulate a new way of reading, where the reader must unpack the accepted paradigms of temporal experience and consider their own place as an active participant of the text. I argue that this active participation is a form of becoming-woman where the reader must transition from a place of immersion in the normative ideology of linear time, to the margins of the clock face where temporality does not run in a straight line. Using a Deleuzian mode of

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[11] Seymour Chapman defines events in narratological terms as sequential composites of a whole (the narrative) See Seymour Chapman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 21.

critique to deconstruct the notion of temporality as homogenously linear, the concept of

becoming-woman enables a reconfiguration of this ideological framework to interrogate

possible alternative ways of thinking about time. The universal assumption that time is

lived and experienced in the same way for everybody, in a linear progression from birth to

death, with markers or significant events mere points of reference on the journey from

origin to end, seems impossible to escape within the inevitability of our embodied lives.

Stephen Kern notes that:

> As basic philosophical categories, time and space are particularly suitable as a
> framework for a general cultural history, because they are comprehensive,
> universal and essential.[12]

However, as feminist criticism of patriarchal knowledge construction highlights, the

premise of universal human knowledge has always contained a gender bias and the

ideological construction of time as linear is no less imbued with patriarchal bias. As Claire

Colebrook notes:

> A great deal of feminist work of retrieval, which looks to a past of artists and
> philosophers not realised (or what Virginia Woolf [1929] referred to as
> 'Shakespeare's sister'), has suggested that one line of progressive and unfolding
> time precludes recognition of those who have offered other models of selfhood
> than that of rationally self-constituting man.[13]

This escape of patriarchal temporality, grounded in the notion that time moves in one

direction, is a mode of engaging becoming-woman through the alternate rhythms of

embodied experience. The reconfiguration of an alternative and embodied temporal

experience is expressed by Julia Kristeva in her essay 'Women's Time' in which she argues

that female subjectivity is intrinsically linked to two alternative modes of temporality that

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[12] Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1800 – 1918*, p. 2.
[13] Claire Colebrook, 'Stratigraphic Time, Women's Time', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 24, (2009), 11-16, (p. 11).

operate outside of, and beyond the patriarchal notion of linear time.[14] For Kristeva cyclical

time is representative of repetition, through the female bodily experience of menstruation

and childbearing. Whereas monumental time is configured as a broader sense of eternal or

ancient existence at a species level. Both cyclical and monumental time are intrinsically

linked to female subjectivity through reproduction and motherhood and encompass a

sense of ongoing process that is broader than the limitations of sociocultural identity

definitions. These two conceptions of temporality are set against the patriarchal

construction of time as a linearity that expresses progression through history. For Kristeva

linear time is also intrinsically linked to language as the progression of the subject into the

symbolic order, where the correct sequence of language must be adhered to:

> this linear time is that of language considered as the enunciation of sentences
> (noun + verb; topic-comment; beginning-ending), and that this time rests on its
> own stumbling block, which is also the stumbling block of that enunciation –
> death. A psychoanalyst would call this "obsessional time," recognizing in the
> mastery of time the true structure of the slave.[15]

'Women's Time' deconstructs the universality of human temporal experience within this

linear framework and offers an alternative frame of reference to situate multiple

embodied identities outside of the socially constructed paradigms that attempt to contain

a more fluid lived experience. Kristeva critiques the cultural categories that shape

identities in relation to sex, race, geographic location etc and highlights the need to

express the divergent multiplicities of individual experience:

> They will not be only European "young people" or "women" of Europe but will
> echo in a most specific way the universal traits of their structural place in
> reproduction and its representations. [16]

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[14] Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', *Signs,* 7:1 (1981), 13-35.
[15] Ibid., p. 17.
[16] Ibid., p. 15.

By rethinking women's embodied experience outside the patriarchal construction of linear clock time, and repositioning it within alternate rhythms of cyclical and monumental time, Kristeva offers up a reconfiguration of temporality as divergent, multiple and subjective, although her centring the notion of cyclical time around a specifically female reproductive capacity is problematic in its biological essentialism and no longer holds sway in our contemporary world where a reproductive body can be non-female.[17] The possibility of more than one conception of time, especially when linked to the corporeal rhythms of daily lived experience thus opens the way for further reassessments of temporality outside of the universally accepted linear narrative of time progression moving in one direction. Her appraisal of generational feminism as periodised phases that overlap and inform one another also decentres the linear narrative of progression through history. The achievements of first-generation feminism in seeking equality and status in a patriarchal social power structure, informed the work of second-generation feminism to reconsider that achievement and emphasise sexual difference as a means to deconstruct a cultural system that devalues female coded experience.

Read together, Kristeva's 'Women's Time' and Deleuze's philosophy of time suggest a reconfiguration of chronological temporality as a normative paradigm. This reconfiguration posits the intersectionality of identity so that an individual is not viewed as a unified definable entity (Kristeva uses the example of a European woman) but instead a fluid assemblage of changing singularities that interconnect with others, morph and invert over time. The generational phases of feminism that speak back to past achievement and inform its future politics, together with an anti-essentialist[18] emphasis on multiple and

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[17] Where transgender men, non-binary and fluidly gendered people menstruate and get pregnant and therefore also take part in this cyclical temporality.

[18] Mari Mikkola summarises anti-essentialist theories where Kristeva does concede that a category of woman cannot and should not be reconstructed, supported by theorists including Judith Butler and Denise Riley. See Mari Mikkola 'Gender Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism' in *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. by Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader and Alison Stone (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 168-178 (p. 173).

changing elements of a subject's selfhood and identity lends itself as a theoretical mode of

engagement to the concept of becoming as a deterritorialising process. I discuss in the

following sections how Smith and Barker both reconfigure the past as a temporal mode

that is not complete or finished but rather one which still functions as a fluid intervention

into ideological constructs of the present and future through the medium of disruptive

forces.

To understand the formal literary conventions that Smith and Barker reimagine I

will now briefly outline the idea of literary representation of reality as a knowable, truthful

reflection of human experience. While a discussion of genre is pertinent here, I firstly refer

to Elizabeth Deeds Ermath's assertion that the realist novel and realist conventions of

literary production are based on the premise of a consensus of verisimilitude; whereby a

commonly held empirical understanding about aspects of human experience of space and

time verifies their classification as neutral, homogenous and universally accepted: [19]

> The linear coordinates in fiction (past, present, and future) operate like the spatial
> coordinates in painting (front, side, and back) to homogenize the medium in which
> consensus becomes possible. It is the agreement, or lack of disagreement, among
> these viewpoints that unifies the field of action and confers the illusion of
> perspective. The very distinction between past, present, and future is only
> meaningful in the first place because the periods thus distinguished are mutually
> informative. They are linear coordinates that make possible relative measurement
> in time. [20]

This premise of verisimilitude means that the realist text conveys a common or shared

understanding of reality and therefore contains recognised aspects of lived experience

such as linear or clock time: the day-to-day sequence of hours in a day, the pattern of day

following night that regulates human experience, making up a linear projection of the way

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[19] See Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space and Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. ix.
[20] Ibid., p. 40.

we recognise our lived progression within a temporal framework. Literary narrative as a mode of cultural production that represents that reality therefore follows these temporal rhythms – we expect the daily patterns of life to be replicated in the fiction we read. Mark Currie argues that these fictional narratives contribute to the temporal epistemologies that inform how we think about modern experiences of time. In structuring the present as both a personal and collective anticipation of futurity and point of reflection on the past, we are able to maintain an unlimited duration of presence.[21] Currie suggests that human experience of linear time relates to the narratives we absorb, where history is presented as an account of a sequential series of events resulting in evident outcomes. Within a realist novel linear temporality presents such a progression within the narrative that follows characters through an opening scenario, moving through a certain amount of action points to a conflict resolution at the end. The reading experience therefore is based around anticipation of futurity, where the reader is propelled to reach the end point of the novel to discern the resolution of the story, i.e., reading to find out what happens to the characters at the end of the book. The denouement offers the reader a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. The ending allows the reader to have achieved a full understanding of the novel so that they may look back at the story as a whole with more knowledge of the plot and characters than they did during the process of reading.

In terms of genre, there is a certain amount of deviation from this premise within different categories of fiction whereby a reader may not be surprised to find an alternative temporal framework, say within science fiction or fantasy where the world represented is constructed on a completely different temporal basis to our own.[22] Similarly, certain

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[21] Where the present is a continual now, unfolding moment by moment and broken into parts that have been and parts yet to come. See Mark Currie *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 8.

[22] See Elana Gomel, *Postmodern Science Fiction and the Temporal Imagination*. (London & New York: Continuum, 2010) and Ursula Heise, *Chronoschisms Time, Narrative, And Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

literary fiction such as David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas (2004)* and Evie Wyld's *All The Birds*

*Singing* (2013) experiment with temporal structures to weave the narrative through

multiple present moments in a non-linear fashion. Despite their innovative use of narrative

sequencing these works, this play with temporal framing has a purpose and works as an

overall component of the text to draw the reader into a gradual understanding of how the

characters, events and seemingly disparate multiple presents link up to inform the

denouement.[23] When considering the difference between fiction that deploys non-

chronological narrative structure, and texts classified as experimental for their play of

narrative sequencing, an interesting point of alignment between experimental and

modernist texts lies with the turn inward to an internal sense of temporality to interrogate

the possible multitude of subjective temporal experience. E.P. Thompson and Stephen

Kern[24] emphasised the commodification of clock-time as an asset of productivity and the

technological advances of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that

reframed global spatial boundaries respectively.[25]

> With the legislation of world standard time in 1884, this specifically capitalist time
> of tightly regulated productivity paves the way for a new global experience of
> synchronised time that inspires many modernist writers to retreat into subjective
> realms of individuated temporal consciousness.[26]

The modernist development of the stream-of-consciousness novel, exemplified in the

work of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, deconstructs the realist universal notion of a

uniform and collective temporal experience by focusing on the shifting and malleable

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[23] See David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

[24] E. P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism' in *Past & Present,* (1967), 1, 38, 56-97. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1800 – 1918*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[25] Caroline Edwards (2019) contextualises the historical temporal ontologies that inform literary criticism through these two influential works. Caroline Edwards, *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 50.

[26] Ibid.

consciousness of time experienced at the personal level of the internal subject. While both

Joyce and Woolf are key influential figures for the contemporary experimental women

writers in this study, most notably Eimear McBride and Ali Smith, I will be focussing on the

expansion of a female-centred tradition of literary experimentation that Ellen G. Friedman

and Miriam Fuchs identify in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (1989).

As mentioned in Chapter Two, although Deleuze and Guattari name Virginia Woolf as an

exemplary author of minor literature, she is notably the only woman writer among others

they hold up as credible experimenters. Their reverence for Proust, Kafka and Joyce

disregards the wealth of a female experimental tradition in line with the literary criticism

of the high modernist period:

> In studies of modernism, Virginia Woolf is the only one of the three women
> pioneers habitually considered with Joyce and Proust, but often not as their equal.
> Leon Edel expresses this view quite clearly: "I think of *Mrs. Dalloway* as a Joycean
> novel, diluted, and washed and done in beautiful water-colour; and *To the
> Lighthouse* is Proustian in its time sense but again the medium is a kind of water-
> colour of the emotions"[27]

Yet Woolf, alongside Dorothy Richardson and Gertrude Stein who comprise the first

generation of women experimental writers publishing most of their work prior to 1930, all

critique patriarchal paradigms of literary production through their development of a

female centred practice of writing. Richardson specifically advocated for a fluid feminine

prose of interiority exhibited in her multi-volume magnum opus *Pilgrimage (1915-1957),* a

series of novels which abandon plot in favour of 'a chronicle of multiple climaxes and

resolutions, but no definite beginning, middle, and end.'[28] Friedman and Fuchs explain that

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[27] Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, 'Contexts and Continuities: An Introduction to Women's
Experimental Fiction in English' in Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction, ed. by
Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 3-51 (p.
9).
[28] Ibid., p. 12.

Richardson's refusal to provide an end point for the protagonist Miriam, instead representing the continuation and growth of the character as she goes on with her life, effectively frees the character from the traditional paradigms of fictional closure for women (marriage, death, madness) and gives credence to her life as a constant movement or development. Echoing this form is Lucy Ellman's 2019 novel *Ducks, Newburyport*,[29] a stream of consciousness narrative told from the perspective of an Ohio housewife over a thousand pages in only eight sentences. Ellman experiments with form in this way to pull the reader into the ever-unfolding present of the protagonist's constant inner monologue of thoughts, worries and fears about contemporary America, balanced against the day-to-day domesticity of her embodied female experience. Like Richardson's thirteen volumes detailing a life unfolding, the density of the text on the page in *Ducks, Newburyport* and the lack of full stops represent the moment-by-moment experience of living as a continuous present, stretching on interminably. The use of commas to keep the text flowing and the lack of full stops portray the relentless bombardment of external influences affecting an individual mind and shaping a life, demonstrating how experimenting with form can engage the reader in this reflective reappraisal of the present moment within contemporary life.[30] Ali Smith, like Ellman, keeps the reader in the duration of the present, by constructing her narrative to be always in the present tense and drawing the reader's attention to constructs of linear time, probing the possibility of alternate temporal measures:

> He checks the time again.
> 11.29. Is that clock broken?
> Is a single minute really this long?
> Is the clock that's broken the one inside him?[31]

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[29] Lucy Ellman*, Ducks, Newburyport* (Norwich: Galley Beggar Press, 2019).
[30] See Alex Preston, 'Ducks, Newburyport by Lucy Ellmann review – pushes narrative to its limits', *The Guardian*, 15 July 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/15/ducks-newburyport-by-lucy-ellmann-review> [accessed 27 December 2023]
[31] Ali Smith, *Spring*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019), p. 49.

In a similar reinforcement of the present, Virginia Woolf brings time into focus, giving it a

primacy ahead of plot, as a theme to be unpacked and reconfigured. As Friedman and

Fuchs observe:

> *In Mrs. Dalloway* she looks between the spaces of clock time, expanding
> the moment, flooding it with the consciousnesses of a small number of
> characters. She breaks the metronome of time, making room for the ebb
> and flow of thought and memory, both stretching the moment and
> conflating the past and the present.[32]

Woolf scrutinizes the divergent lived experience of time at the level of the individual,

contrasting the multivocal microcosm of interiority with the macrocosm of socially

constructed temporal parameters that permeate into broader historical constructs, and

the disparity between the contradictory nature of these temporal positions. With *Mrs.*

*Dalloway*, a novel set across the span of one day, Woolf offsets the frivolous monotony of

Clarissa Dalloway's party preparations juxtaposed with her intermittent memories and

self-reflexivity, against the repetition of Septimus Warren Smith's relentless unbidden

hallucinations and dreams, perpetuating the horrors of war from within the inescapability

of his mind. Similarly, the narrative strategy she employs in *The Waves* most noticeably

makes use of the rhythmic beat of the titular waves within the internal voices of the

characters to suggest a continuous overlapping of temporal experience. While the distinct

voice of each character is enclosed in speech marks and preceded by dialogue attribution

indicating who is speaking, it is obvious to the reader that the content of the speech marks

is not actual speech but a mixture of thoughts, perceptions, impressions and subconscious

desires flowing into and through one another. While the lives of the characters progress

from childhood to adulthood, this is no ordinary bildungsroman, as the passage of time is

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[32] Friedman and Fuchs, 'Contexts and Continuities', p. 13.

marked not by this linear progression, but through the continual refrain of the waves

layering experience and thought in a constant processual becoming. This preoccupation

with time and rhythm pervades Woolf's oeuvre and is one of the key elements of influence

that infiltrates the work of Ali Smith. Paul Ricoeur's analysis of *Mrs Dalloway* as a novel

*about* time suggests that the structure, comprised of a forward pulling narrative of events,

together with the backwards looking inward turn of the characters towards retrospective

memories, creates an intensity of time amplified through individual moments:

> It is suggested to the reader by the reverberation […] of one solitary experience in
> another solitary experience. It is this network, taken as a whole, that is the
> experience of time in *Mrs Dalloway*. This experience, in turn, confronts, in a
> complex and unstable relationship, monumental time, itself resulting from all the
> complicities between clock time and the figures of authority.[33]

Ricoeur's analysis highlights the way in which Woolf constructs her narrative as a

juxtaposition of clock time as the public chronometric expectation of temporal existence

with the multiple differences of the inward time of consciousness. The marker of

chronological time throughout *Mrs Dalloway*, the striking of Big Ben, is a rhythm that

resonates for all the characters as the universal reverberation of authoritarian time

measurement. Yet their own internal experience of that day is punctured with memories

that when recalled, affect their current state of mind and thought processes in the present

moment, and trigger actions that run like a rhythm through the text from past to present

to future. In this way the temporal experience of the characters is stretched to move

outside of the chronological clock time, encompassing an immeasurable multitude of

singularities whilst continuously affecting their experience of the unfolding moment and

changing them in the process. The arbitrary flow of recalled memory triggered by the

instantaneous singularities, collides with the character's conscious thoughts in each

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[33] Paul Ricoeur *Time and Narrative Volume 2*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer
(Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 112.

miniscule 'present' moment, that closely reflects the reality of the constant process of interaction between the subconscious, the unconscious and the conscious mind. This instantaneous unacknowledged interaction is part of our everyday cognitive processes, and one which echoes the Deleuzian molar/molecular interaction where these separate spheres of experience meet and cross over. Yet the act of shining a light on this process exposes an alternative temporal rhythm of lived reality and attempting to represent this internal process on the page offers the reader a deeper insight in this undocumented human temporal experience.

Woolf's technique is clearly influential for Ali Smith, whose seasonal quartet echoes such Woolfian examples of modernist experimentation as characters' memories distilled into crystalised snapshots of the past felt viscerally within the present moment, then fading back to forgotten silences that are given insight from a heterodiegetic perspective (as discussed below). This narrative technique serves to transgress the boundaries of a linear past, present and future distinction, to inform the experience of the contemporary moment as a process of interlinked temporality for both character and reader alike. Following on from Woolf's modernist interrogations into the affected temporal subject, Smith highlights the intersecting rhythms in the textual interplay of characters' lives whilst a meta commentary on the reading process is also unfolding at the same time. I shall discuss this in greater depth in the next section to show how these narrative strategies utilise and highlight rhythmic temporal unfoldings that work to fragment both the characters and the reading experience in service of a mode of becoming-woman. Smith employs the use of disruptive characters including Amber in *The Accidental*, Florence in *Spring*, Lux in *Winter* and Robert in *Summer* who all enable a rupture of measured time and contained space in such a way that works as a form of narrative becoming. These disruptive characters break open the staid paths of other characters who appear to be set in their ways or resistant to change, thereby propelling

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them sideways towards new paths they would not have otherwise taken. This is explored

further with textual examples in the section on disruptive forces.

## Cyclical rhythms in Ali Smith's seasonal quartet

Published between 2016 and 2020, Ali Smith's seasonal quartet works as a series of

standalone novels, not connected by plot or characters but combining real time events and

observations mixed in with fictional storylines to build up a representation of the socio-

political contemporary moment in the UK. They form a meditation on the nature of time,

not just from within the form and content of the novels themselves, but from their

proximity to the present due to the unprecedented speed of publication that effectively

compressed the temporal gap between the point of writing about the contemporary

moment and its subsequent publication and dissemination. Each book was released in the

season it represents and bears the name of, spaced one year apart and prefaced by an

epigraph of a range of quotes relating to time, the season and the current moment. Smith

had been toying with the idea of writing a series of seasonal novels for over twenty years

before committing to the project. The deciding factor had been the surprising speed at

which her previous novel *How to be Both* (2014) had been published after she handed in

the manuscript following a delay to her agreed deadline.[34] The realisation that the

traditional lag between submission of the manuscript and the published book arriving in

bookshops could be overcome by a commitment on behalf of her publisher Hamish

Hamilton to a rapid publication turnaround, allowed Smith to see the potential in writing

the contemporary as it happened:

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[34] Ali Smith, ''I thought it would be about the seasons': Ali Smith on writing Autumn', *The Guardian*, 21 September 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/21/i-initially-thought-it-would-be-about-the-season-ali-smith-on-writing-autumn> [accessed 27 December 2023].

this excited me about how closely to contemporaneousness a finished book might be able to be in the world, and yet how it could also be, all through, very much about stratified, cyclic time. The way we live, in time, is made to appear linear by the chronologies that get applied to our lives by ourselves and others, starting at birth, ending at death, with a middle where we're meant to comply with some or other of life's usual expectations, in other words the year to year day to day minute to minute moment to moment fact of time passing. But we're time-containers, we hold all our diachrony, our pasts and our futures (and also the pasts and futures of all the people who made us and who in turn we'll help to make) in every one of our consecutive moments / minutes / days / years, and I wonder if our real energy, our real history, is cyclic in continuance and at core, rather than consecutive. And since the novel as a form is always about time, and since the name we've given to the novel form also means new, something new, something so new it's news – I suppose I'm interested in asking structural questions of the form.[35]

Smith's fascination with using the novel form to explore the human experience of time is the driver for her experimentation with temporal representations. For the author, this experimentation allows her to produce something new, in the same way her modernist predecessors wanted to extract that full interior experience of thought compared to the outward presentation of action. For the reader, it stimulates a new type of reading experience - to encounter their own present as a mode of historical record, enabling them to absorb the shift in mood and political tension as each book progresses whilst they live inside the moment as it unfolds on the page. In this way Smith troubles the boundaries of textual containment as the unfolding reality within the text is also being experienced by her readers outside of it.

The narrative structure in all four of these books takes the reader backwards and forwards in time, shifting between past and present, memories and envisaged futures, while positing a multitude of possible present moments based on the differing points of view from each of the characters. Each book is structured into three numbered sections,

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[35] Ali Smith, 'Ali Smith on Autumn, Brexit, and the shortness of life', *Penguin*, 11 October 2016, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2016/ali-smith-on-autumn.html#0iXSLuwz6eQRWfYR.99> [accessed 27 December 2023]

potentially hinting at the demarcation of three months per season, but the fluidity of

temporal movement within the narrative follows no pattern or routine. These three main

sections are then broken down further into smaller fragmentary segments, interspersed

between the shifting character perspectives is a conversational omniscient narrator

offering commentary on the rapid progress of time, the contemporary political climate and

asking the reader to engage in questions of temporal experience. The reader soon comes

to the realisation that the sections beginning with a temporal context marked in bold

typescript as if to situate the narrative are arbitrary, playful and insignificant:

> **It is a Wednesday**, just past midsummer. Elisabeth Demand – thirty two years old
> **It was another Friday in the October holidays in 1995**. Elisabeth was eleven years old.
> **Here's something else from another time**, from when Elisabeth was thirteen
> **A minute ago it was June**. Now the weather is September.
> **It is still July**. Elisabeth goes to her mother's medical practice in the middle of town
> **It was one of the days of a week in one of the seasons in one of the years,** maybe 1949, maybe 1950, 1951, in any case, sometime around then.[36]

These temporal signifiers position each episode of the narrative to contextualise it within

the overarching present of post referendum Britain, yet their framing as a multitude of

present moments within the lives of the characters and real people in the novel questions

the need for a chronological consciousness of time. These markers of day, date and year

orient the reader to each section's time period, but Smith is ultimately playing with the

reader's need to have this orientation at all. As the quotation above shows these markers

become irrelevant to highlight that each narrated fragment is a piece of living present

constantly passing into the past and reaching out to its future repercussions.

Interspersed within the fictional narrative are excerpts of fact including passing

references to current events surrounding the publication of each book. In a dream

sequence in *Autumn*, Elisabeth tells Daniel that the murder of MP Jo Cox is old news, 'Once

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[36] Ali Smith, *Autumn*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), pp. 15, 67, 77, 85, 103, 163.

it would have been a year's worth of news. But news right now is like a flock of speeded-up sheep running off the side of a cliff.'[37] This simultaneously comedic and tragic analogy of contemporary life experienced as a series of interconnected and divergent fast-paced events, allows Smith to echo this rhizomatic pattern within her own narrative. The labour party MP was killed in June 2016, targeted by a far-right terrorist angered by her empathy and support for Syrian refugees - their dead bodies washed up on beaches forms one of the most startling opening images of the novel as Daniel's dream sequence evokes the photographs splashed across global news chains of drowned three-year-old Alan Kurdi and the three thousand others who perished in the Mediterranean in 2015. In repeating these images and events in a literary context, Smith solidifies their permanence in the canon of literature, where readers bear witness to the pain and tragedy in the ultimate form of remembrance, thus overcoming their loss from the ever-replaced newsreel. Direct quotes from the then UK Prime Minister Theresa May, and Donald Trump's speech to the Boy Scouts of America bookend *Winter.*[38] The words and images of artists Pauline Boty and Barbara Hepworth, sit alongside excerpts from writers and environmental campaigners. Rachel Carson's ground-breaking work *Silent Spring* (1962)[39] is directly quoted as an influential awareness raising text for Iris and her friends as they campaign against pesticides and the destruction of the natural world. Smith contrasts this activism with Art's apathetic and apolitical attitude to the environmental crisis. These interjections of specific historical cultural events are contrasted with her fictional characters as counter points, serving to demonstrate the repetition of historical atrocities within the span of a single lifetime. While characters such as Art, Sophia and Brit are representative of stultified subjects embodying neoliberal individualism seeing value only in their own personal gain, the active characters like Iris, Lux, Florence and Daniel are the epitome of becoming. Their

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[37] Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016) p. 38.
[38] Theresa May is quoted in the epigraph page of *Winter*, Donald Trump's speech is on p. 321.
[39] Rachel Carson, Silent Spring (London: Penguin, 1962)

openness to change, willingness to challenge injustice, taking new experiences,

information, and interactions into themselves, constantly deterritorialise and

reterritorialise their own subject selves to perpetuate a rhythmic pulse of singularities

outwards affecting change through these interactions. Smith repeats the refrain of this

cyclical rhythm of the seasons in natural world imagery likening the decaying leaves of

autumn with the waning and rebirth of stories. In Daniel's dream sequence he sees falling

leaves and equates them with stories:

> There's always, there'll always be, more story. That's what story is.
> (Silence)
> It's the never-ending leaf-fall.
> (Silence) Aren't you?
> (Silence)
> Isn't it?[40]

The text in this quotation is staggered with white space and decreases as the reader moves

down the page, the form mirroring the journey of the leaves as they fall from a branch.

Through this multimodality the reader is brought into the physicality of this movement and

the gradual fall and layering of the leaves can be likened to the layering of affective reader

responses as each reader encounters Smith's stories and the multiple intertextual

references weaved within them. The questions in this quote are in Daniel's mind but also

addressed to the reader, asking them to reflect on their involvement with this story.

Stories, Smith suggests to her readers, are like leaves constantly perpetuating, with rebirth

and decay incorporating the previous version but with something new. The white space

and visible silence is left open for the reader, giving them space to reflect and think about

the implications at work in Smith's narration. Difference and repetition, within stories as in

nature, is made manifest. Daniel is in the autumn of his life, the reader knows he is dying

like the rich leaf imagery that is incorporated into all his sections of the narrative

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[40] Smith, Autumn, p. 193.

throughout the quartet, but the influence and impact he has had on Elisabeth, the

embodiment of spring, ensures his continuation. His openness, generosity, and curiosity

will go on through her.

Smith's interest in the multiple possibilities held within a moment are expressed

through the diversions and digressions of her text. Although her novels are set in

recognisable situations and make use of mimetic realism, made even more real by the

inclusion of the contemporary political, social and cultural references, her playful

experimentation with the temporal unfolding of her narrative highlights the precarity of

each moment. She explores how each individual decision or action holds within it a

multiplicity of possible domino effects and potential for divergence within these

differences. In *Summer,* the antagonistic character of Robert, plays a prank on his sister by

supergluing an egg timer to her hand, an interaction between brother and sister that is

littered with time related puns. Smith writes with humour and wit. Her fascination with

etymology and multiple meanings of words are combined playfully to expose the richness

and depth of the evolution of language over time.  Robert tricks his sister into giving him

her hand with a false declaration of feeling, 'Can you give me your hand, Sach, just for a

minute?'[41] A minute of time being contained within the timer, a minute is all the time it

takes for the superglue to set her skin to the glass. When Sacha asks her brother what it is,

he responds, 'Present, he says. For the future.'[42] Rather glibly, Robert's explanation in

those few words offers up a plethora of meaning. He has presented (an offering) his sister

with a present (gift) of the present (the now). His present is the gift of time and the

anticipation of a future point to discount Sacha's concern over the effects of climate

change. After he runs away Robert texts her, 'know how worried ur about how theres no

time left so this woz best present I cud imagine from now on u always have time on ur

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[41] Smith, *Summer*, p. 43.
[42] Ibid., p. 44.

hands.'[43] The action of forcibly attaching the timer to her physical body to prove the

human attachment to time and the dimensionality of time, causes a divergence in their

own timeline affecting both of their futures. Sacha's need for help in this moment leads

onto a chance encounter with Art and Charlotte (characters from *Winter*) on the beach as

they intervene in her predicament, leading them to join up and take an unexpected

journey to visit Daniel and Elisabeth (characters from *Autumn*).[44] This journey affects

Robert's own dimensionality and exposes the multiplicity of his character through his

interactions with Charlotte and his sister Sacha and the connections they forge during this

trip. Charlotte's willingness to learn about his thoughts and feelings and Sacha's pride and

adoration in her brother, despite his overtly cruel and rude behaviour provides insight into

the nuanced multiplicities of Robert's character that were not immediately evident from

the representation of his actions and thoughts alone. It is only through these unexpected

interactions and connections that he makes with others that we as readers glimpse his

better qualities. Reading Deleuze's philosophy of time through Smith's narrative

temporality diverts attention from the sequence of events forming the plot to an

appreciation of process or the fallibility of the living present. Sacha's measured school day

is broken by her brother's actions and a new process is set in motion affecting not just

Robert, Sacha and their mother, but Art and Charlotte and then Daniel and Elisabeth,

exposing the connections between them all, and the singular moments of action that bring

about those instances of change. Robert's cruel prank turns into a rhizomatic diversion

where the prescribed tracts of the Greenlaw family's everyday lives veer off into chance

connections. These connections provide value and richness, effecting change in each of the

characters by prompting them to think differently based on these new interactions. At the

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[43] Ibid., p. 45.
[44] In narratological terms then Robert supergluing the egg timer to his sister's hand is the kernel or narrative moment that triggers the direction of the following events. See Seymour Chatman's analysis of kernels as structural narrative points in Chapman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 53.

end of the novel, we see a change in Robert as he asks questions and is open to the views

of others, rather than asserting his views as an ultimate truth:

> But what if you're a mix of *all* of the things. And it's not possible to be just *one* of
> them? Robert said. What does that make you? Human? Charlotte said. Like, you
> know. Someone who'd stick a glass thing to his sister's hand. With superglue? It
> wasn't just glass, Robert said. It was so much more than a glass thing. What was it,
> then? Charlotte said. It was time, Robert said. Time, Charlotte said. Is that the gift
> we get to give to others, then?[45]

The temporal diversion that allows the Greenlaws to embark upon an unexpected journey

and encounter unexpected people is one disruptive force among many that Smith deploys

within her fiction to highlight how structural disruption can lead to new modes of human

connectedness.

## Disruptive forces

Throughout the quartet, as with much of previous Smith's work, she shows us what can

happen if we let go of our reliance on measured time and relinquish adherence to

chronometric markers that dictate the sequence of our quotidian actions. Often using

characters as disruptive forces that cause a rupture in the linear trajectory of others to

shake them out of their everyday routines. These characters are often children, teenagers

and/or semi-mystical and represent the productive potentiality of occupying spatio-

temporal margins – the in-between-ness that Deleuze advocates as the point of becoming.

As Mark Currie explains using the example of Amber, the interloper on a family holiday in

*The Accidental* (2005):

> Amber's superheroic power and her other-worldiness are entwined with her
> metaleptic crossings between the middle as a structural principle for the novel,
> and the middle as a literal position within the frame of the fiction.[46]

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[45] Smith, *Summer*, pp. 373-374.
[46] Currie, *About Time,* p. 121.

Similarly to Amber, the little girl Florence (Flo/Flow) is the character in *Spring* who defies

conventional structures of spatio-temporality to challenge Brit (a personification of Brexit

Britain working as a custodial officer in an immigration detention centre) by way of

questioning her polarised way of thinking, but also creating an event of spatio-temporal

change. Florence poses an impromptu question to Brit as she passes by on her way to

work. A question that sparks a conversation, that leads to a connection. Brit feels a

protective drive to look after Florence because of her young age and the fact that she is

wandering around alone. So instead of going to work as planned, Brit follows her onto a

train to Scotland:

> Long long ago in the morning of what was actually still today, Brit had been on her
> way to work. But now, opposite her on a train speeding its way up the map of
> England, the girl, Florence, is talking about the invisible she says there is in *this* –
> she is pointing at a spill of water out of one of the water bottles on the table
> between them. [47]

Smith's use of these characters to instigate unexpected journeys, crossing boundaries of

workplace, county and country, symbolise the importance of transition and a state of in-

betweenness. They are demonstrating a becoming in which the transitory process of the

journey for the characters, is overlayed by examples of evolution, change and flow from

the natural world, science, art and literature. My reading here is that these disruptive

characters represent the position of becoming-woman as the starting point for change to

occur by providing a gateway to other more static characters, enabling them to pass

through into a new trajectory of altered character development. In becoming the gateway

these disruptive characters produce an interaction that triggers new insight of self-

knowledge, or a different perspective or awareness of the world around them than the

one originally presented. On the journey to Scotland, Brit listens to Florence explaining

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[47] Smith, *Spring*, p. 179.

random scientific discoveries and natural phenomena that she wouldn't have sought out under her own steam. In *Summer*, Robert's obsession with Einstein's theory of relativity permeates all his discussions with his family and triggers the road trip Charlotte takes him on to revisit the places where Einstein lived. Charlotte's kindness towards Robert is prompted by her own experience of having kindness bestowed upon her many years before from a cousin who came to stay. This experience of being touched by kindness is at the centre of all of Smith's character interactions. It resonates out from Charlotte to Robert and Sacha like an echo or rhythm that enables their own individual yet connected becomings. In all these seemingly chance encounters and interactions the singularities of connection that foster kindness are those which create impact and resonance as becoming:

> If people think you like them, Charlotte said, well, it can go either way. There's a lot of powerplay in liking and being liked. Such a powerful connection, it's a chance to make the world bigger for someone else. Or smaller. That's always the choice we've got. Uh huh, Sacha said. That's why we're on the Einstein trail at eleven o clock on a Friday night, Charlotte said.[48]

Charlotte's memory of her cousin showing her kindness as a child is an experience that has been embedded into her own psyche, informing who she is and how she deals with others. From this experience she knows that showing kindness towards another person, especially in the case of Robert whose character has been shaped by the unkindness of bullies, means that it is perpetuated and moves on and through him as its own disruptive force.

As well as disruptive characters, Smith uses memory as a disruptive force to push the more static characters out of their comfort zones and into a middle space or in-between zone. Daniel's memories returning as dreams during his long periods of sleep are interspersed with his waking reality, blurring the edges of distinctive time periods and

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[48] Smith, *Summer*, p. 364.

calling into question the nature of linear development of the self through time. Daniel's

memories returning to him so sharply in his dreams leave such a tangible effect upon his

mind as he wakes, he continues to act and speak as he was in his dreaming memories from

decades earlier. These memories of his younger self become a clearer lived reality for him

than his present condition as his aging body is preparing to shut down. His experiences and

interactions as a younger man hold more significance and affective influence in shaping his

selfhood than the now present time of his long periods of sleep, so these are critical points

within which he dwells. The rhythms of his life that hold significance reverberate through

to his sleeping self so that in a waking moment from his dreams and memories of his lost

sister Hannah, he sees her image in the figure of Robert before him. Smith's deployment of

non-linear events to develop a picture of Daniel's character and his life are more than

simply disjointed flashbacks interspersed with a present in which he is an old man. Rather,

these insights into Daniel's past use shifting narrative temporalities to paint a picture of a

person in a constant state of flux. As the narrative shifts from present to past at various

different points in his life, the reader is encouraged to consider how these temporal shifts

within the narrative challenge the notion of order, stability and progress implied in

ideologies associated with linear temporalities. Although the present of the quartet

narrates the gradual decline of Daniel's physical body as he ages, the temporal deviations

take the reader back and forward in time to gain an understanding of how he has

developed and changed throughout his life. The reader encounters the events of Daniel's

life and his memories of them as a layering of his life experiences and interactions with

others that bisect in non-linear ways. Smith therefore offers an alternative conception of

individual subjectivity as constantly undergoing change not just through their present

interactions, but through the reverberations of those events and people that have affected

them in the past. Daniel Lea's commentary on Smith's experimentation with temporal

modes in *How To Be Both* (2014), is pertinent here to show how she diverges the narrative

throughout the seasonal quartet:

> There is a concerted effort to problematise linear diegesis, especially in the use of
> time. Smith blends temporal positions, slipping between each frame within the
> space of several lines and creating, if not simultaneity, then at least a blurring of
> temporalities. The effect is to generate a sense of disorderliness, but one that is
> open to limitless reshaping and reinterpretation.[49]

A reader of the quartet will be able to infer that Robert is Hannah's great grandson and the

resemblance between them so acute that Daniel's mistake is understandable. However,

this is not made obvious in the text and is not overtly significant to the plot as Smith is

keen to promote the significance of human connection as a result of chance spatio-

temporal divergences wherever and however it may happen. By connecting Daniel and

Robert in a familial line is yet another discrete nod to the multitude of human connections

that go unnoticed and undiscovered.

Smith's use of the egg timer as a symbol highlights a device that measures time

both in and of itself. Although the sand within the egg timer counts a specific span of time

for a practical purpose, the timer is constructed from the product of years of natural

change, yet represents the inability to measure time in a philosophical sense. Smith often

uses sand as a motif in her work[50] and its presence throughout the seasonal quartet is a

subtle contradiction to the human obsession with measuring time as a linear progression.

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[49] Daniel Lea, 'Ali Smith', in *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction*, ed. by Daniel O'Gorman and Robert Eaglestone, (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 396-404 (p. 403).
[50] In the section on form in her part fiction, part essay *Artful*, the protagonist sifting through her dead lover's notes finds a reference to sand, 'representing the many colored spectacle of the world on a surface that is always the same and always different, like dunes [slitted?] by the desert wind' See Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012) pp. 85-86. In her follow up novel to the seasonal quartet *Companion Piece*, Smith names her central protagonist Sandy and incorporates many references to the link between time and sand throughout the novel. The term shifting sands is used as a slur used against her in reference to her bisexuality. See Ali Smith, *Companion Piece* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2022), p. 23.

Sand, a material created over thousands, possibly millions of years, from the fragmentation and weathering of larger pieces of rock and stone, represents the effect of time upon the malleable and changeable natural world as a form of continuation. Sand represents the continuation and adaptability of the earth's natural material. In the symbol of the egg timer, the glass encasing the sand is also created from it – the physical form of the object as a tool for measuring time holds within itself connotations of clock time running out as the sand runs through the hourglass, yet the object also acts as a symbol that disproves its own purpose. While clock time as a measurable human construct is contained within the boundary of the glass, other temporal modes and scales such as geological, evolutionary and infinite cosmological time are boundless and impossible to contain. The sand in the timer is destined to run backwards and forwards, its measure can be repeated ad infinitum, indicative of its physical existence shaped through all its previous forms (rock, stone, pebble, etc) and speaks of that continuation in defiance of its own end.

In *Spring,* Smith uses the character of Florence to talk about sand as a component part of the microscope in a conversation with Brit. The microscope as a device used to interrogate the infinitesimal components of an object or substance, symbolic of Enlightenment scientific investigation and rationalism, also symbolises the importance of multiple singularities that compromise a whole, as well as of the unknown depth and nuance teeming below the surface of a seemingly knowable entity:

> Now we know what microbes are and what cells are and that the naked human eye can only see a fraction of what is actually there. And that this (the spill of water on the table) – is full of life we can't see, and just because we can't see it doesn't mean it isn't. It really really is.[51]

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[51] Smith, *Spring*, p. 181

Florence is representative of the power of enquiry, exploration, empathy and change, whereas Brit as a personification of the Brexit Britain population, embodies statis and limitation. She accepts the world, its constructs and her place within it as an immovable given. Their meeting at a train station is symbolic of the intersection of socially constructed space and time parameters. Trains and train stations like sand, re-occur throughout the quartet as sites where characters come together and split apart, and symbolise the traversal of spatial boundaries intrinsically linked to the strict regulation of behaviour according to temporal expectations. People become passengers as they enter the trains – they are expected to stay in the designated areas and leave at the appointed times. In a troubling of these spatio-temporal borders Richard, the other main character of *Spring*, climbs down onto the track and underneath the train in a suicide attempt. As he waits for the train to move off and end his life, Florence appears and asks him not to go through with it:

> Any second now he will stop time in its tracks.
> Any second now time'll be over.
> Any second now.
> -
> Hey.
> Hey Sir. […]
> A girl, a real one, the one who'd just got off this train, is crouched on the edge of the platform along from the back of the train. She is looking straight at him.
> I really need you not to do that, she says.[52]

As a disruptive force, Florence not only intervenes in saving Richard, but also engages Brit in a conversation that diverts her intended trajectory from home to work. Motivating her in an uncharacteristic turn to accompany Florence in a journey across the country and across borders. As the train moves through England into Scotland Florence, always

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[52] Smith, *Spring*, p. 112.

questioning Brit's blind adherence to a constructed reality, questions the idea of borders

as a universally accepted truth:

> Will I be able to see it? The girl says. Scotland? Brit says. The difference, the girl says. She jams herself against the window. Actually, I think we may already be in Scotland, Brit says. I didn't see any border, the girl says. Did you see it? I don't see anything different. There was a time a time in history, Brit says, when passports didn't exist at all, for anywhere. People could go anywhere. It's not actually that long ago.[53]

Brit's reflection on borders and their control as a relatively new construct in the timeline of

human development is indicative of how deeply entrenched beliefs can be questioned to

deconstruct universal assumptions perpetuated as truths. Florence acts as a disruptive

flow to engage Brit's critical reflection on the cultural construction of these temporal and

spatial boundaries, thereby setting in motion a sequence of events that affects both Brit

and Richard in a process of becoming. Their becomings are manifested through a physical

and embodied disruption - as Florence instigates spatio-temporal divergences that change

their regular routines and modes of operating, but also through the act of questioning as

praxis of self-reflection and individual flux. Smith's character interactions are full of

questioning dialogue. A technique she uses not simply for the characters (and reader) to

learn about each other and understand more, but questions which also involve the reader

in this process of self-reflective practice of thinking through questioning. Often leaving

white space after the questions that indicates space within the text for the reader to pause

and consider their own responses, and by extension, their own self in flux as their

individual singularities of thought are affected by the encounter with the ideas in the text.

The figure of a child as a disruptive force is also used by Nicola Barker in *H(A)PPY,*[54]

a novel that centres on the struggles of protagonist Mira A as she tries, but ultimately fails

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[53] Ibid., p. 195
[54] Nicola Barker, *H(A)PPY* (London: William Heinemann, 2017)*.*

to be happy in a seemingly utopian society. Utopia, which derives from Thomas More's

sixteenth-century book of the same name, suggests both an idealised or perfect society

but also an impossible or unachievable one.[55] The figure of the girl acts as a trigger to

disrupt the cognitive processes of Mira A, pulling her away from complete conformity of

the social codes she lives by:

> This slight discombobulation, this blip – then it started with the child – a little girl –
> there was, yes – when I think back – if I recall correctly – and I can't seem to get
> her…she keeps stealing into my mind. And she is accompanied by a strange
> melody.[56]

Mira A's disrupted reality is specifically linked to the emotive affect of music and rhythm

on her embodied lived experience that is set at odds with the controlling technology that

regulates her physical being through chemical intervention. At the beginning of the novel

Mira A is reaffirming the utopian ideals of presence in the present moment that reinforce

the strictly controlled way of life. In this utopian setting, notions of the measurement of

time, including memory or knowledge of the past and anticipation of the future are

prohibited and enforced by technology embedded into the body and mandatory chemical

adjustments. Mira A's first divergence away from her prescribed mode of living in the

moment is through this image of the little girl, who appears in the margins of an article she

looks up on her Information Stream, and a melody that 'reverberates most curiously'[57]

played on a guitar. This figure of the girl from the margins is another example of a

disruptive force that causes a divergence in the trajectory of the character and the story.

Her appearance contradicts the sanitised presentation of history that Mira A is allowed to

access through her inbuilt technology, 'Kite was nevertheless, quite surprised that

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[55] See Ruth Levinas, *The Concept of Utopia*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 2.
[56] Barker, *H(A)PPY,* p. 5
[57] Barker, *H(A)PPY,* p. 5

anything marginal should be in focus'[58] The action of questioning this guitar, the girl and

their situation in time form the beginning of a rhythm that is the start of Mira A's journey

into disobedience and revolution against this construction of the perpetual moment:

> The precious guitar was a curious anomaly. A puzzle. It sat unsteadily (1920?
> 1925?) – it teetered – at the end of the Past and the start of the Future (which was
> also a kind of past). It existed at a tipping point. At the birth of Dissonance. At the
> death of Harmony. It was an imperfect instrument. An anachronism. A curiosity. A
> puzzle.[59]

It is the figure of the mythical girl appearing to Mira A and linked with musicality which

evokes these revolutionary rhythms that ripple forward into her journey of rebellion

against the New Path. The prohibited past is continually brought into the present moment

as a confrontation to Mira A – she knows she is supposed to avoid accessing information

about the previous time before The New Path, but the reappearance of the girl is a

repetitive reminder that she and her fellow citizens are never not connected to their

collective past.

A mythical or ideological girl, glimpsed at the margins of the narrative, links in with

the Deleuzo-Guattarian conceptual framing of the girl as the essence of becoming-woman

that has the power to disable frameworks of social and ideological codes. Their philosophy

positions the figure of the girl as a privileged or exemplary site of becoming-woman. Not in

the sense of actual or embodied girls in the molar sense but in a theoretical or molecular

sense where the girl, in-between the more solidified stages of childhood and adulthood,

holds disruptive capacities as Hannah Stark explains, 'Becoming-woman or the girl is about

undoing this coding of the body so that the girl particles can be released and flow

throughout the social field.'[60] Mira A's mythical girl, like Lewis Carroll's Alice and, as I

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[58] Ibid., p. 12
[59] Ibid., p. 7
[60] Stark, *Feminist Theory After Deleuze*, p. 36.

explore later, Eimear McBride's central girl progatonist all harness the potential of the molecular girl as a disruptive force of becoming-woman.

## Ending Death's finality

Ali Smith eschews the notion of endings in her writing and often uses death as a device to show life and subjectivity in a new way. Much of her work contains ghosts or characters returning from death to show the living an alternative perspective in which the end of the living person does not mean the end of the subject or indeed the end of a narrative. Her novel *Hotel World* (2001) and her essay 'On time' in *Artful* (2012) both begin with the arrival of dead characters who move the narrative on defying the idea of death as an ending. The memory of these deceased characters continues to affect the living characters whose lives they were a part of. Their experiences and interactions still reverberate through others and perpetuate their being outside of their own lived time. In his reading of *The Accidental* Stephen M. Levin argues that it is the characters of children who are more open to deviation from standardised synchronic temporal modes. While the disruptive force of Amber acts as the gateway for the whole family, 'the children more readily embrace the spectral character of time – the sense that temporality is structured not by regularly ticking seconds but by memory and fantasy.'[61] In Smith's work the human experience of time is bound up with a more interior and subjective experience that does not move in a linear progression. This is reflected in the temporal disjuncts in her writing as the experiences of the characters are presented to the reader seemingly out of linear sequence, but more closely following a stream of consciousness style temporality.

*Winter* (2017) opens as a parody of the ultimate seasonal novel, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, with a list of objects, social and cultural constructs and abstract nouns all

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[61] Stephen M. Levin, 'Narrating Remainders: Spectral Presences in Ali Smith's Fictions' in *Ali Smith Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton. (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 35-47 (p. 38).

declared to be dead in place of Dickens' Marley. '**God was dead**: to begin with.'[62] Not only

is this a playful rewrite of Dickens' opening line, but the sentence works multimodally in its

visual and grammatical impact, to make a strong opening statement asserting that death

can be a point of beginning rather than an ending. The bold type asserting the strength of

the statement is then undermined by the use of the colon and the qualifier 'to begin with'

suggesting death as an impermanent state. Then comes the seemingly unending list of

time in its periodised forms declared to be dead:

> Modernism, postmodernism, realism and surrealism were all dead […] The past
> was dead. History was dead. The welfare state was dead. Politics was dead.
> Democracy was dead. Communism, fascism, neoliberalism, capitalism, all dead,
> and Marxism, dead, feminism, also dead.[63]

We later learn that all these dead things are Google searches and responses, but as is

common in Smith's work, despite the alarming exposure of the worst of human behaviour

and destruction, she will always juxtapose the most depressing of observations with a hint

of hope. The imagery of ghosts offered like a gift to the reader, poses the first question

about the remnants of an aftermath and possibility to change cause and effect, even after

events have taken place. 'Life wasn't dead yet. Revolution wasn't dead. Racial equality

wasn't dead. Hatred wasn't dead. […] it's about real things really happening in the real

world involving real people in real time and the real earth.'[64]

Smith's reimagining of Dickens' Scrooge is the cold-hearted character of wealthy

businesswomen Sophia Cleves, haunted by the silent, floating head of a child. Evocative of

the ghost of Christmas past, it is playful and inquisitive in its mannerisms, and quietly

observes Sophia as her memories resurface tracing the thread of her unravelled

relationship with her sister Iris, in an echo of Daniel's reminiscing mind. The silent ghost

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[62] Smith, *Winter*, p. 3.
[63] Ibid., p.3.
[64] Smith, *Winter*, pp. 4-5.

child head brings to mind figures of silenced refugee children that Smith highlights all throughout the quartet. The floating head gradually loses its facial qualities and solidifies into a lump of inanimate stone:

> She didn't really know what to call it now, head? stone? It was neither dead nor head. It was too heavy, too solid, to hover in the air any more or do those circus-trick spinning somersaults.[…] But she felt for it. She didn't want it to grow cold. She picked it up again, tucked it under her clothes on the skin or her abdomen and held it against her.[65]

Smith's word play linking head to stone, marks a sombre shift from the playful child to inanimate object that loops the reader back to Daniel's dream of dead refugee children strewn along the beach in the opening sequence of *Autumn*. The reader comes to discover in *Summer*, that this lump of stone is the missing 'child' of Daniel's Barbara Hepworth sculpture with a hole through its centre. Presenting the reader with multiple visual representations symbolising the larger themes of migration, division, borders and hospitality, with Hepworth's sculpture framing an alternative temporal view of how these themes are played out at the level of the individual.

The significance of the cyclical nature of the seasons unsurprisingly runs as a theme throughout these books. The quartet began with *Autumn* published in 2016 as Smith declared she wanted to 'write towards the light'[66] and so began with the waning light of the year, contrasting the decay of the old embodied in the character of centenarian Daniel, with the abundance of hope and promise, represented by Florence the magical child in *Spring*. The slow exploration of Elisabeth and Daniel's friendship, love and connection through years of conversations, storytelling and absence is returned to in

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[65] Ibid., p. 142.
[66] Jen Campbell, '*Summer by Ali Smith*', *Toast magazine* <https://www.toa.st/blogs/magazine/summer-by-ali-smith-book-club> [accessed 28 December 2023] (para. 5 of 6)

*Summer* bringing the quartet full circle. The reader catches a glimpse of the strengthening

of their bond as Elisabeth cares for Daniel, now living in her mother's home. The repeated

imagery of Daniel bed bound and Elisabeth watching over him nearby, reminds the reader

of this occurrence in *Autumn* when Daniel lay dreaming in a care home. Reading *Summer*

at the time of its release in August 2020, the reader will be cognisant of the impact of

Covid-19 upon the care home sector[67] and may reflect on Daniel's fate with a sense of

relief in the revelation that he is safe in Elisabeth's care, removed from the danger of high

exposure to the virus that being in a care home would involve. Smith could not have

known the turn of events that would take place in 2020, yet by moving one of her well-

loved characters from the public space of the threatened care home, readers familiar with

Daniel and his change of situation may be affected by this grounding of the narrative in the

contemporary moment of pandemic Britain. The reality of the Covid-19 crisis is laced

through the textual references in *Summer.* A text conversation between Sacha and her

school friend Mel indicates the anti-Asian racism that was perpetuated following the

outbreak of the virus, as Melanie's family experience this first hand:

> woman in Waitros told my mm 'not to breathe near her children' then a guy said
> she should be wearing a facemask my dad went apeshit punched him (frowny face
> frowny face) meltdown big time (frowny face emoji with x x eyes) curtains closed
> on our windows blinds down today don know what else to do.[68]

As well as these cultural inferences that a reader encountering the text at this time would

immediately understand, they may also reflect on what might have happened to Daniel if

he had remained in the care home. In this sense, Smith presents her readers with a

multitude of possible realities alongside the story she overtly narrates. Steven M. Levin

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[67] Peter Walker, Kate Proctor and Rajeev Syal, 'Fury as Boris Johnson accuses care homes over high Covid-19 death toll', *The Guardian*, 6 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jul/06/anger-after-johnson-appears-to-blame-care-homes-for-their-high-death-toll> [accessed 30 October 2020]
[68] Smith, *Summer*, p. 39-40.

argues that Smith's work is punctuated by the multiple possibilities of alternative presents, 'by opening the present to its many contingencies, a process that has the capacity both to liberate oneself from the deadness of the synchronic and to disclose the 'horror' of the real.'[69] Although the 'horror of the real' took on a more acute sense in 2020 as one crisis followed another, the contemporary events unfolding through and alongside Smith's semi-fictional commentary speak so presciently to past events resurfacing as present episodes of the now. Whereas the first three novels in the quartet are not linked as a sequence and can be read in any order, the return of familiar characters Daniel and Elisabeth from *Autumn* and Art and Charlotte from *Winter*, evoke the sense of return. In *Summer*, the reader is taken back to Daniel's reminiscence and the story of his incredible life unfolds as the reader learns he was detained in an alien' citizens internment camp in the lead up to the second world war. The theme of detainment with its connotations of national belonging and boundaries relevant to the characters and setting in *Spring*, is reflected back to the contemporary British reader as historical refrain repeated in a different form.

Despite the exposure of the socio-political turmoil in Britain and the USA in all four of these books, Smith is ultimately an optimist and always inserts fragments of hope and connection in amongst the disheartening detritus of fractured British society, whose divisions are only reinforced by political demagogues. Smith's planned trajectory of writing the series from the short dark days of Autumn, filled with the foreboding beginnings of a return to past atrocities, is measured against the hope and possibility of connections and reframing in the long days of summer.

Elisabeth's friendship with Daniel progresses as she gets older and their interactions allow them to develop a deep connection of mind, but the ebb and flow of life

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[69] Stephen M. Levin, 'Narrating Remainders: Spectral Presences in Ali Smith's Fictions' in *Ali Smith Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 35-47 (p. 38).

also erodes their relationship, and the years Elisabeth is away from him account for

nothing when they are reunited as he sleeps. Daniel's life experiences are recounted in the

narrative as part of his stream of consciousness, an uninterrupted flow of events that do

not have just one instance in a linear progression of his life, but which repeat as memories

and return to inform his thinking within his current living present. The narrative moves

between his memories and dreams to his waking present without pause or identification

of a different time frame so that the reader can move as fluidly as Daniel's mind does

between two instances of time. Akin to Woolf's stream of consciousness narrative, Smith's

narrative is a stream of time through consciousness, the only marker of the linear

chronology of time is the body:

> He puts his hand behind his ear to feel the place where the wart was, three years
> ago, no, eighty years ago. His ears have wakened. That wart's long gone. But he
> can still feel the place the doctor took it off and left a line of stitches. He can still
> feel the line where something was that's gone, where the gone thing healed. [70]

Daniel's return to his physically aged body each time he wakes is set against the non-linear

activity of his mind. An action he made eighty years before the current time is clearer and

more visceral to him in his dreaming state than the reality of his present waking moments.

> I thought time had quite undone us. On the contrary, time and space are what lace
> us all up together, Hannah says. What makes us part of the larger picture.
> Universally speaking. The problem is, we tend to think we're separate. But it's a
> delusion. [71]

In this passage, Daniel thinks he is seeing and speaking to his sister Hannah, but the reader

knows it is Robert quoting Einstein. Daniel's experience of remembering past events, and

confusing present happenings are part of his specific non-linear experience of time. In this

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[70] Smith, *Summer*, p. 194.
[71] Ibid., pp. 195-6.

moment it doesn't matter that he is not in fact speaking to his sister because his memories

of actual events and their impact upon his virtual reality[72] are so visceral and integral to his

subjectivity in process, that the conversation with Robert acts as an imprint of one he

*might* have had with Hannah in the past or in an alternative present where Hannah could

have been there instead of Robert. The interchangeability of Robert and Hannah as

Daniel's conversational companion in this moment affirms the words Robert speaks about

the connection of space and time and our place as individuals within it. Daniel's love and

regard for his sister, his knowledge of her intellect and ways of speaking are held within

him as experience that reverberates outward, finding its echo in Robert's intelligence and

turn of phrase. The individual subjects having the conversation may be interchangeable,

but the context of connection is the core becoming of this moment – the molecular

connections that are made between these two people act to deterritorialise the notion of

separate individual selves. Robert's words find their echo in Daniel's memories of his

sister, all three are connected as more that individuals[73] intersecting through spatio-

temporal diversions. A few pages on, the narrative moves back to a historical point in time

and a different mistaken identity, when Hannah in 1940 thinks she sees her brother:

> Of course it's not her brother. That's obvious almost immediately. But there's
> been a fragment of a second when her brother was there in front of her even
> though he wasn't, isn't, and the man has such a look of him that it makes her turn
> her head then turn right round on her heel on the street. It is so nice to see him!
> Even though it's not him.[74]

Knowing it is not in fact her brother, Hannah follows him onto a train regardless and her

course of action that day is sent into a different trajectory through geographical location

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[72] I use 'virtual reality' here to mean the virtual or molecular realm which he now inhabits and
crosses over in his waking moments.

[73] Not an individual as a person but in the Deleuzian sense of a series of processes connecting
thoughts, sensations and intensities.

[74] Smith, *Summer*, p. 203

and time. Her experience of the train journey, seeing the countryside flash by and the light

flashing through the windows triggers a memory from her childhood, akin to Proust's

madeleine,[75] in which she recalls the migraines she used to suffer and a time when Daniel

came into her room to check on her. Their conversation is a refrain of Daniel and Robert in

the present narrative, troubling the notion of a singular individual experience and

temporal linearity, instead suggesting the refrain of commonality or shared human

experience as a transcendence of individuality:

> How does it feel now, then? He said.
> Now then, she said. An interesting verbal construct.
> A what what? He said.
> The past and the present together, she said. Now. Then.[76]

Using this play on words, Smith uses Hannah, much like Robert, as the disruptive force

encouraging Daniel to think not only about the language he uses to describe their situation

in time and what this really means, but also to consider the micro and macro perspective

of their immersion in time. Hannah is trying to show Daniel that the staging of temporal

experience as separate entities of past, present and future is a false narrative because so

much of the past is bound up in the present, and at the same time creating new

dimensions of the future. The reader is given access to Hannah's internal thoughts as she

reflects on her brother's lack of foresight into the changing state of pre-war Germany

outside their window. Hannah being contained within the same space, has seen slow

creeping change from day to day, but for young Daniel who moves between England and

Germany, the change is much more jarring and distinct. The past viewed as safe, the

present now unsafe:

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[75] Proust's madeleine is a term that refers to memory triggered by a sensory experience like taste or smell. Originating from an early scene in his multi-volume novel *In Search of Lost Time*, in which the taste of a madeleine invokes forgotten memories of his childhood. See Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: The Way by Swann's*, trans. by Lydia Davis (London: Penguin, 2002)
[76] Smith, *Summer,* p. 207

He thinks I've shut myself in here because things are changing out there, she thought. He thinks I'm frightened. He didn't see it coming, hasn't seen it happen, not like we have. He doesn't know the everyday nature of it. *He* must be frightened.[77]

The reader observes the transition between Daniel's timelines within the narrative as it weaves backwards and forwards through alternating periods of his life. Smith positions each part of Daniel's story as the present and gives the reader a bird's eye view of his life not as one linear trajectory of distinct events from one leading onto another, but as repeating patterns that resurface to reinforce the intensities of his experience as he relives them through memories and dreams. These patterns are not singular but overlap the personal and private experiences of the characters' lives into the wider sphere of public life that is also mapped against the global and political. These patterns, like the seasons, are cyclical and echo through each other; Elisabeth's difficulty getting a passport in *Autumn*, Sophia's struggle to withdraw money from her bank account in *Winter* give us farcical examples of a systematic bureaucracy designed to keep a population confined within rigid categories of identity and authenticity. These categories are repeated in a more extreme context in *Spring* with the SA4A detainment centre holding refugees and asylum seekers, and again in *Summer* when a young Daniel is categorised as an enemy alien due to his German heritage and held in an internment camp. Notions of categorising individuals loop back to the atrocities borne from racism, xenophobia and the rise of fascism that contemporary readers in 2020 know did not end with the War in 1945, but are repeated in the actual present of our contemporary lives. Smith traces these repeating rhythms throughout the quartet and poses questions to provoke reader response, 'What will you make of it all?' asks Hannah to Daniel, or asks Smith to her readers.

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[77] Smith, *Summer*, p. 208

As this chapter has demonstrated, Smith and Barker's experimentation with spatial boundaries, temporal modes and positionalities challenge notions of narrative linearity, progression and containment in ways that also trouble ideological structures of order and fixity. In showing their readers how seemingly small and insignificant interactions, affects or singular instances of connection disrupt our linear ideologies of temporal experience, they offers the opportunity to consider how individual subjectivity can be rethought as a fragmentary process of shifting selfhood. With this reconfiguration of individuality comes the potential for the reader to also expand this critique outward to the seemingly rigid paradigms of social order and control and consider how they also might be reconfigured through more fluid approaches to thinking about temporal experience.

## Chapter 4. The fragmented self as schizo-narrative

In this chapter I will investigate the use of narrative voice to convey the fragmented self or schizo-subject as a multi-faceted entity undergoing constant change. By interrogating the philosophical, cultural and literary construction of subjectivity, I discuss how Nicola Barker and Eimear McBride offer a feminist critique of the unified human subject that may be represented on the page as an identifiable person or character, in favour of an entangled corporeal, disruptive subject-in-process. The concept of a knowable, unified, universal subject is premised on the legacy of Enlightenment philosophy where the Cartesian tradition of a mind/body dualism and its associated binary constructs have informed Liberal Humanist thinking and still holds significant sway over our social, cultural and political structures. As Hannah Stark observes:

> The figure of the human assumed by this system has an essential and unchanging nature; it is autonomous and coherent. It is the model of the individual that our legal and political systems are based on to this day. For example, the subject who votes is presumed to be capable of making a rational and informed decision. The subject of legal discourse is presumed to be autonomous, has an entitlement to the integrity of their body and can understand the system of law.[1]

The figure of the liberal humanist subject, Stark argues, has been constructed as a universal standard of white, male, heterosexual, rational and able-bodied, and therefore not only excludes persons outside of those identifiers but also actively contributes to ideologies that discriminate against them. Like the Cartesian foundation of binary constructs that either ascribed value to a preferred position or quality, or denigrated their opposite, the premise of singular and whole personhood is inextricably bound up in these notions of value and identity. Within this context, the mind is valued whereas the body is not. As Stark points out, this is why a Deleuzian approach is helpful for feminists seeking to challenge this liberal human construction of the self:

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[1] Stark, *Feminist Theory After Deleuze,* pp. 10-11.

His work offers a radical alternative to Enlightenment models of thought: he liberates thought from the hierarchies inherent to reason; he critiques the Cartesian devaluing of the body as a passive container for an active mind, arguing instead for the imbrication of mind and body; and he releases thought from the interiority of the subject.[2]

This chapter is therefore positioned alongside Stark and argues that the entangled schizo-subject, as exemplified by the texts in this study, engages a form of a Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming conceptualising the body as a tool of political resistance and disruption, and offers an alternative mode of thinking about the self, outside of the standardised liberal humanist subject construct. The schizo-subject as presented in this research represents a disruptive force that challenges normative modes of being and subjectivity. It is the cognitive and embodied experience of the individual on a micro level of spatio-temporal interaction with their immediate physical and socio-political context. The power of the disruptive force then, comes from the potential for divergence or change at the microscopic level of that experience, and how that divergence engages becoming through the unfolding self. In real world terms this translates to an individual's capacity for a multitude of actions based on their conscious and subconscious thoughts, feelings, bodily processes, the external forces affecting them, and the myriad of choices open to them moment by moment. The capacity of an individual to think and act in one way or another based on affects at the micro level of experience is how the concept of becoming is made manifest through the schizo-subject.

My conception of the schizo-subject is theoretically aligned with Margaret Price's use of the term 'bodymind'[3] and crip theory as an ontology that 'privileges the dis-composed, the contingent, and the mobile'[4] and 'challenges normative spaces and interactions'.[5] The term bodymind refers to the inseparability of body and mind, and the

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[2] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
[3] In her application of crip politics as a materialist feminist Disabilities Studies approach. Margaret Price, 'The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain', *Hypatia,* 30: 1 (2015), 268-284, (p. 271).
[4] Ibid., p. 269.
[5] Ibid.

refutation of their categorical division. It is theoretically informed through trauma studies

that evidences the ways 'mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also

give rise to each other'[6] thus the bodymind is one entity rather than two, in which the

individual corporeal experience is implicitly bound up with the social and cultural

contextual experience. Margaret Price defines her use of the term bodymind as 'a

sociopolitically constituted and material entity that emerges through both structural

(power-and violence-laden) contexts and also individual (specific) experience.' This is a

particularly helpful angle through which to view the construct of the subject and aligns

with the conceptual framework of becoming as an approach that celebrates difference and

divergence from normative constructs of subjectivity. Becoming, and specifically

becoming-woman as a process of eliding the centred majoritarian, privileges navigating

space within the margins and exploring those identity markers categorised as abject.

Price's discussion of crip theory in relation to the bodymind subject praises the positivity of

moveable identity markers which consistently challenge the dominance of subjectivity as

wholeness:

> A crucial element of crip theory is its emphasis on - its desire for, we might say - de-composition rather than (fictitious) wholeness. McRuer emphasises that the value of crip theory lies in its ability to reject stable identities (queer, straight, disabled, nondisabled) and instead draw meaning from transient "moments" (McRuer 2006,157). [7]

This idea of transient moments of identity or personhood is how I consider the schizo-

subject manifests – as a challenge to conventional notions of selfhood and unlocking

alternative ways of thinking about individual agency, action and how this feeds into a

wider collective consciousness.

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., p. 274.

Focusing on the fracturing physical bodies of the two protagonists in *H(A)PPY* and

*A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing* as a process of becoming-woman, I suggest how this

embodied splintering of the physical subject is refracted through a philosophical lens that

disengages essentialist terms of female embodiment and desire to present an alternative

mode of becoming as complex multiplicity. In this way, the protagonists are drawn as a

multiplicity of shifting parts (identities, thoughts, bodies, actions) that make up their

subjective selves and encompass the tension and struggle between their identities as

established in the molar realm, and their inward subjective rebellion which constitutes

their molecular becoming. The fluid nature of these evolving selfhoods negates the need

to express a unified or whole character, as they are ontologically constructed as subjects in

process rather than beings in statis.[8] Drawing on feminist applications of becoming-woman

from Colebrook and Stark that uphold the positive value of becoming for future feminist

thinking,[9] this reading positions the fragmented subject as a site of divergent sexuality and

desire that actively challenges and undermines the molar realm it inhabits, to forge its own

molecular escape routes or lines of flight. Specifically, the characters I focus on in this

chapter break apart the normative patriarchal constructs of the desiring, gendered self and

enact a form of agency which demonstrates the constantly changing nature of their schizo-

selves. By reading these texts as instances of becoming-woman, I want to demonstrate

how the tightly bound restrictions of singularly defined selfhood can be released through

embracing the plurality of the subject-in-process. Here I am aligning this interpretation of

becoming-woman with the Deleuzo-Guattarian affirmation of 'a thousand tiny sexes'[10]

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[8] To illustrate the idea of the unfolding self in *Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing*, the protagonist cannot be singularly defined as a young girl damaged by sexual abuse and trauma. Her character development through the novel is crafted in a such a way that her subjectivity is built moment by moment at each interaction (verbal and physical) with her mother, brother, uncle, abusers. These interactions, at each point where she makes a decision, takes action or is submissive, mean that her responses shape her molecular identity and feed into the subjective revolution that forms her molecular becoming.

[9] Claire Colebrook, *Sex After Life*, 2014, p. 177, Stark, *Feminist Theory After Deleuze*, p. 40.

[10] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 235.

made possible at the level of the molecular or abstract sphere. While Deleuze and Guattari

refer only to a dichotomy of man and woman, which no longer represents the variety of

gender identities in contemporary culture, they do acknowledge a form of crossover or

interrelation of gendered aspects of the subject as they intersect with others:

> For the two sexes imply a multiplicity of molecular combinations bringing into play
> not only the man in the woman and the woman in the man, but the relation of
> each to the animal, the plant, etc.: a thousand tiny sexes.[11]

This theoretical framing of gender as infinitely fragmentary and moveable is productive for

reconfiguring traditional constructs of the self, grounded in categories of sexual difference

and sexual orientation. Deconstructing gendered identities from models of singular

definition provides us with a greater scope for rethinking subjectivity when it is not bound

to named 'types' of identity. Thus, not just enabling emerging identity categorisations as

they become understood and nameable in linguistic and cultural terms, but also offering a

critique of the human propensity to enforce such categorisations.[12] Building on a legacy of

feminist critiques of gender constructs, including Judith Butler's influential text *Gender

Trouble[13],* writers like Barker and McBride further a feminist discourse through the more

accessible medium of fiction.

I will appraise the different approaches taken by McBride and Barker of writing

thought, both authorial and character driven, including the techniques of stream of

consciousness, subconscious and pre-speech flow, under the breath talk, silence and

pauses as modes of writing which all engage diverse levels of self-reflexivity and evoke

multi-layered versions of self. The purpose of this chapter is to situate these narratorial

innovations as a textual practice that engages a mode of becoming-woman, which I argue,

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[11] Ibid.

[12] LGBTQIA+ as an increasingly expansive anacronym encompasses a growing spectrum of gender fluidity and sexual identities, whilst also acknowledging the mutability within those terms and the potential for them to expand and change.

[13] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

reconfigures subjectivity as an undefinable, shifting entity that is constantly in flux., This

reconfiguration is formulated through the coming together and splitting apart of many

different and changeable aspects of the self, based not just on intersectional identifiers[14]

such as gender, class, race, sexuality etc, but at a micro level of influences and events that

make up the subject in each moment of infinitesimal time. As discussed in Chapter One, I

argue that echoes of modernist and avant-garde techniques to closely represent the ever-

divergent thoughts of the thinking subject run through the contemporary experimental

authors in this study as they amplify the schizo-subject,[15] unmade and remade moment to

moment.

In the close reading that follows I will trace this experimental mode of writing a

fractured self through to the work of Eimear McBride and Nicola Barker to demonstrate

how their use of multimodal techniques inform their character configuration. The

characters in these novels are in turmoil, and while a formalist narratological approach

may argue these character arcs are purely in service to the plot,[16] both novels are less

ingrained with the function of plot, and more concerned with conveying their characters'

subjectivity and sense of self as a state of constant change. In this way, the authors

critically engage the reader in deconstructing the premise of a definable and stable

personhood and suggest instead a mode of subject-in-process. By examining this concept

of the subject-in-process, these works allow for an alternative positioning of the subject as

*schizo-self*. This schizo-self is a subjectivity of multiple, overlapping and contradictory

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[14] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color' *Stanford Law Review*, 43: 6 (1991): 1241–99.

[15] The use of schizo here refers to the Greek origins of the word denoting split. The terms schizo-subject and schizo-self are my own coinage to describe the multifaceted and moveable parts that comprise the self and are split apart in perpetuity.

[16] See Seymour Chatman's summary of characterisation in narrative theory which places characters as functional elements of plot in formalist and structuralist narrative theory. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 111.

elements, all functioning as an overt becoming opposed to a more traditional ontological

framework of being as a stable entity.

I will be looking specifically at the novels of McBride and Barker that deal with

characters redefining their selfhood through the disruptive force of their resistant bodies.

These texts present a mode of becoming-woman by way of bodies that disrupt and resist

the patriarchal socio-political structures of their respective environments, effectively

breaking the systematic constraints attempting to hold them accountable to patriarchal

expectations. Analysing the mapping of content to form, these texts also work as

disruptive bodies in themselves, resisting traditional literary conventions and pushing the

boundaries of what a body of text can do.

To begin this analysis, a definition of terms is first required to contrast the

narrative conventions this experimental writing subverts. Two aspects of narrative

transmission, point of view and narrative voice, are the medium through which the 'story'

of the text is conveyed to the reader.  Seymour Chatman makes the distinction between

point of view and narrative voice as:

> Point of view is the physical place or ideological situation or practical life-
> orientation to which narrative events stand in relation. Voice, on the contrary,
> refers to the speech or other overt means through which events and existents are
> communicated to the audience.[17]

The style of the narrative voice and the authorial choices regarding point of view therefore

influence how the reader receives and understands the characters in a novel and the text

itself.[18] Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth explains the conventional narrative representations of

realist literature as:

> The genial consensus of realistic narration implies a unity in human experience
> which assures us that we all inhabit the same world and that the same meanings
> are available to everyone. Disagreement is only an accident of position. However
> refracted it may be by point of view and by circumstance, the uniformity at the

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[17] Chatman, p. 153.
[18] See Chatman, p. 22.

base of human experience and the solidarity of human nature receive confirmation from realistic conventions.[19]

Ermarth's argument posits that narration in realist novels is configured as an objective dissemination of events from a position of consensus. Whereas the narrative perspective in experimental works seeks to deconstruct this notion of verisimilitude and collective reality to suggest there is no such thing.

While postmodern critiques from thinkers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Frederic Jameson during the 1980s[20] dispute the notion of Enlightenment Grand Narratives as providers of universal truth and the idea of a unified subjectivity, literary innovations within the novel form, from Laurence Sterne[21] to Ali Smith, have exposed the plurality of experience to challenge notions of singular truth, and offer a reconfiguration of reality as a lens through which we view the world. Each one representative of an individual's upbringing, identity, specific interactions and each one its own valid version of the truth:

> With so many 'new truths' at our disposal, it has left us to revise our concept of truth, so that truth is believed to be something that is considered to be constructed rather than discovered. In addition, as a result of the paradigm shift brought about by social, technological and cultural change, the once universal assumptions about what constitutes the real has also been revised. So, there now exists a much more fluid and multiple sense of reality.[22]

Julie Armstrong uses the example of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) as a postmodernist text that 'leads the reader into a state of uncertainty, one of unfamiliarity, so much so that they are unsure where the real experience ends and the imagination begins.'[23] This is very much the case with the narrative style in Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY*

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[19] Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space and Narrative*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 65.
[20] See Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) pp. 28-44.
[21] Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is considered to be the first experimental novel in English language that utilises form to showcase how a life is subject to digressions, tangents and fragmentation. It was published in nine volumes between 1759 and 1767 and so predates these postmodernist theories, yet functions in a similar way to challenge realist verisimilitude and the ideology of universal truth.
[22] Julie Armstrong, *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers* (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 98.
[23] Armstrong, p. 144.

which compels the reader to question the reality presented in the novel as it begins to break down, but also reflect on the concept of a representative single lived reality.

## Multimodal awakenings

In the next section I provide an analysis of how Nicola Barker utilises multimodal forms of textual experimentation to emphasise and enhance the impact of her protagonist's cognitive and physical awakening, from subservient automaton to resistant rebellion. Multimodal techniques, as mentioned in Chapter Two, invoke a mode of communication that function on multiple levels of cognition. Alison Gibbons defines multimodality as 'the coexistence of more than one semiotic mode within a given context.'[24] She explains that this is how we interact with the world in our everyday lives, encountering and responding to the world through multiple modes of communication and specifically through sensory detail such as sight, sound and movement. For example, in the way that understanding can be gleaned more by a gesture, body language or eye contact than in the exchange of language. In any given instant modes of communication are never purely linguistic but also involve a multitude of subtle and unregistered nuances. Multimodality then works at the level of embodied cognitive response, and in literary interpretation, engaging formal experimentation as a process of dynamic reading that triggers an affective response:

> Cognitive poetics is conceptualised not simply as an approach to literature, but as an approach concerned with our cognitive capacities to interpret and feel involved literary reading. Furthermore, it claims that these capacities and feelings are direct manifestations of the way in which the human mind comprehends, experiences, and represents the world; a world that is encountered not just linguistically, but visually, audibly, physiologically.[25]

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[24] Alison Gibbons, *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*. (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 8.
[25] Gibbons, *Multimodality*, p. 38

Relating this plurality of communication through textual multimodality is manifested in *H(A)PPY* through the use of colour, image, variable topography and auditory prompts. These multimodal forms will be analysed in the next section as affective properties of the novel that engage a mode of becoming.

## Shattered Windows – The distorted view of the fractured narrator

Barker's post-apocalyptic novel is structured through the first-person narration of protagonist Mira A, a citizen of a seemingly utopian society comprised of genetically enhanced humans whose bodies have been fused with assistive technology. While not explicitly explained in the narrative, the reader is able to discern through Mira A's narration the addition of intelligent technology built into the workings of the human body. Whether externally projected outside of their bodies or internally visible through technology attached to their eyes, each of these citizens is connected to a Sensor that monitors their physical, mental and emotional state of being and reports back to the System – an all-seeing, all-controlling mainframe. Their thoughts are visible to all through the Information Screen, and in this way the notion of an individual is inextricably linked to the collective community with all sense of internal privacy and self-directed motivation denied to them. Barker's novel is clearly indebted to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World (1932)*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949)* and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924) both in terms of narrative genre and themes, covering surveillance, state control and the suppression of individuality.

The reader is given no discernible time frame other than a reference to apocalyptic events and the reformulation of civilisation at the hands of an unknown body of power:

> After they banded together and saved us from the Floods and the Fires and the Plagues and the Death Cults, the Altruistic Powers actively discouraged The Young from thinking about God. We walked a new path.[26]

Mira A describes the foundations and ideological premise of this society, The New Path, that informs her way of life and how this newly constructed reality has fused intelligent technology with the human body and consciousness, as a mode of control over human autonomy whilst promoting the illusion of freedom:

> We were taught to celebrate This Moment. And our chemicals were balanced. We were perfected. We were given just enough choices to make us feel as though we were free, but not so many that our minds (our still-fragile intellects) became overloaded. [27]

As Mira A narrates more of her day-to-day life and the society she lives in, two elements of the narrative style become apparent –the first-person perspective is a device to amplify Mira's compulsion to narrate her own experience as a means to process her understanding of her sense of self, and her place within The New Path. Secondly, the gradual revelation of detail about the structural functions of this society brings the reader in as witness and participant, as both protagonist and reader come to learn more about the policing and control of this society and realise the utopian framework is disguising a dystopian reality.[28]

The crossover of utopia to dystopia as a literary technique is traditionally grounded in the genre and subgenres of science fiction and offers a critique of the socio-political world at the time the text was produced. While dystopian narratives provide an allegorical mode of critiquing the structures in operation at the time of writing, their utopian frameworks also have the capacity to highlight the limits and/or dangers of these imagined futures that are invariably influenced by the author's temporal and socio-political location. This is certainly the case in Barker's novel which can be categorised within the

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[26] Barker, *H(A)PPY*, p. 1.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, ed. by Raffaella Baccolini (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014)

speculative fiction genre and places its framing around the integration of human bodies

with artificial intelligence.[29] However, the use of utopian ideals or themes as Caroline

Edwards highlights, has considerable reach outside of genre fiction when read analytically

as literary utopianism within contemporary literary fiction.[30] Edwards points to the

productive value of utopian readings that indicate a drive towards imagining 'better

collective futures'.[31] My application of becoming-woman is one such utopian imaginary

praxis, within which, seemingly rigid structures of power and oppression can be undone

through a reconfiguration of the subject and its relational interaction with these systems.

In Barker's novel the opening description of a utopian future descends into

confusion as the reader and protagonist Mira A gradually come to understand the lack of

personal autonomy she really has, and that true freedom outside of The System can only

exist in The Unknown; an undefined space of chaos and degradation, located physically

outside of the novel's utopian setting. Physical and psychological spaces are mapped

against dichotomies of freedom and constraint. Where the perfect society requires its

inhabitants to conform to control over their physical bodies and cognitive processes,

freedom over the self can only be attained through relegation to the unknown - an

unchartered territory of physical space that allows freedom of thought and expression, but

offers no assurance of safety.

This realisation for the protagonist leads to the interrogation and deconstruction

of her own sense of self and individuality as she breaks away from the amorphous

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[29] Margaret Atwood discusses the differences between genre classifications of science fiction and speculative fiction suggesting the former involves currently unrealised human abilities or capacities like space travel, and the latter uses technologies or devices currently available. See Margaret Atwood, 'Scientific Romancing', in *Burning Questions: Essays and Occasional Pieces 2004-2021*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2022), pp. 3-12 (p. 8). I would argue that Barker explores the potential consequences of current artificial intelligence capacities albeit combined in currently unrealised forms of bodily incorporation.
[30] Caroline Edwards, *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 20-21.
31 Ibid., p. 20.

collective of 'The Young' to forge her own subjective identity as a complex multi-layered

configuration of divergent influences:

> But Mira A? Who is she? Mira A is just a small, individuated brush stroke. A tiny,
> insignificant splash within a giant, glowing canvas of Light.
> I am H(A)PPY with that.
> H(A)PPY.
> I am…
> Oscillating.
> Move on, Mira A. Just let it pass.[32]

This active questioning of her selfhood and her place within the social framework is the

beginning of Mira A's move to slip outside the confines of The New Path. In Deleuzo-

Guattarian terms she is participating in a form of becoming-woman as she attempts to

elide the positionality afforded to her and occupy a liminal space in the margins of the

prescribed cultural expectations. As explained in Chapter Two, Deleuze and Guattari

proclaim that becoming-woman is the first stage of engaging with the concept and action

of becoming in the molecular or abstract sphere of human experience; 'all becomings

begin with and pass through becoming-woman. It is the key to all the other becomings.'[33]

This is due to the molar positionality ascribed to women by a dominant patriarchal society

that has historically situated woman as 'other' to a construction of the universal subject as

male. In order to break free from this damaging social construct, the position of the other

must be invoked in order to navigate a way out of the dominant socio-political and

economic frameworks of molar experience. Applying this to Mira A's situation means that

her becoming-woman is manifest as she releases herself from adherence to the social

expectations defined by The New Path in her molar sphere, but also allows her known

subjectivity to fall away in an act of embracing the chaotic, fluid and unknown aspects of

her self in a molecular sense:

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[32] Barker, *H(A)PPY*, pp. 23-24.
[33] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 306.

> But still – still – I am a voice – a small voice – telling the story of my abrogation. This is nothing, I tell myself, nothing but my own narrative – my own words – and words, surely – I tell myself – are sustained by gaps – by brief interludes – by inhalations. *Do not panic. Do not panic.* Keep telling the story of yourself. As long as you tell it, Mira A, you cannot be obliterated. Words are souls, are they not?[34]

By rejecting the control of the artificial intelligence incorporated into her body, she opens up a space for her fragmented and uncensored thoughts to rise to her conscious awareness and question the construction of her own subjectivity.

Her new awareness of this liminal space is demonstrated through her subversive actions to immobilise her Sensor which, she learns, is possible by staring into a bright light. This action intentionally blocks her view of the Sensor (and by extension the Sensor's view of her) so that she may think freely without its interaction and input. Through this initial challenge to, and stimulation of, her own thought trajectory she is able to reflect on how her cognitive processes have so far been mapped by external forces, enabling her to access the gateway of further becoming that incorporates her embodied physicality as a form of resistance. This is demonstrated through the constant repetition within Mira A's self-narration of the culturally ingrained mantra that she must turn away from any thoughts that trigger an emotional response. The italicised verbs indicate that the truth of those verbs is in question, rather than to emphasise those words as true:

> the Path *is* perfect, the Path *is* Freedom, the path *is* Clarity). The Young study forms, they process archetypes (we *understand* the lie of Art - how it points to an escape. But we do not *want* to escape. Our reality is good enough. If This Moment is perfectly satisfactory, why might it require further augmentation?)[35]

Does Mira A really believe these statements? In the passage quoted above the word 'lie' appears on the page in red – a beacon that the eye returns to as it reads the passage. The reference to art as an escape is an interesting meta-fictional reference to the book in the

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[34] Barker, *(HA)PPY*, p. 278.
[35] Barker, p. 33.

reader's hand as a work of art that traces the escape of the protagonist (or in Deleuzian terms, a line of flight). Barker's use of italicised words and the red colour in the text is to mark out these particular words to the reader as language to be questioned, language that acts as a warning to Mira A and signifies their importance to the reader.[36] While she insists she does not want an escape, the unfolding narrative insists otherwise. Coloured words on the page echo the coloured words on Mira A's Graph which highlight an excess of emotion (EoE), something to be avoided and tempered by neutrality in the community of The Young. The use of colour as formal experimentation in literary texts is employed to catch a reader's attention and is theorised in the field of cognitive poetics by Peter Stockwell as *attractors* which draw the eye to the points of colour, affecting a reader's cognitive response the text.[37]

Although she tries hard to adhere to this philosophy of The New Path, it is only in her sleeping state that she is able to fight against this hard coded ideology to challenge her own compliance. Her inner conflict is demonstrated through the textual layout of the repeated phrase 'I must turn away from these thoughts' and use of colour on several instances of the word 'must' on page 134 (See Figure 1).

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[36] To compare this technique to an existing analysis, Alison Gibbons comments on Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* as an example of an experimental text that uses colour as a multimodal form to draw the reader's attention to the materiality of the text as a technique that also draws them into the imagined world of the narrative, seeing the colours that the protagonists see at the same time they are seeing them. See Gibbons, *Multimodality*, p. 146.
[37] See Gibbons, p. 28

must. I *must*. I must turn away from these thoughts. Just turn away from them. I
from them. I must. I *must*. I must turn away from these thoughts. Just turn away
turn away from them. I must. I *must*. I must turn away from these thoughts. Just
thoughts. Just turn away from them. I must. I *must*. I must turn away
from these thoughts. Just turn away from them. I must. I *must*. I must
turn away from these thoughts. Just turn away from them. I must.
I *must*. I must turn away from these thoughts. Just turn away from
them. I must. I *must*. I must turn away from these thoughts. Just turn
away from them. I must. I *must*. I must turn away from these thoughts.
Just turn away from them. I must. *must*. I must turn away from these
thoughts. Just turn away from em. I must. *must*. I must turn away
from these thoughts. Just away from them. I must. I *must*. I must
turn away from these thoughts. Just turn away them. I must.
I *must*. I must turn y from the thought ust turn away from
them. I must. I *must* must turn away from these thoughts. Just turn
away from them must. I must turn away from these thoughts.
Just turn away from them must. I *must*. I must turn away from these
thoughts. Just turn a from the must. I *must*. I must turn away
from these though ust turn y from them. I must. I *must*. I must
turn away from ese thoughts. Just turn away from them. I must.
I *must*. I must turn away from these thoughts. Just turn away from
them. I must. I *must*. I must turn away from these thoughts. Just turn
away from them. I must. I *must*. I must turn away from these thoughts.
Just turn away from them. I must. I *must*. I must turn away from these
thoughts. Just turn away from them. I must. I *must*. I must turn away
from these thoughts. Just turn away from them. I must. I *must*. I must
turn away from these thoughts. Just turn away from them. I must.
I *must*. I must turn away from these thoughts. Just turn away from
them. I must. I *must*. I must turn away from these thoughts. Just turn
away from them. I

Figure 1. A page of repeating text from *H(A)PPY* with the word must coloured in red.

This page comprises a small section of the book where the pages are not

numbered, an indication to the reader that a disruption to the narrative has occurred - a

sequence is broken.

These pages represent a view of Mira A's Information Stream rather than her own internal monologue and therefore indicate a mediated view of her cognitive processes which have been hard wired to repeat the formulaic 'truth' of The New Path. Her physical resistance to this set narrative comes when she is at rest, her body is the vessel through which her subconscious rebellion arises. This is represented by the page layout (Figure 1) as the repeated words of her waking mantra are slashed through with symbols made from white space, which the reader learns in the following pages, are the movements of her arms marking hieroglyphs in the air as she sleeps.  Each of these symbols carved in the air corresponds to words that are revealed when she looks at her Information Stream. The words themselves do not make sense to Mira A (or the reader) at the first encounter, but act like clues which later reappear towards the end of the book in experimental typography. This typography echoes the earlier repetition of words, but overlays them in elaborate green font creating concrete poetic patterns of a blurring visual effect (See Figure 2). The impact of these pages is visually disturbing to the reader, suggestive of an erroring computer screen running text into infinity or the unfocussed gaze of a magical eye puzzle that reveals a hidden image.
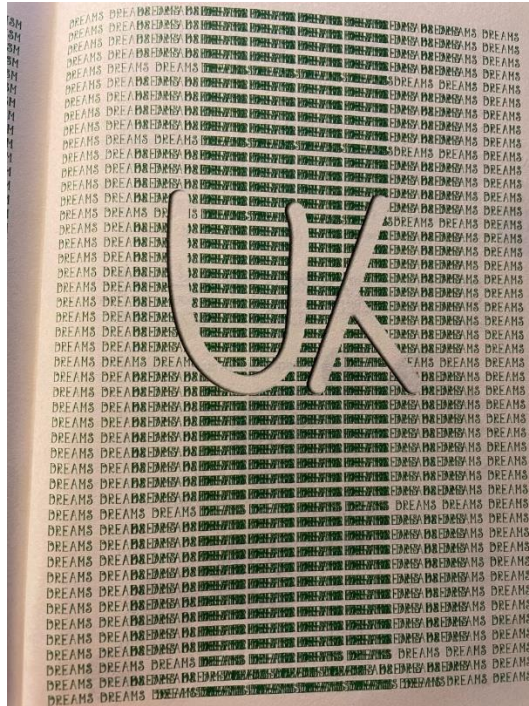
Figure 2. A page of green overlaid text from *H(A)PPY* with two characters carved from white space in the middle of the page.

A Deleuzo-Guattarian reading of this formal experimentation on the page brings the concept of the refrain to bear as a mode of engaging the schizo-narrative effecting a becoming. The repetition of the same words across the page, in some places singularly, in others overtyped to differing degrees works on multiple levels to insinuate how difference is produced from this repetition. Across pages 272-277 while the words around the outside of the pages are readable, the numerous overtyping causes the words to blur and become unrecognisable in the middle of the pages. Letters merge and invert into patterns, evoking a sense of rhythm. The words effectively lose their form and meaning. This is representative of a breakdown in the prescribed sequence of Mira A's life trajectory and displayed visually on her Information Stream effectively making it redundant as it displays a jarring loop of repeated words. This breakdown of language and meaning allows a rupture to develop in Mira A's conformity to the social expectations of The New Path and in the reader's ability to follow her through language alone. She is forming the break and taking the reader along with her in a mode of becoming-woman that allows her to slip

outside the subjective position afforded to her and occupy an alternative space in the margins of that reality. It is an act of displacement where she is able to manifest an escape route out of the restrictive utopia and into the Unknown by untethering herself from the values of The New Path that have been hard coded into her cognitive processes. Using her bodily gestures to inscribe the air with the forbidden words, Mira A's unconscious bodily resistance is a battle with her entrenched mind. Her struggle with the conflicting duality of self – can be read as analogous to the distinction between the Deleuzo-Guattarian molar and molecular spheres of experience. Mira A's conscious mind and her AI enhanced body are ingrained in the molar sphere of communal living subject to the rules of The New Path manifested in her everyday reality of waking consciousness. This is represented in the main body of text with sentences, paragraphs and typography in a standard format forming her self-narration. However, her embodied rebellion comes from a place of deep subconscious desire to push against those boundaries and forge a space for herself in a molecular sense (accessed through her dreams and her bodily autonomy in sleep). Her movements act to ground her into her bodily knowledge, fortifying her sense of self at the level of embodied intuition and action. Her becoming is enacted through the productive force of her subconscious desire to go beyond the physical and mental limitations she is expected to adhere to, carving out this embodied rebellion into the textual body as depicted in the slicing through of the repeated systemic language (see Figures 1 and 2).

It is at the point where Mira A is replaying the footage of herself asleep that Barker also switches the narrative point of view from third to first person as Mira A seems to struggle with situating herself as the object of her own gaze. This duality is further emphasised by the introduction of Mira B as a separate yet intertwined character:

> As Mira A sleeps, Mira B stares down quietly at Mira A's inert body, then glances over, faintly scowling, towards her Information Stream. Mira B sighs and gently lifts her hand from where it has been firmly placed over Mira A's mouth. The marks of her fingers are clearly visible – indented, in angry pink, deep into Mira A's pale skin. After she carefully rearranges the dank locks of hair obscuring Mira A's

> damp cheeks she is still for a moment, then smiles darkly and bends forward,
> placing her lips right up close against Mira A's ear: Hello. Hello. Hello. I am the
> sister star, she whispers.[38]

The reference to the physical appearance of Mira B – a sister or twinned half to Mira A

brings with it a very tangible corporeality. From the marks she leaves on Mira A's face

echoing the symbols she draws in the air, to her lead in the final escape for freedom, Mira

B is the personification of her inner rebellion and the fracturing of self. A line of flight

embodied. Her emergence into the narrative as a physical form marks the beginning of

Mira A's journey towards reclaiming her embodied self as a multiplicity that requires her

to relinquish the belief of wholeness and adherence to the utopian comfort of her clean

and controlled environment and fight her way into the dystopian Unknown. The fracturing

of her selfhood is further splintered during the last section of the novel as the Paraguayan

history replays over her Information Stream infecting her bodily perception with the figure

of the pregnant girl. Mira A repeatedly returns to these mysterious characters with a

yearning to find out more about them, but the novel does not make the connection

between them explicit. A possible reading of this might be a form of inherited trauma or

generational knowledge that has been carried down to Mira A through her genetic make-

up, pulling her to uncover the history of her ancestral past. An alternative reading is that

these aspects of human history and experience have spread by contagion as a form of

collective assemblage or subconscious knowledge. As discussed in Chapter Two, Deleuze

and Guattari suggest that contagion or virus spreading is a process that allows becoming to

sweep through heterogeneous entities at a micro level without the need for a filial link:

> We know that many beings pass between a man and a woman; they come from
> different worlds, are borne on the wind, form rhizomes around roots; they cannot
> be understood in terms of production, only in terms of becoming.[39]

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[38] Barker, p. 140.
[39] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 267

Mira A's thoughts and questions are not just rhetorical internal musings, they are directed toward someone other than herself and her immediate surroundings as her need to follow threads of information compels her to seek validation from an external source. This source is not just outside of her tightly controlled social parameters but outside of the page.

## The Contagion of the Reader

Barker's use of multimodality engages the reader through formal experimentation that requires their interaction with, and interpretation of the textual devices. Mira A's questions combined with the white spaces on the page and gaps in text leave the narrative open for the reader to reflect on the meaning of these spaces and consider the questions she poses. In the first instance of white space being used to form an image, sentences are centred on the page along with gaps in the middle of those sentences which craft the white space to form a discernible outline of a guitar (see Figure 3).

and by virtue of his creative wisdom, Our father created
the foundation of human speech, And caused it to
form part of his own godliness. Before the earth
existed, In the midst of primeval darkness,
Before there was knowledge of things,
He created the foundation of future
human speech, And the first true father Namandu
Caused it to form part of his own divinity.
Having conceived the origin of future human
speech, Out of the wisdom contained within his
own godliness, And by virtue of his creative
wisdom He conceived the foundation of love
of one's fellow men. Before the earth
existed, In the midst of primeval darkness,
Before there was knowledge of things,
And by virtue of his creative power
He conceived the foundation
of love of one's fellow men.
Having created the foundations
of human speech, Having created a
small portion of love Out of the wisdom
contained within his own
godliness And by
virtue of his creative
wisdom He created,
in his solitude, The
beginning of a sacred hymn,
Before the earth existed, In the
midst of primeval darkness, Before there was knowledge
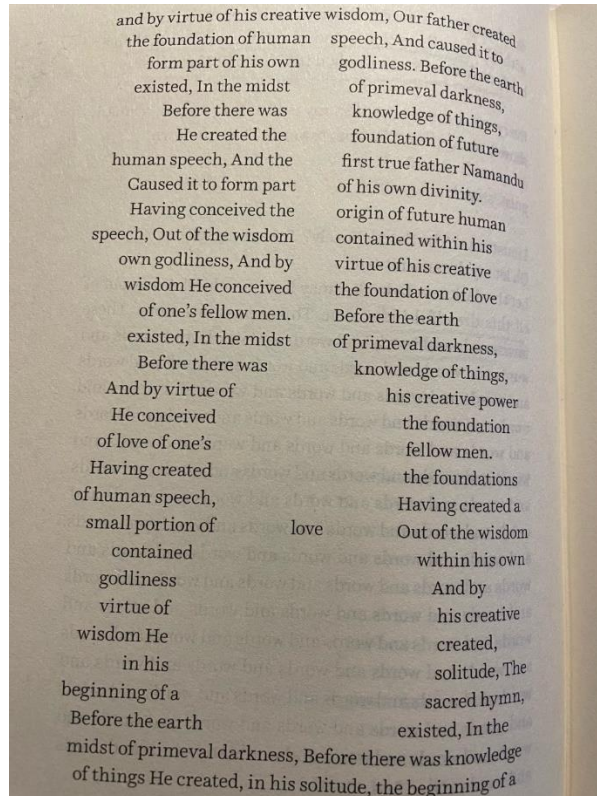of things He created, in his solitude, the beginning of a

Figure 3. A page of text from *H(A)PPY* that forms the shape of a guitar in the white space.

The text surrounding this shape mimics religious rhetoric which the reader might assume is derived from Mira A accessing The Information Stream. Yet the image of the guitar with the single word 'love' at its centre emulating the sound hole, conveys her preoccupation with the instrument, as well as its connection to a musician from the past, Agustín Barrios, and the importance of the sound he created which emanates through time and space into her own consciousness. Music is important here as it permeates the text both through Mira A's increasing obsession with learning about Barrios in order to replicate the exact sound he played, but also seeping into the consciousness of the reader, as Barker suggests in a preceding author's note, the book is best enjoyed whilst listening to his music. The recommendation of a soundtrack to accompany the reading of the book may be dismissed on first encounter, but as Mira A becomes consumed with the compulsion to become physically and mentally in tune with his music, so too might the reader find themselves

looking back to that author's note and accessing the same recordings through their own version of the Information Stream to understand the affective influence of his music. Adding music to the reading experience also engages more than one sense at a time, thereby engaging a multimodal practice of encountering the text and opening up more possibilities for thought associations. This links into an interesting intersection of multimodality with multimediality[40] in which the interactivity of the user with the multimedia artefact is a mode of affective response.

The repeated refrain that echoes through the text of 'THE TUNING FORK IS IN YOUR HEART' and 'TERRIBLE DISCIPLINE' appear on Mira A's sensor like a subconscious thought erupting to the surface. She is unable to make sense of these phrases appearing and becomes convinced that there is a flaw within her that is causing her Sensor to present anomalies. This is, until she delves deeper into historical records to learn about Barrios himself, and his unwavering dedication to perfecting his music. The more she learns about the past, an action discouraged but not prohibited by the curators of The New Path to maintain the illusion of ultimate freedom, the more this past seems to infiltrate her being and splinter her self-assuredness. Barker provides no discernible link between Barrios and Mira A other than the connection of affinity for the music, but the figure of the mystery girl linked to Paraguayan history is a repeated thread through the text that later becomes entangled with Mira A's own physicality. This ambiguity leaves an open-ended question for the reader as to the point of this startling narrative thread. One inference may be that Mira A is a descendent of Barrios or the pregnant girl in the news archives, and if so, what does this connection mean for the perpetuation of history in the face of an ideological turn away from historical narratives?

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[40] Where multimediality is the combination of media technologies as advocated by Anne Cranny-Francis in *Multimedia: Texts and Contexts* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

Barker's innovation is to echo the splintering of the character's sense of self through the fracturing of the novel form itself using multimodal textual forms including unusual text layout and page design, varied typography, use of colour in type and imagistic content and concrete realisation of text to create images. As suggested in Chapter Two, drawing on Alison Gibbons' theory of multimodality informs my conceptual framework of reading this experimentation as a form of cognitive poetics. This white space, which often follows questions asked by the protagonist, leaves space on the page for the reader to pause and reflect on the questions posed at the same time as she herself considers them in the text, drawing the reader in as co-conspirator, along with Mira A herself, working against The New Path to formulate a forbidden narrative. The reader must interpret the white spaces, images and shapes on the page and how this textual deviance pertains to the narrative, at the same time as Mira A is puzzling over her own cognitive dissonance, thus drawing character and reader into a commonality of experience. The large gaps on the page suggest a sense of space for thinking and reflecting on the gaps in Mira A's knowledge about herself and the world she inhabits. The experimentation with form then mirrors the turmoil of the protagonist and attempts to replicate this state of inner conflict and confusion for the reader. In disrupting her own narrative, Barker and her character call into question the construct of a linear temporal unfolding, and the narrative impulse and ability to represent the development of the self. Barker demonstrates how narrative as testimony and personal truth is not a straightforward matter of representation but involves a tussle with the process of narrative creation. In this sense the multimodal and metanarrative of Mira A recounting her experience is employed to express Mira A's process of uncovering what she thinks through the act of narration/writing. As previously mentioned, the practice of narration for characters in *H(A)PPY,* both personal and institutional, is discouraged within the dystopian societal structure, due to the suggestion that recorded history and personal testimony impose restrictions and prevent freedom:

> 'You must determine to stop telling this story,' Kite says, 'or you will poison The Graph. You will pollute The Information Stream. You will unbalance The Sensor.' He pauses. 'You will effectively declare war on The Young.'[41]

With obvious echoes of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* where protagonist Winston Smith dreams of rebelling against totalitarian rule whilst participating in editing the past at the Ministry of Truth and destroying the original historical accounts, Mira A's rebellion takes the form of accessing prohibited historical records as well as the recognition and gradual understanding of her own multiplicity as she claims herself through words. My reading of this multiplicity is her self-discovery of the various and fluctuating singularities that comprise her individual subjectivity as a fluidly evolving entity. At the beginning of the book she attempts to define herself as an component of the collective, 'We abhor 'personality'. We eschew difference.'[42] but also as an individual vying for specificity. As her self-narration continues, she comes to understand herself in more fluid terms; an embodied specificity comprised of an amalgamation of her various singularities. A talented musician as a more permanent singularity; her thoughts that come and go as lines of flight as more transient singularities; the separated part of herself manifested in her narrative as Mira B as a rebellious singularity emerging from her subconscious. By voicing the narrative of her life, she situates herself within a larger historical context of rebellion and revolution. As an agent of change, Mira A challenges the stability of the world around her by discovering the power she holds as an individual that is undergoing a constant state of change, effectively manifesting becoming through the deterritorialising and reterritorialising of her own subjectivity.

Ambiguous instances of Mira A speaking at someone unnamed, an external source of address and even seemingly direct forms of address to the reader of her narrative, playfully suggest the reader situate themselves as this unnamed addressee:

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[41] Barker, *H(A)PPY*, p. 46
[42] Ibid., p. 8.

> I came upon this information purely by accident. And I asked that question (the one you just read) – Who is Mira B? – staring into bright light. Blinding light. I am staring into bright light as I think this.[43]

> I found the girl! There. Now you know. [...]
> While I'm on the subject…

> Remember that dolly? The dolly she held? The little girl? Her dolly?[44]

In the quotations above Mira A acknowledges there is a reader of her narrative but the action of staring into the light to hide her thoughts from the Sensor means this reader cannot be from within her world, implying the reader she addresses is us. This meta reference to a future reader follows the dystopian format of appealing to the future. Similarly, Barker's use of conversational tone when Mira A brings the unnamed reader in as confidant ('Now you know' and 'Remember that dolly?') yet again suggests a collusion or commonality between protagonist and reader as they piece the mystery together between them. This narratorial intrusion is a metafictional device Barker develops in her later novel *I Am Sovereign* (2019), in which she explicitly addresses the reader, inserting herself as author into the narrative, referencing her own writing process and giving autonomy to the characters in a form of self-conscious and self-referential comedic metafiction:

> We apologise, in advance, for the brief interruption…

> …but it is necessary at this moment in the novella (hence-forth referred to as I Am Sovereign) to warn the reader that Nicola Barker (henceforth referred to as The Author) has been granted **absolutely no access** to the thought and feelings of the character Gyasi 'Chance' Ebo' (henceforth referred to as The Subject).[45]

In *H(A)PPY*, Barker's use of character to address the reader directly fits into the metafictional tactic of challenging representational reality. Theorists including Linda

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[43] Ibid., p. 16.
[44] Ibid., p. 35.
[45] Nicola Barker, *I Am Sovereign*, (London: William Heinemann, 2019), p. 149.

Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh identify metafiction as a key postmodernist trope, as Waugh notes:

> Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structure. The materialist, positivist and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exists.[46]

Yet the use of metafictional tactics employed by twenty-first century experimental writers like Barker and Smith relate to a more modernist avant-garde approach that insert a subversive feminist discourse into the spaces of ruptured linguistic and narrative structures. Smith, Barker and McBride complicate the relationality of language to meaning within existing frames of patriarchal reference and also how this relationality is echoed through the interaction between reader and text, as Friedman and Fuchs attest of their avant-garde predecessors who sought to:

> nullify the assumption that language imparts cultural "truths," thwart the process of critical interpretation, breaking the complicity between reader and writer. […] Blurring distinctions between interior and exterior, between the clandestine and the overt, they uncover, but do not rationalise, the impenetrable and paradoxical.[47]

Just as Mira A unpicks the structures that uphold her own reality, Barker opens up spaces of ambiguity and non-meaning in her ruptured text for the reader to undertake their own critical engagement of the structures that form their respective realities. The structure of the textual body comes undone as the reader progresses through the pages of the book, with words losing meaning to form shapes and images that question and contrast the stability of a world that imposes order. With this descent into ambiguity and spaces of not-knowing, together with an affirmation of corporeal intuition and bodily autonomy as a

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[46] Patricia Waugh, 'What is Metafiction and Why are They Saying Such Awful Things About it?', in *Metafiction*, ed. by Mark Currie (New York: Longman, 1995), pp. 39-54 (p. 44)

[47] Friedman and Fuchs, 'Contexts and Continuities', p. 27.

mode of exploration and agency, Barker offers a feminist subversion of existing codes of meaning and ways of knowing.

The use of colour in *H(A)PPY* works to highlight certain words that pertain to or invoke a feeling of emotion. This simultaneously acts as warning to our protagonist (which she sees on her sensor) and the reader of the narrative (which is visible on the page as specific words are printed in different colours), thereby fostering a sense of common experience between character and reader. The different colours denote the intensity of the emotion expressed in a scale of pinks, purples and blues. Sometimes emotional words appear in the same colour, other times repeated words change colour due to the increase in emotion that is conveyed as Mira A uses them:

> *This feeling. This frustration. Frustration is nothing more than an unhealthy burgeoning of the rampant Ego. Frustration is entitlement. Frustration is arrogance. Check the Graph. Is it pinkening? Is it?* [48]

In this quotation the text is in italic indicating that she is thinking or speaking to herself, in contrast with the surrounding text that comprises her narrative address to the reader. The coloured words signify that some are more dangerous than others, and the differing colours as shown above prompt the reader to interrogate which words might be more emotionally charged than others.  Mira A is concerned by the visibility of these coloured words on her Sensor because they feed into the mainframe Graph representing the society as a whole. Her subjectivity is not a separate entity from the collective and therefore her emotionally coloured language infects the balance of her entire community. Her concern at the amount of colour being displayed on her Sensor and caused by her narrative, is acknowledged in a self-reflexive questioning. She is aware that The Graph (and the society as a whole) is affected by her actions, at the same time as the reader comes to understand this connection. Thus, feeding into the reading experience as one of hyper awareness of

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[48] Barker, *H(A)PPY*, p. 9

language and emotional affect, as the reader encounters each word, its colour signifies its

potential for damage.

Interspersed with Mira A's words are passages of data that she is calling up on her

Information Stream. The ambiguous allusions to the technology incorporated into the

physical bodies of 'The Young' suggests that data is accessed through each individual's

Information Stream using only their thoughts. Mira A is a musician and becomes aware of

a piece of music she has accessed as her fleeting and rhizomatic thoughts call up this

information from the past:

> How curious…
> How perplexing.
> A malfunction?
> A blip?
> A kink?
> But where…?
>
> Ah. That jangling, sweet melody. Remember?[49]

The narrative arc follows Mira A's unstoppable trajectory of delving further into the history

of this song and its creator Agustin Barrios. The rhythm of this song therefore infiltrates

Mira A's consciousness as she becomes obsessed with replicating the sound of the original

instrument Barrios used to play. The more she learns about this composer, the more

desire she feels to access information about this specific history, pulling it into her own

personal narrative by emulating Barrios and undergoing a parallel experience of becoming

a social outcast. As she increases her knowledge of the pre-apocalyptic world, she begins

to question The System through her narrative flow and her seemingly destructive path to

rebellion and freedom. The very act of narrating her experience is forbidden, and her

continued compulsion to do so, engages the reader to consider what this means for her

and us:

> 'The issue is that you are *still* telling your story. Even this - our exchange - is now
> gradually becoming a part of it. And I am a character in the story. I'm being co-

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[49] Barker, *H(A)PPY,* p. 5

> opted. reinvented, *used*. And that's not acceptable. I don't want to be a character in your story, Mira A. I want to be my own character in my own story…' He pauses. 'No. I don't want to be a character at all. I just want to be myself. I just want to be in This Moment. Unconstrained. Unfettered.[50]

In this quotation the character of Kite, a Technician who ensures the rules of The System are adhered to, attempts to quash Mira A's personal narrative by reiterating the mandates of The New Path as a collective, effectively denying her intrinsic drive for individual specificity to serve a utilitarian ideology of the greater good. Mira A's interrogation of her own personhood involves a rebellion against the state, casting personal agency as a political act. Barker's dystopian world constructs of technological additions (the Information Stream, Graph and Sensor) to the bodily subject creates a sense of unlimited visibility, where each person's thoughts and feelings are laid bare for all to witness and interpret. They also provide a medium for Mira A to narrate her story. While initially, she is not intentionally writing her own narrative, Mira A's unfolding thought processes are displayed on the screen of her Sensor, (replicated for the reader as the words on the page) effectively creating her own personal testimony as a struggle against the control of the state. Again, there are echoes here of the influential dystopian text *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin[51] in which the protagonist D-503 moves from writing a state-sanctioned piece of propaganda to exploring his own sense of self through diarising his subversive activities and reflecting on his own thoughts about his actions. Parallels between Barker and Zamyatin's utopian societies include the prevalence of surveillance and state control over the expression of individuality, where citizens are likened to cogs in a machine – their only value is being subsumed into a collective. Expression of selfhood and creative freedom is therefore prohibited. In both novels the creation of individual expression is the point of divergence away from the control of the state as Demir Alihodžić notes:

> Any utopian state strives to achieve a state of perfection and permanence, which leads to inaction and stagnancy. With writing come new ideas and responses to

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[50] Barker, *H(A)PPY*, p. 47

[51] Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. By Bela Shayevich (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2020).

ideas; a dialogue follows. Totalitarian states practice censorship to varying degrees because exposure to new ideas, or the exploration of one's own ideas, leads to questioning of state policies and practices. People will believe that they need something new, making a contradiction the state's claim to have taken care of everyone's needs.[52]

Writing a personal truth therefore is a mode of discovering the self in a moment by moment becoming — a constant unfolding of subjectivity as interaction with the surrounding world and structures of power. This idea of personal rebellion against a political ideology through the medium of creative production is also fundamentally mapped through an embodied response. In his analysis of writing as rebellion in Zamyatin's *We*, Alihodžić draws attention to the bodily intervention of the character with the text in the form of a sexual or reproductive alignment, and discusses the psychoanalytic readings of textual creation as a form of human reproduction:

> As he grows accustomed to wielding the pen, D-503 soon begins to feel textually potent, and sees himself no longer as a womb for his textual creation but as a godlike progenitor on a massive scale, creating not only his text but his audience: "And maybe you're all nothing but my shadows. Wasn't I the one that used you to populate these pages, which only a little while ago were white quadrangular deserts? Without me would you ever have been seen by any of those that I am going to lead along behind me down the narrow paths of these lines?" […] His diary is the measure of his increasing subjectivity, and he links the fear of losing the subjectivity with fear of losing his virility [53]

Here we see the same metafictional use of self-referential textuality as in Barker's *H(A)PPY*, where Mira A becomes conscious of the audience her narration is seeking and creating at the same time. As well the gradual incorporation of bodily dominance into the discovery of the subjective self, both characters move away from an unquestioning cognitive compliance with the dystopian structures of power that hold them in place, and towards a corporeal bid for freedom and agency. In this sense they enact an embodied becoming that affirms the power of cohesion between body and mind as an individual,

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[52] Demir Alihodžić, 'Writing the Self: Writing as Power in Yevgeny Zamyatin's We', *Društvene i Humanističke Studije,* 5 (2020),123-136 (p. 125).
[53] Alihodžić, p. 131-132.

over and above the ideology of the collective state.  The topic of documenting history and the control of what people are allowed to see and know, is reflective of the wider themes at play in the text and how they intersect with the experience of the reader. As the narrative of *H(A)PPY* progresses, the typography, layout and page design constantly morph and changes and instances of colour words denoting an Excess of Emotion (EoE) increase, to illustrate the process of disruption and destabilisation that Mira A is undergoing. The use of coloured words emphasises the significance of these emotions and their effect among the rest of the black text, like a warning visible to all – the reader experiences the same effect of that warning that the surrounding characters do in seeing them on Mira A's Sensor. The multimodality of the text therefore operates in a such a way that brings the reader in as a participant and actant of the text, with the textual disruption on the page offering a mode of affect to the reader in the same way that Mira A's disruption of her world is affecting her own selfhood and the other characters around her. This disruption from character, through text and towards the reader, therefore operates as a mode of becoming-woman that undermines categories of fixity through fragmentation.  The fragmentation of Mira A's selfhood in which her subjectivity is released from its governing structures of control, is echoed through the shift in the reading experience that is also fragmented through the textual multimodality to release the reader into possible new modes of thought and response. Thereby enabling their own participation in becoming-woman as they too move from the category of passive observer to integral co-producer of textual meaning. Barker has spoken about her writing as a practice of making the reader work, stating that it is important for her to convey gaps in meaning and ideas that can't be explored through language because 'struggle makes learning meaningful'.[54]

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[54] Nicola Barker speaking about her work at the Cambridge Literary Festival, Winter 2017.

## Reader as Actant

Barker's assertion that she wants the reader of her novels to be made to work, together with her use of multimodal forms suggests the reader of *H(A)PPY* is an integral component of the text as it unfolds. The reader's embodied connection with the book as a material object itself, and their subsequent engagement with, and interpretation of the text contributes to the construction of meaning. The increased frequency of the multimodal page layouts as the book progresses disrupts the reading experience in tandem with the development of the protagonist discovering the power of disruption in her physical body. Barker's use of these unusual page layouts prompts the reader to question the meaning of these images and the effect of this visual content on their own senses. If text formed into a blurred block or image can cause the reader to take a second look, squint, look closer at the page or simply engage with the book through a non-linguistic medium, then the impact of the typographical experimentation is such that it creates space for a physical response that engages perceptive processing of the cognitive response. This technique can be seen in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*:[55]

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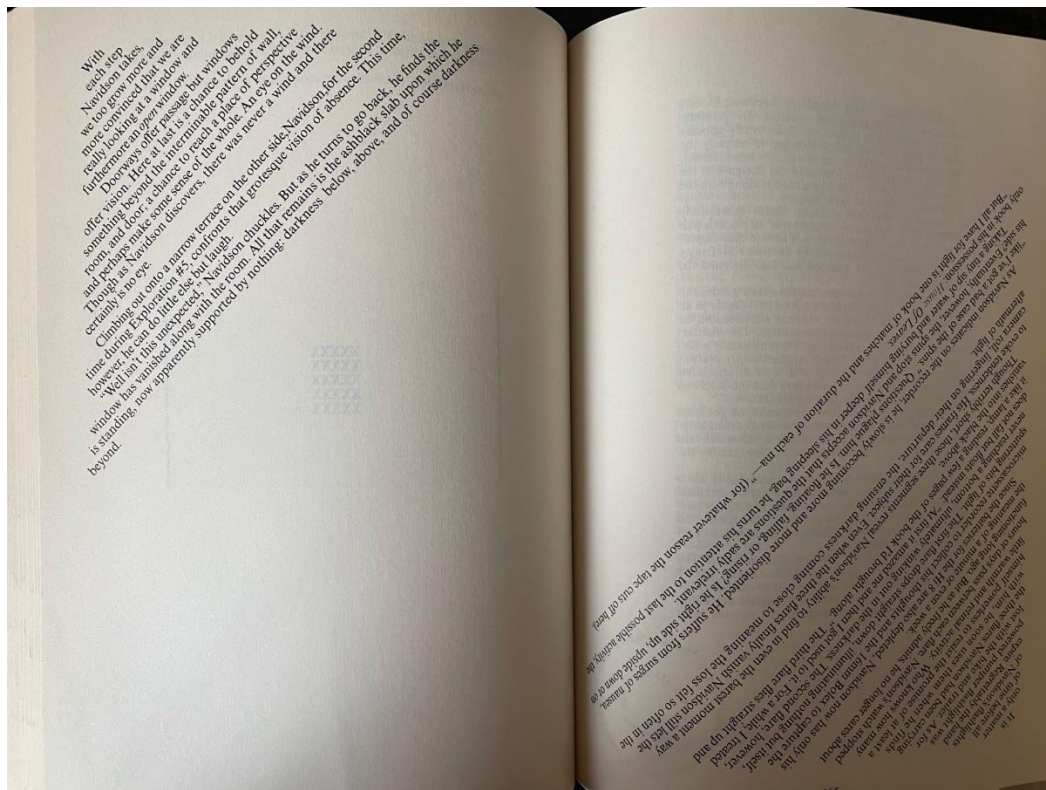[55] Mark Z Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, (London: Doubleday, 2001)

Figure 4. Two pages of Danielewski's *House of Leaves* showing text on the diagonal in each corner of the page and white space in the middle.

Barker also uses text that forms spirals and patterns on the page, encouraging the reader

to turn the book or twist their head to read the words.

bodies to the rafters. Its luxuriance – its lushness – becomes increasingly dense and fibrous. It hisses and twitters. This is the jungle of words. This is the wilderness. This is cruel nature: the sustainer, the destroyer. Soon I cannot move. My feet are sealed to the floor by suckers. Tendrils slide over my body. I try to sing, but I cannot hear the resonance. The hiss of growth is too powerful. I had created The Cathedral (had I not?) and now the jungle will devour it. I glance down at my broken fingers. What could I possibly do now? If only I could... I try to form them into the shape of a brush (but they are limp, they are crushed), yet still, I lift my arm up, and into the wall of green around me I etch:
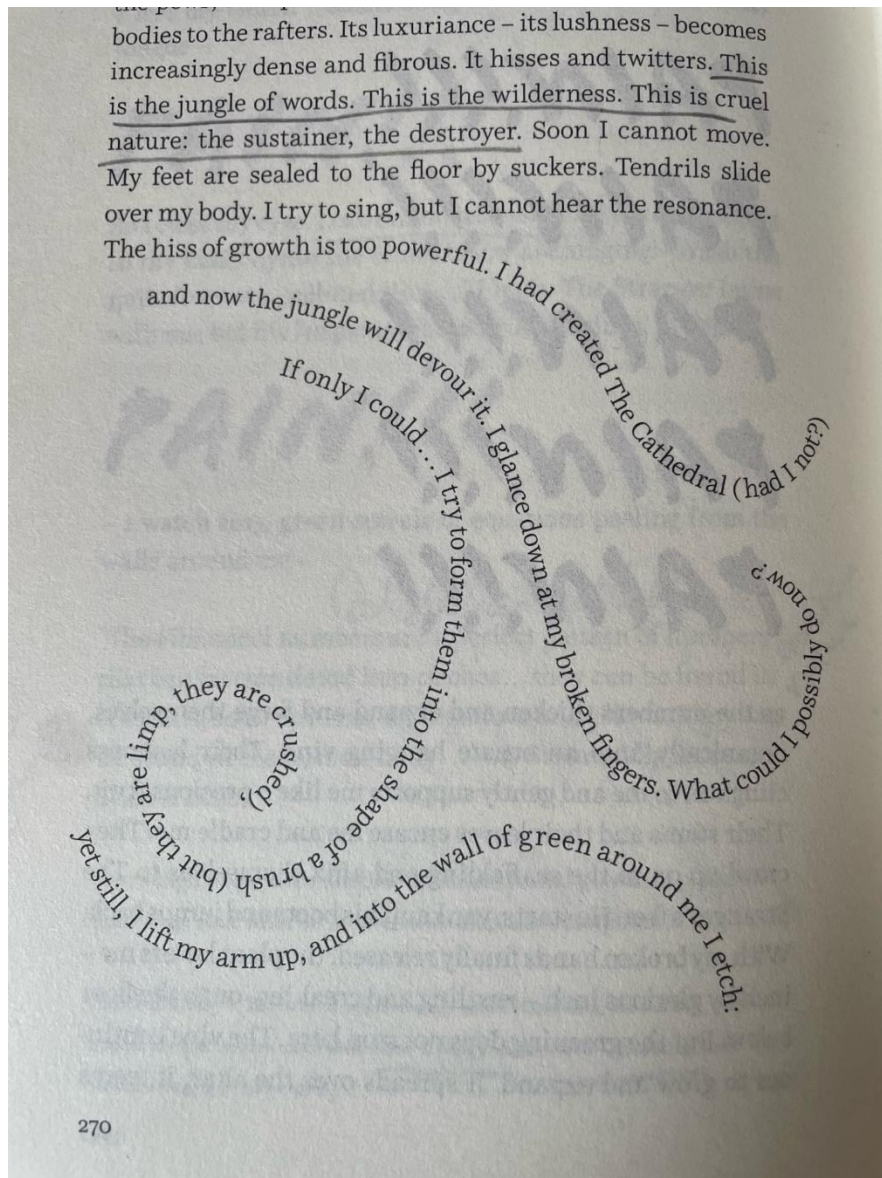
Figure 5. Page of text from *H(A)PPY* showing the prose layout change from straight lines to swirls that spiral down the page.

This doubled reading experience therefore focusses the reader's attention onto the materiality of the book and potentially their own physicality as they encounter this materiality, at the same time as the protagonist is questioning hers. Thus, the multimodality of form engenders a reading which brings the experience of embodiment to bear upon the process of meaning-making. Alison Gibbons highlights the use of this technique in a *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* (2002), an experimental novel that 'utilises

multimodality to fuse both virtual literary meaning with actual literary experience in the reader's narrative understanding of embodiment.'[56]
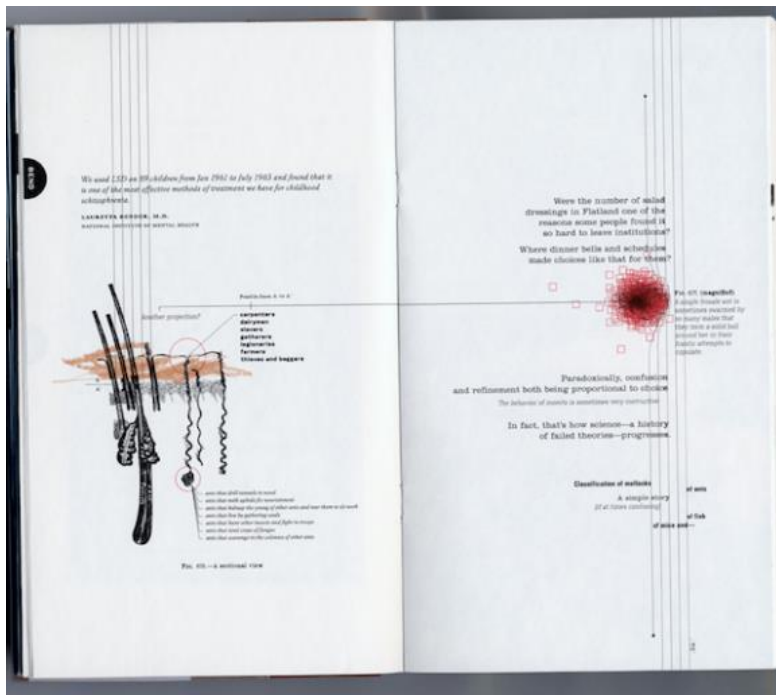


Figure 6. Two pages of *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* showing images interspersed among the scattered vignettes of text.

This, she argues, 'exploits physicality and corporeality to heighten awareness of the embodied nature of not merely reading, but also being, cognising, and imagining.'[57] Situating *H(A)PPY* in a similar vein requires the reader to step outside of the recognised role of the reader as passive cerebral interpreter and instead engage fully in a corporeal immersion of the text, challenging binary constructs that operate within the production and consumption of literature, and which are perpetuated in the molar sphere of stable and recognisable patterns of identity – where the author is considered the maker of textual meaning and the reader is the passive recipient of that meaning. Formal experimentation that situates the body of the reader as part of the textual encounter manifests a form of minor literature as explored in Chapter Two, undermining the stability

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[56] Alison Gibbons, *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature* (New York; London: Routledge, 2012), p. 89.
[57] Gibbons, p. 88.

of the molar realm and disrupting normative structures of social order. Connecting the function of minor literature to the philosophical framework of becoming-woman is part of this molar disruption that operates through a feminist application of multimodal cognitive poetics. Where becoming-woman is the molecular occupation of the marginalised subject position of women (in opposition to the majoritarian position that situates man as the universal and dominant subject) that enables a point of departure away from patriarchally informed frameworks of knowledge and meaning aligned with notions of objectivity based on the mind/body dualism. Therefore prioritising embodiment as an integral part of the narratological and reading experience specifically disrupts the notion of reading as a cognitive only process and incorporates bodily affect, response and subjectivity as a necessary aspect of the reading experience. The reader then becomes a physical actant in the textual production of meaning and the boundaries between author/reader, and reader/text are made fluid, breaching the molar/molecular distinction and making way for becoming through the reading experience. Minor literature disrupts the majoritarian language and form of the novel, enabling the reader to become part of that rupturing process in their textual encounter. The multimodality of this novel then not only works as a narrative device to strengthen the impact of the character's journey into a questioning mode of becoming and rebellion against a restrictive regime of control, but also engages the reader in a similar project to question the text in their hand, the language and technology surrounding them, and the validity and value assigned to recorded history and systems of power and control.

The Embodied Reader: A Girl is a Half-formed Thing.

Furthering the scope of embodied reading, Eimear McBride's experimentation with

language blurs the boundaries between thought, speech and physical response that

immediately immerses the reader into the position of the protagonist. This stylistic

approach creates an intense and uncomfortable reading experience:

> The author has created a new form of prose which employs a deceptively simple
> lexicon in fragmentary vernacular syncopations to represent thought the point
> before it becomes articulate speech. That is an extraordinary achievement in itself,
> but having forged a prose style capable of doing this she then does much more,
> placing the anonymous narrator within a series of vividly realised scenes set at
> different points in her childhood and adolescence, many of which are intensely sad
> or harrowing, or both.[58]

In *A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing*[59] the unnamed narrator and protagonist establishes her

own form of control by allowing her body to be used as violent sexual harm is enacted

upon her. The novel is written in lyrical fragmented prose to represent the pre-speech

inner thoughts of the unnamed central character. The narrative is a form of

bildungsroman, tracing the short and tragic life of the titular Girl, beginning before her

birth and ending with her death by suicide. The girl's sense of self is tainted by the trauma

of an early incident of sexual abuse she endures at the hands of her predatory uncle, and

then further destabilised by the slow decline and eventual death of her beloved brother,

the only family member to whom she felt truly connected. The extreme religious

environment and complete lack of love and affection from her mother during her

formative years are shown to situate her as an island adrift, with only her brother to

anchor her. Following an early episode of sexual abuse by her uncle, she attempts to take

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[58] David Collard, *About A Girl: A Reader's Guide to Eimear McBride's A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*
(London: CB editions, 2016), p. vii.
[59] Eimear McBride, *A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing* (Norwich: Galley Beggar Press, 2013).

back some form of control over her body and by extension her life, by carving out a

position for herself as instigator of sexual encounters. Using her sexuality to wield power,

she then chooses to invite multiple unfulfilling sexual encounters that grow evermore

disturbing and masochistic as a means of obliviating the initial abuse through ongoing

pain. In this way, putting her body in the path of harm is to make her claim for active

participation in the events of her own life, however traumatic they may be. More

significantly, the abused body of the girl as it repeats the pain enacted upon it, amplifies

the themes of sexism, misogyny, and violence against women to such a degree that the

reader is bombarded with the reality of that embodied experience, where the language

used acts a form of textual onslaught as the form echoes content. The use of individual

words and fractured sentences punctuated by full stops convey the intensity of the Girl's

physical and mental trauma as a refrain she cannot escape from, and one that the reader

must also go through with her:

> pulled me up the stairs. Breath. My eyes I can't. Full of my own hair.
> Screaming. Shut up. Is that me I am I. I think. There's a my body he
> push back. I'm. Fling rubbish thrown I am am I I. Falt. Where until I
> crack. Break my. Face. Head. Something. Smash. On a stump. Where
> on the back of my head on the back of my back my back crack that's
> my eyes fucking up with tears. Scare me. Punch me there fright. Stop
> stop it you are who are I do I don't want. I want to. Not this I don't
> not for me what he will. You. Jesus. Got. Jesus on his knees pull me
> up pull me. Fuck. Not. Fuck not. Help. Grab me. Fingers of my skin.
> With his filth hands I hear. All the sounds tonight. Raddle fuck in my
> head. Tonight I hands up my. Knickers up my. Hurt. Not me Jesus.
> His nails too sharp are you. Did that. Did I make. Stop. Don't don't.

Figure 7. Section of fragmented text McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*.

In this passage near to the end of the novel, the girl has returned to the lake, a site at

which she knows violent and predatory men will linger, in a final self-destructive bid to

overwrite the damage already done to her body and mind. The immediacy of the attack is brought to bear through the sharpness of the language, repetition and punctuation. The full stops work on multiple levels, at once offering an end to the incident or thought, which is then never realised as the next word or fragment continues to express the brutality as it unfolds, and with it, her inability to escape both the physical trauma and the resulting imprint of the experience on her thought patterns. The frequent repetition of the full stops draws attention to this mode of punctuation, suggestive of their articulation as written grammatical commands as in a telegram, where the word stop appears among the words of communication. Each full stop may be read as suggestive of her physical and mental resistance to the assault being enacted upon her. Each word or instance of thought followed by a demand to stop. Full stops also give guidance to readers on when to take a breath, and in passages like this where they are frequent and fast, they suggest the act of fast and panicked breathing that would likely be the Girl's physical reality at such a moment of trauma. In this way, McBride's choice of language, punctuation and textual layout, is a multimodal form that imbues the text with a tangible physical presence, not only conveying the Girl's cognitive and embodied experience to the reader but actively mapping her physicality onto the reader as part of the reading experience.

In this sense the abused body of the girl may also be read as a metaphor for wider societal problems that perpetuate patriarchal control over, and the abuse of female bodies. David Collard remarks upon this with regards to the prevalence of sexual stereotypes in popular culture and the contradictory construction this forms of women and girls as sexual objects and victims, yet this same culture reacts with shock and outrage at the inevitable violation of these bodies:

> What happens to the girl after that is a direct consequence of her violation. She does not become, despite what some male critics have said, a slag, or 'the town bike'. Damaged, she invites further damage, seeking through pain and abasement

to find a place beyond either. There is a terrible exploitation at the heart of this novel, and a correspondingly terrible exploitation at the heart of our society.[60]

In this way McBride inverts the trope of the female victim by placing individual agency and bodily autonomy as the driver behind the perpetuation of this violence. In doing so, the reader is exposed to the uncomfortable truth not only of the extreme mental and physical scarring left behind on an abused body, but also the wider context of the female body as culturally inscribed to invite and allow its objectification and violation. The repercussions of which are that the body of the Girl is driven to repeat the violence enacted upon it, as the reader is made to bear witness to, echoing the way in which women's bodies are socially inscribed to expect and anticipate this objectification and violence. This repetition thereby works on multiple levels for both character and reader, as each incident of bodily abasement represented on the page builds into a sense of relentless overwhelm, as Maggie Nelson attests in her exploration of cruelty in art:

> Freud argues that our enjoyment stems from art's ability to offer – perhaps to viewer and creator alike – retroactive mastery of traumatic experiences that one's defenses failed to deflect adequately from the organism at the time of original impact or injury. The "compulsion to repeat" the trauma - be it in art, nightmare, or waking life – is the organism's attempt to master the surplus of anxiety that the original incursion produced. Of course, these attempts typically fail, often to catastrophic effect – in which case art can be seen as a relatively innocuous arena in which to showcase the failure.[61]

In actively choosing to allow her own violation, the Girl suggests an attempt to regain some form of control, to overwrite her role as victim in response to the original trauma, setting out an alternative response that blurs the lines of a binary victim/perpetrator subject positioning. The reader is made to feel uncomfortable at being in such close proximity to the subjectivity of the Girl as it becomes undone. Not merely observing her

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[60] Collard, *About A Girl*, p. 50

[61] Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), p. 11.

actions, but viscerally drawn in by McBride's use of pre-speech internal language which affords the reader a much closer position alongside the character as she makes those decisions to place herself in situations of danger and objectification, as David Collard notes:

> What happens in *A Girl* to the girl happens to the reader, and with extreme vividness and intensity. We share her pain and it becomes our pain. *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* is a book about a girl, and the girl is all of us.[62]

The representation of the trauma repeated as she allows her body to be used on multiple occasions by unscrupulous men echoes as a refrain through the pages. Her language becomes more fragmented with each incident, finally breaking down into spurts and splutters of capitals and lower-case letters during a horrific rape scene at the end of the novel.
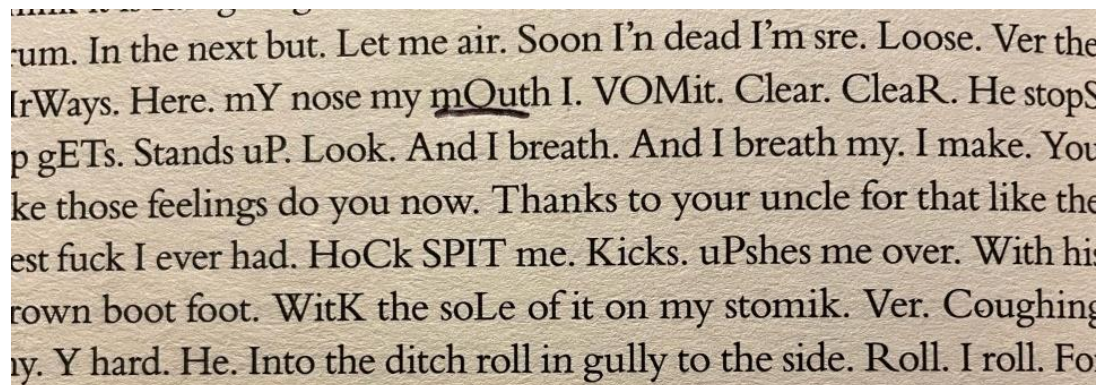


Figure 8. Section of fragmented text from McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* showing varied typography.

The typography mimics her struggle, gasps for breath, spatters of blood, bodily fluids and bruising blooming across the page as it is wrought upon her body. McBridge creates a sense of overwhelming and relentless abjection that signifies the impossible bind and

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[62] Collard, *About A Girl*, p. 42

cruelty of culturally constructed gender roles and expected behaviours that are mapped onto gendered bodies. These expectations are highlighted in the novel through the representation of an intensely patriarchal Catholic society that require girls to be submissive, quiet and accepting of male dominance. These are qualities that the protagonist embodies in the fullest sense, not only in her acceptance of the sexual abuse she endures but also pushing the limits of those expectations by seeking out the physical violence herself. As the sexual encounters with her uncle become more violent at her own behest, another disturbing scene where the Girl asks him to hit her repeatedly presents the reader with questions – what do these patriarchal values mean for girls and women who embody them as characteristics of their subjectivity and selfhood? How far does the damage reach? The Girl's behaviour is an exaggeration of the wider social context of gender-based inequalities and violence. McBride sharply expose the harm perpetuated in these cultural codes of behaviour by making it play out on the body of a girl:

> He hits til something's click and the blood begins to run. Jesus he says. I feel sick. But I'm rush with feeling. Wide and. He thinks he's bad when he fucks me now. And so he is. I'm better though. In fact I am almost best.[63]

The reader is made complicit in witnessing this harm and this passage illustrates how the Girl's agency in determining that harm is the only freedom afforded to her from within these patriarchal structures. From her physical pain, the Girl feels justified in her embodiment of submission as well as knowing that the perpetrator of her abjection also feels his status as villain. Both roles are played out to extreme ends and represent the rigidity of fixed subject positions. Her agency as instigator is an attempt at unmaking her submissive self yet at the same time she allows the paradox of submission to rule her. The Girl's subjectivity is being made and unmade moment by moment in these interactions

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[63] McBride, *A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing*, p. 144

then. They both amplify and challenge the notion of a singular rational subject grounded in body and mind within a socio-political framework of patriarchal values and instead offer the alternative position of chaotic subversion, constantly battling with social paradigms that impinge upon bodily autonomy and freedom of thought, expression and agency.

With A *Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, McBride inverts the traditional structure of the bildungsroman by engaging her protagonist in a process of embodied undoing that can only lead to her destruction. Her trajectory from child to adolescent to adult is not one of typical growth and development in which the character is able to overcome the trauma she has been subjected to and evolve into a well-rounded individual. Instead, as she ages, the repetition of harm is made inevitable, and she becomes a body undone, a schizo-subject with no centre of gravity spinning out of control and into oblivion. Her subjectivity is fragmented into too many moving shards that pull her apart and offer no point of confluence with which to centre herself. In this way, the schizo-subject of the Girl exposes the strength of the body as a site which bears the agency her mind is not allowed to fully realise. Culminating in suicide, her ultimate freedom is to choose death over the continuation of her mental trauma. This end does then signal the problem of advocating a process of becoming through fragmentation of the self as potentially detrimental to the molar subject, when an application of the schizo-subject is taken to its radical end. For the reader though, this extremity provides a commentary on the inability of patriarchal systems to maintain control over the subjects they continue to other and abject. As previously discussed, McBride's destruction of the Girl is reminiscent of the demise of Kathy Acker's Janey. Both novels function as a practice of negative aesthetics to expose the untenable patriarchal control over female bodies. One that speaks back to a need to disrupt the wider patriarchal discourses on control as Ellen Berry remarks: 'the threat of the abject body is its *un*controllability, its tendency to exceed all attempts to contain it. It

therefore demonstrates that power centers are defined much more by what escapes them

or by their impotence than by their zones of power.'[64]

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[64] Berry, *Negative Aesthetics*, p. 51

# Chapter 5 – Schizo-narrative as social commentary and political urgency

## Reading as a political act

This chapter considers how the splintered or schizo-subjects presented in the last chapter are invoked and utilised to provide social commentary in a wider context of political urgency. I argue that this reconfiguration of the subject as an assemblage of shifting multiplicities, engages a mode of becoming-woman by defying normative paradigms of personhood.[1] In this reading, becoming-woman is enacted through the refutation of traditional constructs of subjectivity and the potential this holds to unpick existing frameworks of power and oppression. By slipping outside the socio-political constructs of a white-centred, patriarchal, heteronormative majoritarian, the minor position of the marginalised can be invoked to challenge the authority of that dominant majority. In the textual analysis that follows, I demonstrate how identity constructs and their associated power values[2] can be undone from the queer spaces of the marginalised as a mode of becoming-woman.  In her examination of social codes of power, Rafia Zakaria points out how white supremacy has long been embedded as a cultural value within mainstream Anglo-American feminist concerns, discounting the experiences of, and contributions offered by anyone that does not fit within the designated majority category of white, middle-class feminists:

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[1] By this I mean socially constructed ideas of subjectivity whereby individuals are categorised and known by specific, fixed characteristics or identity markers (race, class, gender, sexuality etc) and how this is represented on the page in the form of either fictional characters, or in the case of memoir a definable person.

[2] Here I refer to identity constructs as markers such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, social background, political and religious affiliations etc and the cultural values associated with those categories.

> If an experience of characteristic is associated with a non-white group, then it is coded automatically as valueless, and in turn anyone associated with that experience becomes themselves devalued. This is the way that hegemony protects itself: silencing and punishing difference by stripping away its legitimacy.[3]

With this in mind, this chapter situates becoming-woman as a necessary part of undoing these cultural paradigms of value and power and specifically how a contemporary feminist literary activism can deconstruct deeply entrenched value systems. Identifying how the authors' more experimental stylistic choices have an affective impact of upon the reader, I suggest that the reading experience of these texts is charged with a form of political literary activism. This activism works at the micro-level of the molecular where readers encounter textual strategies and content that raise awareness of systematic prejudice and injustice and point to ways structures of power and oppression can be undone through a collective reconfiguration of those systems. Thereby, the act of reading, thinking about and engaging with these texts then becomes a political act in itself.

## Genre bending as schizo-narrative

The narratorial experimentation in the work of Nelson and Smith not only invokes a schizo-subject modality but also presents the reader with a schizoanalytic form of writing that incorporates multiplicity at its core and offers up an alternative communality of being in opposition to a pervasive contemporary culture of neoliberal individualism. Unlike McBride and Barker whose experimentation with linguistic form is more overt, Nelson and Smith mostly deploy a more standard use of sentence structure and syntax but still engage

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[3] Rafia Zakaria, *Against White Feminism* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2021), p. 8

a minor use of this majoritarian language.[4] As Chrysanthi Nigianni observes, this form of

schizoanalytic writing is a creative resistance to majoritarian language and ideologies:

> Schizoanalytic writing as the becoming-minoritarian in one's own language moves
> us away from the authorial "I" of a molar notion of subjectivity: the woman
> reproduced as entity fixed in language and into anthropomorphic representations
> of sex produced by phallologocentric humanism.[5]

While all the writers in this study enact a form of minor literature to reframe notions of

subjectivity through their formal experimentation, Nelson and Smith write openly and

specifically about contemporary social and political issues, providing critique and

commentary in their respective genres of autotheory and fiction. While Smith's Seasonal

novels are categorised as fiction, they rely on and reference contemporary real-world

events refracted through fictional characters and situations, thus conveying the author's

personal and political critical standpoint. Similarly, Nelson's text employs autobiographical

detail and theoretical frameworks to situate herself and her embodied experiences in the

immediacy of the contemporary political landscape she critiques. Nelson's use of

autotheory and Smith's socio-political commentary both link in a critical, intellectual

reflection that engages a form of life-thinking[6] through their writing praxis, incorporating

their own lived experience and emerging thinking in response to the events happening

around them, that also destabilises the genre binary of fiction/non-fiction. Lauren Fournier

notes that terminology incorporating words like *critical*, *theory* and *thinking* around the

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[4] Where majoritarian language is the standard ideal of normative communicative language imbued
with power values coded in binary oppositions.

[5] Chrysanthi Nigianni, 'Writing Difference: Toward a Becoming Minoritarian' in *Deleuze and the
Schizoanalysis of Feminism*, ed. by Janae Scholtz and Cheri Carr (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp.
193-207 (p.204).

[6] Fournier references the term life-thinking, used by the Somali American writer Sofia Samatar, as a
qualifier to genres of life-writing and autobiography that also incorporate criticality. See Lauren
Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,
2021), p. 15.

genre of memoir and life-writing 'emphasizes their intellectual aspect, raising interesting questions about the perceived lack of "thinking" in these genres.'[7]

## Autotheory in *The Argonauts*

*The Argonauts* is a chapterless narrative of fragments, encompassing Nelson's personal experiences, thoughts, reflections, theoretical and critical responses to themes of desire, motherhood, feminism, art, family making and bodily transition. Documenting her relationship with transgender artist Harry Dodge, Nelson examines the dynamics of queer family making mapped against the wider socio-political context that dominates and threatens their way of life. Connecting her personal experiences to theoretical ideas from thinkers and writers such as Donald Winnicott, Sara Ahmed, Luce Irigaray, Eve Sedgwick, Audre Lorde and Beatriz Preciado, Nelson upends literary convention and genre by pairing the retelling of deeply personal experiences in memoir format with a wide range of academic and critical theory folded into accessible prose. While the names of theorists and thinkers are referenced in the margins, there is no other detail of the text they refer to, or any citation that could lead the reader to them. Instead, these critical sources become part of her own retelling, offering up an integrated critical-personal memoir. The critical theory she incorporates aligns with the life experiences she recounts, and her own thinking and reflection on these experiences at the time of writing. Lauren Fournier suggests this 'performative mode of citation' together with queer feminist life-writing situates Nelson at the forefront of a renewed interest in autotheory and is grounded in a history of feminist theory and activism.[8]

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice,* p. 7.

## Queering the narrative

One of the major themes of the book is the body as a site of inscription of the self. Nelson

unpacks ideas about the body as a signifier, particularly with reference to identity markers

and their accompanying values. She interrogates a multitude of ways that transitioning

bodies can destabilise fixed notions of subjectivity and contribute to a more fluid

understanding of personhood as a multiplicity or becoming. Recounting the physical

changes wrought on her own body through the process of IVF, pregnancy, and birth, she

confronts the culturally ascribed values of motherhood historically aligned with women

and femininity, and maps these against other transitioning bodies and other forms of

mothering. Not least the transforming body of Harry and the wider context of gender

fluidity. Positioning her own pregnancy as a mode of queer becoming in parallel to the

bodily changes experienced by Dodge as he undergoes top surgery and begins taking

testosterone, 'Our bodies grew stranger, to ourselves, to each other.'[9] Nelson questions

why pregnancy as a mode of being with its violent rupturing of body is subsumed into a

'normative' state of being for women, while fluidly gendered bodies with less obvious

bodily changes are regarded as so alien within heteronormative culture. The obvious

argument against this would be that pregnancy is a natural bodily process whereas surgical

interventions for the purposes of gender reassignment and/or to enable gender fluidity

are not. However, Nelson's use of critical theory, personal experiences and anecdotes to

reconsider ideologies of natural, embodied human processes, informs her project of

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[9] Subcutaneous Mastectomy - a surgical procedure to remove the breasts in order to achieve a more masculine chest, often undergone by female to male transgender or non-binary people who do not want to identify as female. Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts,* (London: Melville House, 2015), p. 107.

unpicking these social constructs and re-evaluating marginalised and suppressed

perspectives that present alternative ways of thinking and being.

Turning to the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Nelson considers her notion of

'queer' as a transgressive tactic of resistance to patriarchal culture, quite aside from the

use of the word to denote sexual orientation or identity. Quoting Sedgwick's descriptor,

'Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*',[10]

Nelson brings the notion of queer into conversation with a Deleuzian becoming as a tactic

for challenging heteronormative culture and thinking through the various possible ways

that queer being and doing can activate change. Reflecting on Harry's gender fluidity in the

context of his transitioning body, she highlights the need to avoid slipping into the binary

trap when labels are applied and become signifiers that hold meaning in and of

themselves:

> How to explain – "trans" may work well enough as shorthand, but the quickly
> developing mainstream narrative it evokes ("born in the wrong body,"
> necessitating an orthopedic pilgrimage between two fixed destinations) is useless
> for some – but partially, or even profoundly, useful for others? That for some,
> "transitioning" may mean leaving one gender entirely behind, while for others –
> like Harry, who is happy to identify as a butch on T – it doesn't? I'm not on my way
> anywhere, Harry sometimes tells inquirers. How to explain, in a culture frantic for
> resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy?[11]

*The Argonauts* was published in 2015 and covers a period of years from 2008 onwards

when the term 'transgender' implied a transition from one gender to the other (only two

genders being presupposed). Nelson's critique of the binary at work in that definition is

twofold; it blurs the line of the two-gender distinction by documenting Harry's experience

of gender fluidity, and from that very personal experience, it then questions the legitimacy

of the language used to define it and hold meaning within that binary.  Speaking about *The*

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[10] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 35
[11] Ibid., p. 65.

*Argonauts* in an interview with Paul Laity, Nelson comments on the power she hopes her

book holds to affect its readers with the truth of her family's lived experience:

> I like to think that what literature can do that op-ed pieces and other
> communications don't do is describe felt experience […] the flickering, bewildered
> places that people actually inhabit. I hope my book has made a nuanced
> contribution to a conversation that is important but can be too clearly
> delineated.[12]

By examining the dynamics of their growing family and bodies in flux, Nelson navigates her

own life experiences through critical discourse to question not only the constraints we

place on bodies both physical and metaphorical but also how bodies of text and narrative

forms can reflect these transitions, and consequently the affect invoked in readers through

these unique textual forms.

The fluid style of Nelson's text as it moves through autobiography and critical

reflection evokes the voyage of the titular Argo. Towards the end of the book, the

theoretical references and academic, critical language fall away as the narrative focuses in

on the contrasting experiences of Nelson going into labour and giving birth, and Dodge

caring for his dying mother. These deeply personal accounts are rendered in visceral

language that bring the reader into the immediacy of each situation. Nelson's sentences

when describing her labour pains, become short, breathless, the form echoing the physical

act of embodied pain:

> The car is where the pain turns into a luge. I can't open my eyes. Have to go inside.
> Outside there is a lot of traffic; I squint and see Harry doing the best he can. Every
> bump and turn a nightmare. The pain cavern has a law, its law is black shudder.[13]

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[12] Paul Laity, 'Maggie Nelson interview: 'People write to me to let me know that, in case I missed it, there are only two genders'' *The Guardian*, (2016) < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/02/books-interview-maggie-nelson-genders> [accessed 03/07/2023]
[13] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 159.

This passage is akin to the short sentences marked with suffering from Eimear McBride's A

*Girl is a Half-formed Thing* and demonstrates the formal experimentation that comes into

play towards the end of the book.

Harry's experience is told in his own words, his first-person narrative is italicised to

indicate it is quoted material, and his name appears in the margin. His language is poetic

and heavy with the emotion of grief and love:

> *she was beautiful. and dying. her mouth was in slow motion rounding up little bits*
> *of earth air for her lungs, or just an echo of that i guess. her eyes were in light and*
> *open. she was jutting her chin in the sweetest, most dignified little coquettish juts.*
> *she was in the doorway of all worlds and i was in the doorway too.*[14]

The text here is without capitalisation at the beginning of sentences and in the use of the

personal pronoun, suggestive of a return to childlike writing and an inhabitation of the

childlike form in deference to a parent, the lower case 'i' indicative of his uncertainty and

position of deference to his mother in her transition from life to death. Harry's narration is

a deterritorialization of the relational positionalities of parent/child and their associated

values. He describes the final acts of caregiving for his mother, taking on the role of parent

himself — mothering come full circle and an echo of the many gendered mothers cited

earlier in Nelson's part of the narrative. The role of mother/child is reversed and coming to

an end for Dodge, but also the overlapping experience of parenthood is beginning anew.

These two closely intertwined narratives serve to highlight this overlap, this blending of

experience and life events and subsequently the affects they inscribe upon the self and the

body.

Nelson is directly influenced by Deleuzian thinking, utilising the Deleuzo-

Guattarian concept of becoming as a route of escape from the oppressive trap of

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[14] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 163.

categorisations that privilege majoritarian definitions of identity. In a short paragraph

directly referencing *becoming,* following on from her discussion of Harry's genderqueer

identity, the prose moves from philosophy to poetry - from an acknowledgement of the

pervasive human drive to compartmentalise and label, to the suggestion of becoming as a

counterweight, merging this theoretical perspective into its artistic realisation in language

– words from a Lucille Clifton poem *Turning*:

> The *presumptuousness* of it all. On the one hand, the Aristotelian, perhaps
> evolutionary need to put everything into categories – *predator, twilight, edible* –
> on the other, the need to pay homage to the transitive, the flight, the group soup
> of being in which we actually live. *Becoming*, Deleuze and Guattari called this
> flight: becoming-animal, becoming-woman, becoming-molecular. A becoming in
> which one never becomes, a becoming whose rule is neither evolution nor
> asymptote but a certain turning, a certain turning inward, *turning into my own /
> turning on in / to my own self / at last / turning out of the / white cage, turning out
> of the / lady cage / turning at last.* [15]

The use of Clifton's poem is evidence of artistic expression that evokes a sense of fluid

selfhood unfolding as an essence of becoming. The repeated turning away from cages of

definition and meaning, turning out of the white cage of colonialism and oppression,

turning out of the lady cage of gender roles, a turning towards inherent truth of self that

cannot be tied down, a self always in revolution, never coming to a stop. The rhythm of

the poem then reverberates backwards through the preceding theoretical points.

Throughout her fluid-like prose the reader is also brought into that becoming to

bear witness and as participant in forging these connections of theory to real life, engaging

in their own self-reflexive trajectories of affect. *The Argonauts* is a book that embodies its

title – like the Argo it refers to, the text, like the people in it, is being remade both through

its formal experimentation and through each reading of it. The shifting sands of reader

positionality – temporal, spatial, locational, political, are brought to bear upon the text as

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[15] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 66.

it offers a remaking of the subject and the text as part of the reading experience. Robyn

Wiegman suggests this achieved as a textual conversation between Nelson and her reader:

> the performance of the text conjures the work of the title, designating the author
> as an Argonaut who restores and rebuilds the world beneath her feet. Love,
> marriage, pregnancy:  yes, but not with the affective underbelly of conservative
> ideology and its gendered regulation; autobiography, academic criticism: yes, but
> demonstrably oriented toward interlocution not individual experience as the sole
> means and measure of queer survival and repair.[16]

Nelson demonstrates how her thinking processes and critical self-reflections on the

unfolding events of her life comprise the shifting multiplicities that make up her own

subjective becoming. The text represents her individual becoming as part of a wider socio-

political context that we as readers are bearing witness to, but also participating in

ourselves as part of the reading process. As well as the gaps left in between each vignette

of text allowing space for readers to pause, reflect and insert their own thoughts,

experiences and perhaps even marginalia, there are points of direct reader address,

whether it is through a playful intertextual reference to Jane Austen, 'Reader, we married

there'[17] or a more serious point of encouragement for the reader to consider the point she

has referred to:

> There is something profound here, which I will but draw a circle around for you to
> ponder. As you ponder, however, note that a difficulty in shifting gears, or a
> struggle to find the time, is not the same thing as an ontological either/or.[18]

 Our own multiplicities of affect are engaged by our response to the text, and the resulting

cognitive rhizomatics that grow from it, whether this through the conversations it

stimulates between readers or purely individual cognitive responses, all map a trajectory

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[16] Robyn Wiegman, 'In the Margins with The Argonauts', *Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 23 (2018): 209-213 (p. 210)
[17] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 30
[18] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* p. 81

of affect that intersects between author, reader and the wider social context that we operate within.

The text therefore embodies a layering of ideas, dialogue and promotes conversation with its readers. This is particularly pertinent within the online reading community that utilise social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, Goodreads and StoryGraph to engage with books and the reading experience, with variations of the names of these platforms indicating the specific niche of bookish communities (BookTube, Booksagram, BookTok). These platforms and the content creators that utilise them promote the books they read and foster reading communities often curating their own specific areas for discussing books. BookTube content creators with enough followers often set up their own Discord servers and run their own book clubs and curated discussion groups based around themed reading goals, reading trends or periodised reading themes – for every month of the year readers can find a community readalong to participate in depending on their preferred tastes.  YouTuber Simon Savidge has 28,000 subscribers to his channel and from this popularity has forged a career promoting books from literary festivals and tv shows to working with library outreach projects and charities like the Reading Agency.[19] Simon praises *The Argonauts* for its capacity to engage readers with complex and nuanced ideas in an accessible form of non-fiction:

> It's almost like Maggie Nelson takes the top of your head off, pours all these ideas in, then pops the lid back on, shakes it, and says go away and have a good think about that. And you do. I just think it's phenomenal […] opened me up to how non-fiction, not just narrative non-fiction, but in this kind of vignette, quirky,

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[19] Scholarship is emerging on these online reading communities, including small scale studies such as an analysis of reading participation within the Turkish Booktube community. Simge Ünlü and Lütfiye Yaşar suggest the followers they surveyed had different participatory motivations that included learning about literature. See Simge Ünlü and Lütfiye Yaşar, 'Literature Gathering as a Cultural Event: Booktube Participation' *Folklor/Edebiyat ,28, 111* (2022) 632-661. < https://doaj.org/article/0958df754bcf41ceb9d1f1c17e12cc1a> [accessed 01 January 2024]

> different way, can open your mind to so many more experiences than fiction can
> […] this opened me up to the other, almost endless possibilities of non-fiction.[20]

The sources Nelson incorporates into her narrative are jumping off points for her own thinking and reflection, and suggestions to the reader, offered like a breadcrumb trail – whether they follow it or not is up to them. In this vein, Jackie Stacey suggests that 'Nelson reconfigures the psychic dynamics between readership and the act of writing.'[21] Proposing a suggestion of the 'good-enough' reader of *The Argonauts* as one which doesn't have to know or understand all the theoretical positions and references she mentions, but allows ambiguity and ambivalence as part of the reading process. The relevance of including these academic theorists in a memoir format is that it reiterates the point of the argo – the flux and flow of interchanging ideas and dialogue, a layering of knowledge and experience that builds up and is then taken apart. Nelson simultaneously uses her text to deconstruct notions of privileged identity markers from within a fluctuating subject specific position that is continually speaking back to and undoing social and cultural behaviours. As such, *The Argonauts* works in affirmation of Deleuze and Parnet's assertion that, 'Multiplicities are made up of becomings without history, of individuation without subject'.[22] The encounter between the reader and the text is one such becoming that enables lines of flight to emerge from the reading experience. The reader might learn something new, look up one of the theorists referenced, relate to a particular episode that triggers a memory or fleeting thought, find themselves in opposition to a point of discussion or consider an amalgamation of different states of being that are culturally considered oppositional. All

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[20] Simon Savidge, *The Books that Shaped Me| Reading Through the Decades| June 2021.* Online video recording, YouTube, 3 June 2021 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFzAKe2PijU> [accessed 19 February 2023]
[21] Jackie Stacey, 'On Being A Good-Enough Reader of Maggie Nelson's The Argonauts' *Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 23 (2018): 204-208, (p. 204).
[22] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II,* trans. By Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2002), p. vii.

points of affective response contribute to this idea of multiplicities existing within an individual at the level of molecular disruption. These molecular multiplicities cross over to the molar reality of the individual's lived experience with varying degrees of intensity and therefore carry instances of affective power.

At the beginning of the book, she narrates an interaction with a friend in whom she confides about not knowing the pronouns of her new partner, Harry Dodge. Nelson reflects on her tactics to avoid using pronouns whilst talking about, and with her partner, and offers a reflective musing on how this avoidance leads her to linger in the space outside of the binary. 'You must learn to tolerate an instance beyond the Two, precisely at the moment of attempting to represent a partnership – a nuptial, even.' Nelson then cites Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet in the margin with the quoted text in italics, 'Nuptials are the opposite of a couple. There are no longer binary machines: question-answer, masculine-feminine, man-animal, etc. This could be what a conversation is – simply the outline of a becoming.'[23] Situating this quote at the point of her own uncertainty both in terms of how she refers to her new partner and how this new partnership is represented to others, leads the reader to an interesting intersection of theoretical and personal. The suggestion of a becoming in this quote is therefore multiple – a becoming as a conversation about gender and relationships outside of binary terms (what happens in the spaces in between? How can we articulate a state of inbetween-ness when the language or vocabulary is not good enough?) These are all questions that Nelson seems to be suggesting through her exploration of transitioning bodies.

Deleuze and Parnet discuss the notion of *becoming* as a mode of being that strives to be constantly in-process, in flux and in-between, fleeing from categorisations and binary paradigms. Nelson exposes the overwhelming compulsion of heteronormative culture to

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[23] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 8

appropriate the subjective self and demand these restrictive categorisations be adhered

to. Recalling a dinner party conversation with another woman who asked, 'have you been

with other women, before Harry?[…] Straight ladies have always been hot for Harry'[24]

Nelson's reaction is one of shock and reflexive questioning on the dichotomies at work in

this interaction;

> Was Harry a woman? Was I a straight lady? What did past relationships I'd had
> with "other women" have in common with this one? Why did I have to think about
> other "straight ladies" who were hot for my Harry? Was his sexual power, which I
> already felt to be immense, a kind of spell I'd fallen under, from which I would
> emerge abandoned, as he moved on to seduce others? Why was this woman,
> whom I barely knew, talking to me like this?[25]

Expressing her confusion at this attempt by a stranger to categorise and define her

sexuality and that of her partner, Nelson exposes the damaging effects of heteronormative

dominance inherent in patriarchal culture which dictates how we think, speak and use

language around subjectivity and selfhood. Nelson uses this method of self-reflexive

writing to consider the relationship between thought and language and specifically how

we process and articulate ideas on gender and identity. Referencing the film *By Hook or By*

*Crook* (2001) and the decision made by Dodge and cowriter Silas Howard with regards to

how the butch characters would use pronouns in difference contexts, Nelson champions

the need for a multiplicity of self and specificity within different spatio-temporal contexts:

> Words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure. The answer isn't
> just to introduce new words (boi, cisgendered, andro-fag) and then set out to reify
> their meanings (though obviously there is power and pragmatism here). One must
> also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings
> with which each word can fly.[26]

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[24] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 10.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., p. 9

It is through the ever-changing specificities of language and context that these multiple

selves are forged and by focusing on the spatiotemporal specificities of language Nelson

opens out the possibilities for a deeper engagement with our own multifaceted selves. The

process of writing her personal experiences as a critical memoir or autobiographical

narrative is infused with not only the subsequent multiple reflections on those experiences

by Nelson herself, but also the effects of interactions and discussions with Dodge and

others:

developing bonds in a new family not every day or every month or every year, but every seven years. (Such a time frame struck me then as ludicrous; now, seven years later, as wise and luminous.) Your inability to live in your skin was reaching its peak, your neck and back pulsing with pain all day, all night, from your torso (and hence, your lungs) having been constricted for almost thirty years. You tried to stay wrapped even while sleeping, but by morning the floor was always littered with doctored sports bras, strips of dirty fabric—"smashers," you called them.

*I just want you to feel free*, I said in anger disguised as compassion, compassion disguised as anger.

*Don't you get it yet?* you yelled back. *I will never feel as free as you do, I will never feel as at home in the world, I will never feel as at home in my own skin. That's just the way it is, and always will be.*

*Well then I feel really sorry for you*, I said.

Or maybe, *Fine, but don't take me down with you.*

We knew something, maybe everything, was about to give. We hoped it wouldn't be us.

You showed me an essay about butches and femmes that contained the line "to be femme is to give honor where there has been shame." You were trying to tell me something, give me information I might need. I don't think that line is where you meant for me to stick—you

Figure 9. Excerpt from *The Argonauts* showing the layout of the text in vignettes.

These multiple reflections from self and others intertwine throughout the text to weave a rhizomatic mode of recounting experience and are imbued with and coloured by social context, received knowledge, counter-culture and changes in socio-political temporal shifts. Writing about the State of California's Constitutional amendment, Proposition 8, which revoked the legal right of same sex couples to marry in November 2008, Nelson tracks their response as a couple; the realisation that an imminent political change would not only encroach on their freedom and marginalise them and their family in a very real way, the subsequent frantic rush to marry before the proposition was passed, and considers the social context of mainstream heteronormative California perpetuating anti-gay propaganda.

## Language limitations and authentic expression

A thread running throughout the book is the question of whether language is a good enough tool for expression. This question is presented as a conflict of opinion between Nelson and Dodge – she is devoted to Wittgenstein at the outset 'the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly! – in the expressed.'[27] Whereas Dodge maintains that language is inadequate and even damaging:

> Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow. […] Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again. All that is unnamable falls away, gets lost, is murdered. You called this the cookie-cutter function of out minds. You said that you knew this not from shunning language but from immersion in it, on the screen, in conversation, onstage, on the page.[28]

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[27] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 3
[28] Ibid., p. 4

Nelson records Dodge's words on the dominance of linguistic pattern matching – he

maintains that once a word is cast as a signifier, the signified will always be tied to it in

some way. As well as representing their discussions about the merits and limitations of

language within her own text, Nelson uses the form to speak back to this ongoing

question. Each paragraph or vignette holds the kernel of an idea or concept, she affords

each one just enough language to ignite the reader's curiosity but does not overload them

with exposition. She offers up these kernels of thought to be taken on for consideration

and then moves on to her next musing. Whether the reader chooses to follow her lead

down one or many paths of enquiry is up to them. Recounting a discussion between

herself and Harry in which they watch *X-Men: First Class* (2001) and debate the premise of

othered bodies assimilating into or rebelling against a normative culture, Nelson quotes

lines from the film then moves on to thinking about fiction a medium for the reader to

think:

> We bantered good-naturedly, yet somehow allowed ourselves to get polarizes into
> a needless binary. That's what we both hate about fiction, or at least crappy fiction
> – it purports to provide occasions for thinking through complex issues, but really it
> has predetermined the positions, stuffed narrative full of false choices, and
> hooked on them, rendering you less able to see out, to get out.[29]

Following this are two lines separated by white space in which she drops related points for

the reader to think about, the second line being a quote from Deleuze and Parnet with

their names in the margin:

> *Do you want to be right or do you want to connect?* ask couples therapists
>
> everywhere.
>
> *The aim is not to answer questions, it's to get out, to get out of it.*[30]

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[29] Ibid., p. 102.
[30] Ibid.*,* p. 103.

While each vignette follows on to the next in terms of narrative flow and a linking of ideas

or thinkers, she also includes her own self-reflexive questioning and frustrations.

Representing the reality of this critical thinking, she acknowledges her own biases and

ingrained social conditioning. Reflecting on her own propensity to seek out renowned

male theorists of child development as the most authoritative writers on the subject,

rather than their female counterparts, Nelson highlights the gender bias at work both in

terms of traditional academic publishing and the culturally constructed preference for

male authority.  'I'm boring myself with these reversals (feminist hazard).'[31] By exposing

her own thinking on the page, she affords credence to her unfolding thoughts, even while

they are subject to conflict or contradiction, and captures a representation of her thinking

self at that point in time. In this way, Nelson offers a glimpse of fleeting thought as her

own shifting perspectives continue to grow and change. In doing so she attempts to

represent herself as a subject-in-process, finding a way through and outside of

categorisation and fixed referential points. At the beginning of the book, her uncertainty

over her burgeoning relationship is mapped against an awareness of changing views and

divergence from certain philosophical standpoints she had previously held fast to. Once so

faithful to Wittgenstein, her conversations with Harry opened her up to the possibility of

critically reassessing her beliefs:

> But I changed too. I looked anew at unnamable things, or at least things whose
> essence is flicker, flow. I read-mitted the sadness of our eventual extinction, and
> the injustice of our extinction of others. I stopped smugly repeating *Everything
> that can be thought at all can be thought clearly* and wondered anew, can
> everything be thought.[32]

Throughout the book Nelson draws on the philosophical and academic to think through

her own lived experiences and in doing so, demonstrates the relevance and pertinence of

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[31] Ibid., p. 54.
[32] Ibid., p. 5.

challenging, abstract or complex modes of thought to daily life without requiring the reader to know these theories or follow her references. As Robin Wiegman attests, 'Nelson's expectations for the reader are not as deeply tied to bibliographic competency as theory devotees might like, as the psychic implications of all social relations is that they cannot not fail.'[33] The formal experimentation then reflects the titular ship and its journey. Short paragraphs and individual sentences float in the white space of the page, a visual suggestion of ideas as islands that the ship (both Nelson and the reader) pass by and through, evocative of the reading experience of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. The intertextual quotes are both isolated and embedded, and the accompanying names of theorists in the margins, suggest possible moorings or places to explore, but the text moves on like water, without being tethered to these academic standpoints. The typographic choice to place quotes from critical theorists in italics alongside speech from her own experiences in italics is indicative of the flow and interconnectedness of ideas, experiences and critical self-reflection.

As well as formal experimentation, Nelson moves the text fluidly between a juxtaposition of domestic and political geographies within the space of two subsequent paragraphs. A domestic scene, in which Nelson is role playing typical gender roles with Dodge's son in their home – she plays the part of a witch, he a soldier – is mapped against the shifting political landscape of 2008 California in which the advocation for, and the passing of Proposition 8, results in a ban of same sex marriage. Nelson observes how family values, and the protection of children are lauded as the reasons behind this change to the state constitution by conservatists, whilst exposing these fraudulent motives from within her own subject position and role as a mother. Nelson doesn't shy away from including every aspect of her life, including intimate sexual details, her text laying bare her

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[33] Wiegman, 'In the Margins with The Argonauts', p. 211.

raw embodied sexuality as part of the process of thinking and writing through her own

sexual specificity. Nelson asserts the value inherent in this practice of self-reflection and

self-interrogation, whilst also acknowledging that it is interwoven with the problem of its

articulation. Writing back to cultural expectations and representations of motherhood as a

defined subjective mode, she expresses her concern about her own contribution to the

canon of representation:

> What would these "enabling representations" look like? Better parts for women in
> Hollywood movies? Books like this one? I don't want to represent anything. At the
> same time, every word that I write could be read as some kind of defense, or
> assertion of value, or whatever it is that I am, whatever viewpoint it is that I
> ostensibly have to offer, whatever I've lived. [...] I am interested in offering up my
> experience and performing my particular manner of thinking, for whatever they
> are worth. [...] But I have also never been less interested in arguing for the
> rightness, much less the righteousness, of any particular position or orientation.
> *What other reason is there for writing than to be traitor to one's own reign, traitor
> to one's own sex, to one's class, to one's majority? And to be traitor to writing.*[34]

The text in italics in this passage is referenced in the margin only as Deleuze/Parnet. There

is no reference to the title of the text but the reader can discover their jointly authored

work *Dialogues* (1977, 2002 translation) should they choose to perform a quick internet

search. Taken from the essay 'On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature' Deleuze

asserts that the highest aim of literature is becoming, even downplaying the importance of

philosophy below the significance of writing literature. Inserting this quote from Deleuze

and Parnet here promotes the combination of Nelson's purest form of self-expression and

self-reflection with her philosophical musings, at the same time as acknowledging the

limits of language and writing. *The Argonauts* is precisely an offering up of her singular

experience and her unfolding thought processes pressed upon the page. Without agenda

or ego, Nelson confronts her own embodied subjectivity, in an ongoing reflective writing

practice that disrupts a narrative of harmonious self. Through critical and artistic self-

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[34] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, pp. 120-122.

reflection within her writing, she is acting the traitor to continually unpack her own notion of selfhood in an act of deterritorialization. Nelson is effectively demonstrating how individuals can enter into a form of molar becoming: disrupting the self, not to create a new and improved version, but to constantly keep changing the shape of it, blurring the edges of definition and questioning every part of a once assured mode of being – both cognitive and corporeal. Nelson's text is an offering to the reader proving an example what is possible when the self is engaged not as a singular entity but as a multiplicity always in flux, open to a continual process of becoming. Splintering the self into constantly shifting fragments that intersect and collide, merge and reform, only to break apart again in a perpetual becoming. The Argo in motion. The reader takes up a position of participant in Nelson's journey of becoming, and through this open-ended textual encounter is encouraged to embark upon their own.

## Community and Communality in the Seasonal Quartet

While Ali Smith's oeuvre has always contained social and political commentary in varying degrees of subtlety, her Seasonal Quartet together with *Companion Piece* comprise her most overtly political work to date. *Winter* and *Spring* were respectively shortlisted and longlisted for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction, with the final book in the quarter *Summer*, winning the award in 2021. Smith's acceptance speech highlighted George Orwell's influence on her own work and the need for contemporary fiction to intervene in, and embolden political debate:

> The place where these two things meet can't not be a place of humane – and inhumane – revelation. To me, that's what the word Orwellian means, […] That's why the past and future visions of his fiction will always be timeless, and why the Orwell prize for political fiction really matters.[35]

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[35] Alison Flood, 'Ali Smith wins Orwell Prize for novel taking in Covid-19 and Brexit', *The Guardian*, 25 June 2021 < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jun/25/ali-smith-wins-orwell-prize-

These five novels not only use fictional narratives to highlight the lived reality of the contemporary socio-political moment but deploy a stylistic formal experimentation that imbues her work with a strong sense of emotional affect. Containing commentary on important contemporary issues and events including Brexit, the refugee crisis and the mistreatment of immigrants, the rise of global right-wing politics leading to an upsurge in nationalism and neoliberal individualism, the climate crisis and the destruction of the natural world created by hyper consumerism and capitalism, the Covid-19 pandemic and the privatisation of the National Health Service at the hands of the Conservative government, the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests. Smith opens up the novel to a more participatory reading experience – one which becomes an interactive discourse with the reader. In a similar vein to the Orwellian influence on her work, Ben Masters draws links between the work of H. G. Wells and Ali Smith, not just in terms of their political and ethical priorities but in the affective impact of their stylistic choices upon the reader, and their contribution to destabilising conventional literary categorisation and critique. Masters challenges the Wells-James debate within the academy that has aligned the work of H. G. Wells with the lesser qualities of literary merit compared with the supposedly superior values of high modernism as exemplified in the work of Henry James.[36] Arguing that it is in fact Wells's unusual linguistic choices and innovative writing style combined with his overt political commentary that deserves a critical reappraisal as a mode of literary affect:

> Wells's devices impinge of us, repositioning us from one vantage to another. From this we can begin to trace a more phenomenological approach to the ethical and political instead of a propositional one – i.e. the sense that a novel's ethical and/or

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novel-covid-19-brexit-summer-joshua-yaffa-between-two-fires> [accessed 28 August 2023] (para. 7 of 10)

[36] Highlighting the oppositions that have been formed around their reputations as the novel vs storytelling, art vs journalism, character vs ideas, ethics vs politics, showing vs telling, realism vs romance, high vs low, literary vs popular. See Ben Masters, 'Adjustment-style: from H. G. Wells to Ali Smith and the metamodern novel', *Textual Practice,* 35 (2021): 967-995 (p. 972).

political value lies in its sensibility, as embodied by its form, which cannot be reduced to propositional statements of good/bad, right/wrong, or political programme, but can only be felt through the very encountering of that form.[37]

Linking this affective formal experimentation as an influence on Smith's Seasonal quartet, Masters draws connections between their stylistic presentation of plural viewpoints and shifting framing devices as a mode of discourse that encourages the reader to question the assumption of fixed points of being and knowledge:

> Smith loves puns that probe and enquire, that are sensitive to, and revelatory of, odd conjunctions and alternatives. They represent life to the side, so the pun becomes a kind of illuminative happenstance that splinters the frame of singular expression in order to let alternative meanings in. Even Smith's grammar is pre-occupied with multiplying out frames of reference. Her sentences proliferate with subclauses and parentheses and colons and co-ordinating words like 'but', 'or', 'so' and 'if', each one a signpost to a modifying direction of thought.[38]

This affective formal experimentation in the Seasonal Quartet is threaded through each book in sections that take the form of a Dickensian-style omniscient narrator or communal voice of the nation speaking in the binaries that define of the contemporary cultural moment. In *Autumn*, a section of three pages summarises the polarity of the UK population after the Brexit vote, with each sentence beginning with the refrain 'All across the country' to emphasise the commonality of emotionally charged experience within the divisiveness:

> All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing.[39]

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[37] Masters, 'Adjustment-style', p. 976.
[38] Ibid., p. 985.
[39] Smith, *Autumn*, p. 59.

The repetition of 'All across the country' is poetic in its rhythm, pivoting from one side of the Brexit coin to the other, highlighting the division of beliefs from within a common location, and then zooming out to critique the socio-economic effects of the referendum. Within these few pages, readers from the UK at the time of publication would not only have been able to recognise themselves and their fellow citizens who held opposing views on the Brexit vote, but also felt the lived reality of that politically divisive period and the adverse effects of this lack of dialogue reflected back at them through the repetition of the text. The end of this section breaks down one sentence into individual lines on the page akin to the structure of a poem.

> was about control. All across the country,
> everything changed overnight. All across the
> country, the haves and the have nots stayed the
> same. All across the country, the usual tiny per cent
> of the people made their money out of the usual
> huge per cent of the people. All across the country,
> money money money money. All across the
> country, no money no money no money no money.
> All across the country, the country split in pieces.
> All across the country, the countries cut adrift.
> All across the country, the country was divided, a
> fence here, a wall there, a line drawn here, a line
> crossed there,
>     a line you don't cross here,
>     a line you better not cross there,
>     a line of beauty here,
>     a line dance there,
>     a line you don't even know exists here,
>     a line you can't afford there,
>     a whole new line of fire,
>     line of battle,
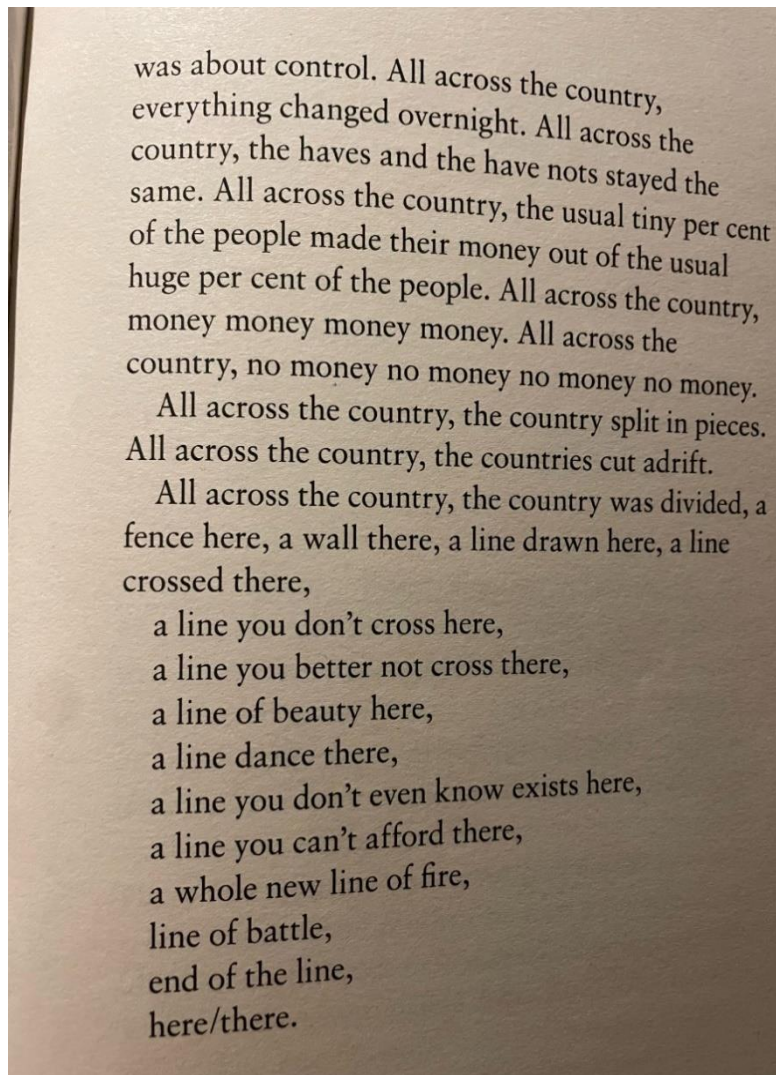>     end of the line,
>     here/there.

Figure 10. Page from Ali Smith's *Autumn* showing repetition.

Smith uses repetitive language, wordplay and formal experimentation here to represent

the simultaneous division and connection of the UK population. Each line is separate on

the page but still forms part of the whole sentence connected by a comma and ending in

just two words of a binary – here/there. These last ten lines of the page play with the

concept of lines as division ('a line you don't cross here […] line of battle') and connection

('a line dance there' with its connotations of a joyful communal event, and 'a line you

don't even know exists here,'[40] suggesting the arbitrary boundaries of place) and speak to

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[40] Smith, *Autumn*, p. 61

the overarching context of borders as a form of exclusion and control, both in terms of

geographical and political thresholds and metaphorical or personal boundaries. The

rhythm and cadence of Smith's repetitive prose in this section, giving way to a fragmented

sentence that falls down the page and ends in a stark binary, visually represents the

crumbling of the socio-political state within the UK at the time of publication. This format

is picked up again in the opening pages of *Spring* (Fig. 11) but with typographical variance

of differing font size to replicate the loudness of some voices over others, and disparate

punctuation to represent the overlap and overwhelm of these competing voices and

opinions that range from politicians and police to tabloid headlines and social media

statuses. The use of the pronoun 'we' in this passage forms a communal, almost choral

voice of authority and unity that is made possible only by the previous discord from

*Autumn*. This authoritative voice echoes the sentiments and sentences coming out from

the UK Government and right leaning media outlets at the time of publication.

> We want rape threats death threats 24/7 to black/ female members of parliament no just women doing anything public anyone doing anything public we don't like we need How Dare She/How Dare He/How Dare They. We need to suggest the enemy within. We need enemies of the people we want their judges called enemies of the people we want their journalists called enemies of the people we want the people we decide to call enemies of the people called enemies of the people we want to say loudly over and over again on as many tv and radio shows as possible how they're silencing us. We need to say all the old stuff like it's new. We need news to be what we say it is. We need words to mean what we say they mean. We need to deny what we're saying while we're saying it. We need it not to matter what words mean. We need a good old slogan Britain no England/America/Italy/France/ Germany/Hungary/Poland/Brazil/ [insert name of country] First. We need the dark web money algorithms social media. We need to say we're doing it for freedom of speech. We need bots we need cliche we need to offer hope. We need to say it's a new era the old era's dead their time's over it's our time now. We need to smile a lot while we say it we need to laugh on camera ha ha ha thump man laughing his head off hear that factory whistle at the end of the day that factory's dead

Figure 11. Page from Ali Smith's *Spring* showing varied typography and repetition.

The syntactical and typographical choices that inform Smith's formal experimentation in

these sections, together with her use of non-chronological and cyclical time throughout

the books, work as a form of feminist critique through negative aesthetics — an approach

advocated by Ellen Berry whereby experimental texts deploy strategies of literary negation

to represent the reality of lived experience entrenched in normative categories of power and oppression by 'unmaking dominant structures of rationality.'[41] Berry suggests that negative aesthetics functions in its utilisation of radical literary techniques as a mode of social critique that 'supports antisocial forms of radical refusal'.[42] These passages work in the vein of negative aesthetics to unmake the rationality of contemporary polarised views by amplifying them to expose their absurdity. While these sections represent the dominant voice of the nation at the time of each book's publication, each novel also works to combat that sense of singular authority and individualism. By delving into the shifting differences and nuance of polyvocal experience, Smith's texts unmake any singular essentialist worldview, deterritorialising any sense of primacy or authoritarian voice and instead offering up a plethora of perspectives and experience. As Daniel Lea notes of Smith's writing: 'Stylistically her writing embraces fragmentation and multi-perspectivalism to reflect the crumbling of the singular, authoritarian voices in contemporary discourses.'[43]

*Autumn* follows the friendship between a young girl Elisabeth and her elderly neighbour Daniel. Daniel acts as babysitter and mentor, always encouraging Elisabeth to question the world around her even when it seems too rigid to do so. Daniel's perpetual greeting to Elisabeth throughout the book is to ask what she is reading – a question that affirms the importance of reading as a means of critical engagement with the world and is perhaps indicative of Smith's own interjection to her readers, reminding us to critically appraise the narratives we encounter. The many intertextual references weaved throughout the text demonstrate Smith's delight in how the connections between the narratives we consume reinforce the connections we have to each other, and challenge

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[41] Ellen E. Berry, *Women's Experimental Writing: Negative Aesthetics and Feminist Critique* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 1.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Daniel Lea, *Twenty-first-century fiction: Contemporary British Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), p. 27.

the frameworks of hierarchy and power we have built up on the foundations of exclusion

and difference. On their walks Daniel engages Elisabeth in games that challenge and

change narratives – he encourages her to tell her own story and question the authenticity

and structure of others, so that she may gain insight into the structural paradigms of

narratives designed to exert control.

An early scene in *Autumn* describes the frustrating bureaucracy of the passport

office dictating requirements for a person to gain access to an official identity document.

The scene runs through almost slapstick humour to emphasise the farcical nature of the

interaction between Elisabeth, now in her thirties and a university lecturer, and the Post

Office employee who refuses to process her application:

> Not good, the man says. I'm afraid not good at all. Your face is the wrong size.
> How can my face be a wrong size? Elisabeth says.
> You didn't follow the instructions about filling the facial frame […]
> What size is my face meant to be? Elisabeth says
> The correct size for a face in the photograph submitted, the man says, is between
> 29 millimetres and 34 millimetres. Yours falls short by 5 millimetres.
> Why does my face need to be a certain size? Elisabeth says.
> Because it what is stipulated, the man says.[44]

This scene conveys the frustration Elisabeth experiences, as a highly educated and capable

person, in failing to carry out a seemingly mundane task to renew her passport. However,

it also highlights the systematic barriers in place that prevent people from obtaining legal

documentation that legitimises their identity. Referring to the price of buying a passport as

well as the additional cost of utilising the bureaucratic check and send process, Smith

points to the financial disparity that divides those who can afford to legitimise their

identity against those who can't. The scene is also evocative of the xenophobic and racist

tones of nationalist slurs against people whose 'faces don't fit' with ideals of Britishness.

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[44] Smith, *Autumn*, p. 24.

Smith has already shown the reader how these narratives play out on real bodies with the

opening scene of *Autumn* depicting Daniel walking along a beach littered with the

drowned bodies of asylum seekers/refugees.[45] By showing the inhumane reality at the

outset of the novel caused by the dehumanisation of those seeking safety, Smith then

moves her own narrative forward by tracing back to the polarising cultural rhetoric that

fed into those deaths. Olivia Laing writes of Smith as an artist closely involved with the

world:

> She believes in unselfish communal values such as altruism and generosity and has
> an infectious faith in hospitality, be it to new ideas or strangers. […] Listening to
> the radio in the run-up to the referendum, she was appalled by the collapse of
> dialogue, the creep of lies, the resurgence of a kind of bullying language – "go
> home"; "we're coming after you" – she hadn't heard since she was a schoolgirl
> back in the 1970s. "Human beings need to take in all the possibilities of rhetoric,
> all the varieties and versatilities and here was coming a loggerhead," she says
> now.[46]

Smith's work is embedded with these values and seeks to combat the ever-increasing

divisive politics that pits humans against each other by showing up the falsity in these

narratives. Highlighting the middle ground of community and commonality through her

characters,  Smith guides the reader into affective spaces of love, acceptance and

empathy. Speaking of her earlier body of work, with particular reference to *The Accidental*

(2005), Marina Warner considers the impact of Smith's prose upon the reader as a

viscerally affecting charge:

> The effect is metaphysical, like a seventeenth-century love poem, and the
> sensuous chromatics are so tightly spun into the physical fabric into the story that
> certain scenes strike at the reader's body as if the words on the page were
> material. Love of different kinds and degrees fills the Aliverse; she is brave – and

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[45] Smith, *Autumn*, p. 12.
[46] Olivia Laing, 'Ali Smith: It's a pivotal moment…a question of what happens culturally when
something is built on a lie', *The Guardian*, 16 October 2016,
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/16/ali-smith-autumn-interview-how-can-we-live-ina-world-and-not-put-a-hand-across-a-divide-brexit-profu> [accessed 2 January 2023]

unusually among contemporary writers – in her belief in it, and it beams out to take hold of the reader.[47]

Warner's observation stands true for Smith's Seasonal quartet in which even the most obviously frustrating and dislikeable characters, such as Art in *Winter* and Robert in *Summer*, who are written as obtuse, apathetic and even cruel, are treated with love and forgiveness by Smith herself. In this way, Smith prompts her readers to do the same – to look beyond the surface actions of these characters and dwell in the ambiguity and uncertainty of what they can't know, never fully being able to comprehend the entirety of an individual or understand the nuance and multiplicity that make up their shifting subjectivity. To take the example of Art and Robert, both characters are given a redemption of sorts, but they are still rendered as difficult with ambiguous developmental arcs that don't transform them from wholly bad to good. Smith incorporates a tender scene between Art and Daniel — both unaware of their connection as father and son — in which Art's compassion for an unknown dying man is tempered by the possible selfish motivation of developing of a romantic relationship with Elisabeth:

> In that room that afternoon with the old man in the bed, a bright and charming old man who didn't seem to remember Art's mother but who took Art's hand in his and wouldn't let it go, Charlotte had seen the woman called Elisabeth see Art. She had seen Art see the woman back.[48]

The reader is therefore also requisitioned to consider their own part in building up a view of each character and scenario based on their own specific biases and worldview. Smith acknowledges this as leaving room for the reader and the multiplicity of interpretation. In

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[47] Marina Warner, Forward in *Ali Smith, Contemporary Critical Perspectives,* ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. vii-ix (p. viii-ix).
[48] Smith, *Summer*, p. 350.

an interview, Gillian Beer suggests that the reader always 'populates the work', Smith

responds:

> But in a way the story, generating story, includes the reader at all points, because
> the reader will generate his or her own story, as he or she reads alongside, so
> exactly that. So I suppose one of the things that's most important but almost
> impossible to do, because you can't actually assure yourself that you are doing it,
> is to leave room for the reader. And in the way that placing your story alongside
> the story will do that. Because it allows for all sorts of other stories to propagate
> from the told narrative. It's like a narrative free-for-all, which at the same time will
> hold you steady.[49]

Smith's work in the Seasonal Quartet is not only to weave multiple strands of narrative

together with her own intertextual references but also to leave space for the reader to

bring their own to bear upon the text as part of the reading experience. At the end of

*Summer* Robert's change of heart or softening of his previously hard character and

judgemental views, comes in the form of an epiphany about people not being just a

singularly definable entity — but rather a mixture of things. In a conversation with

Charlotte where Robert recounts seeing a drunken man falling out of a pub exposing

himself, he says he doesn't want to live in a world like that – one where people are so

down beaten by the state of their life, they have to dull the pain with unconsciousness.

Charlotte posits the distinction between two types of people and the way they respond to

the world around them – the drunken man, embodied in his sensorial oblivion, contrasted

with the academic in search of knowledge. However, Robert considers the middle ground

or in-between alternative:

> But what if you're a mix of *all* the things. And it's not possible to be just *one* of
> them? Robert said. What does that make you?
> Human? Charlotte said. Like, you know.
> Someone who'd stick a glass thing to his sister's hand? With superglue?
> It wasn't just glass, Robert said. It was so much more than just a *glass thing*.

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[49] Ali Smith, quoted in Gillian Beer, 'Gillian Beer Interviews Ali Smith' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 137-153 (p. 146).

What was it then? Charlotte said.

It was time, Robert said.

Time, Charlotte said. Is that the gift we get to give to others, then?

Robert shrugged. Don't know, he said.

Me neither, Charlotte said. What would Einstein say?

He'd say, Robert said, that the human species got our best intellectual tools from looking at the stars. But that this doesn't make the stars responsible for what we do with our intellects.

Wow, Charlotte said. Robert. What a great thing to say.

Is it? Robert said.

Pleasedness radiated off him[50]

Robert's acknowledgement that people are a mixture of things, incorporating contradictory or ambiguous qualities is a manifestation of Smith's emphasis on multiplicity within individual subjectivity. Robert's observations as well as his own character and those around him present the reader with a subjective mode of becoming as the singularities that comprise these individuals shift and change with each instant. The Robert at the beginning of the book as annoying and hurtful brother to Sacha is no longer the same Robert in conversation with Charlotte musing over questions of the universe. The passage quoted above, taken from the very end of *Summer*, is typical of the line breaks and white space left on the page around dialogue and character interactions throughout the Seasonal quartet. The effect of this stylistic choice is twofold; it works both to leave space for the impact of Charlotte's patience and kindness towards Robert, leading to his own changing mindset through her willingness to understand his perspective. It also gives physical space for the reader to consider their own responses and thoughts. Leaving white space after a question and continuing the conversation after a line break allows the reader to pause, offering up - as Robert and Charlotte consider — the gift of time. Smith gives her readers time to stop and reflect without the immediacy of having to move onto the next part of the dialogue. In this conversation, Robert is given the opportunity by Charlotte to consider and reflect on his own actions (in this case, of gluing a glass egg timer to his

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[50] Smith, *Summer,* pp. 373-4.

sister's hand) and hard-held thoughts without judgement or criticism, but with the understanding that he is a flawed human being with the potential to grow and change just like everyone else. In appealing to his knowledge of Einstein she also boosts his confidence by allowing him to show his positive characteristics such as how he can apply his intellectual knowledge to a given scenario. The final sentence of 'Pleasedness radiated off him' viscerally demonstrates the affective power of change wrought through connection, conversation and kindness over that of dismissal, anger and polarity. It is a distinctively stylistic choice that is typical of Smith's word play and unconventional use of grammar to provoke a response or affect the reader. Pleasedness is not a typical word we would readily use in our everyday language, so its deployment here causes the reader to consider its meaning and construction; the way in which Robert feels this sense of being pleased. It radiates off him, giving a visual sense of his pleasure as a result of Charlotte's response. In reading this sentence I imagined him to have a beaming smile and thought about how a body could manifest this sense of pleasure through embodied expression into the world around them. In doing so I searched for a memory of a time in my own life when I also felt pleased with something I had said that might have evoked such a response from another person. Smith's stylistic choices in using unconventional language and grammatical constructions therefore allow a different space to open up for a reader to respond, as Ben Masters attests:

> Smith's grammar embodies particular ways of seeing and thinking (qualification, hesitation, adjustment, intensification, accumulation), a style of surmise that is wired for ways of knowing rather than knowledge itself.[51]

Charlotte affords Robert respect, value and the opportunity to reflect on the multiplicities that reside within him and others. His response to her suggested positioning of people in

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[51] Masters, 'Adjustment-style', p. 985.

binary categories is not just a reversal of his previous views but shows an opening out of

his thinking process that is receptive to a middle ground or alternative ways of knowing.

This scene also employs a device, frequently used throughout the quartet, of characters

asking each other questions to think through an issue, event or problem but without them

needing to give a resolution or answer. When Charlotte asks, 'Is that the gift we get to give

to others, then?' and the response is 'Robert shrugged. Don't know, he said. Me neither,

Charlotte said. What would Einstein say?' both characters leave room for uncertainty and

for questions to be left unanswered, thereby leaving room for the reader to interweave

their own ideas with the narrative. It also suggests in a wider context, the potential

fruitfulness of questions, uncertainty and curiosity. In contrast to Robert's earlier views

and the sections throughout the quartet of competing polarised voices, the power of a

humble stance of not-knowing is given credence. Along with the white space around

dialogue these gaps and pauses in the text are suggestive of spaces open for ambiguity,

leaving room for her characters to be unsure and not know, leaves room for her readers to

do the same – to ponder, question, and occupy a space of in-between-ness. The inclusion

of Einstein as a respected scientific figure whose influence upon our knowledge of the

world and our interaction with it, might also be read as indicative of Smith's metamodern

positioning.[52] Appealing to a sense of certainty, meaning and ultimate truth grounded in

scientific investigation and knowledge, without the surety of ever achieving it, suggests

Smith is keen to remind her readers that notions of ultimate truth or canonical knowledge

always have the capacity to be interrogated with curiosity and openness. Smith's style, like

that of her female modernist and sidelined avant-garde predecessors, resides in the in-

between state of ambiguity and unknowing-ness that a literary becoming can activate. In

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[52] Applying a definition of metamodernism from Nigerian art historian Moyo Okediji as 'an artistic attempt to both extend and challenge modernism and postmodernism together' taken from Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm's philosophical project of applying metamodernism as a new mode of theory. See Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. 5.

adopting and appealing to off-centre or marginalised voices that have been silenced or

disregarded, Smith subtly points out to her readers all the potential unwritten knowledge

and experience that has been denied primacy and dissemination.

As a tool for literary activism, Smith's emphasis on kindness, curiosity and

connection are proven qualities to forge affective change. An example of such activist

practices outside of a literary environment are social commentary multimedia platforms

that are targeted towards educating individuals for personal growth and self-development

as the foundation of tackling social issues and injustice. The *Know Better Do Better* podcast

created by Marie Beecham seeks to tackle racism through such educational practices and

uses very carefully curated language and discussion points to foster allyship and promote

racial equity. Tackling contentious issues such as Critical Race Theory, and more specifically

interrogating the language that often polarises discussions of racial equity such as white

privilege, Beecham encourages empathy and openness as a practice of anti-racism

education for her listeners to implement when encountering resistance from others.

Beecham's podcast aims to equip her listeners as activists of racial equity with the

language and attitude required to pursue and maintain the work of anti-racism. In an

episode on the impact of vocabulary, Beecham suggests contentious terminology such as

white privilege can be dispensed with when it causes resistance to racial equity goals, and

instead more readily receptive terms used to foster alliance and common ground.[53] This

example of social activism wrought through considered use of language and individual

engagement to prompt a mindset shift, is one which aligns with the power of literary

affect to perpetuate such activism through the reading experience.

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[53] 'The Small Change that Makes or Breaks Antiracist Goals', *Know Better Do Better Podcast*,1
August 2023.

Johannes Wally argues that while *Autumn* 'refrains from returning open verdicts

on current political affairs, it is a deeply political book'[54] in its left leaning socio-political

critique. Suggesting that Smith's use of linguistic and literary devices, specifically

intertextual references to works of classic literature, only work in the context of fostering a

sense of commonality and shared cultural knowledge between author and a *specific type*

of reader. Aligning its political critique to middle-class, educated liberal readers, Wally

suggests the novel's political reach is minimally contained to this specific group of society

through forging a shared sense of identity based on social and cultural power and

knowledge. An identity that is threatened by 'the rise of anti-intellectual nationalism',

suggesting these readers will no longer hold the cultural capital they once did. Wally's

somewhat reductive argument fails to acknowledge the broader reach of the social

critique performed in the novel through its parody of, and subsequent deconstruction of

identity categories that holds affective power for *all* readers by way of negative aesthetics.

Referring to Ellen Berry's term that denotes thematic concerns and formal strategies which

'constitute a radical critique of all structures of domination and inequality'.[55] In *Autumn*, as

well as the subsequent Seasonal novels, Smith deploys thematic points that highlight,

critique and undermine dominant structures of rationality and their associated codes of

meaning, as well as formal strategies that 'produce indeterminacy and lack of closure;

strategies emphasizing silence, absence, loss, blankness, incompleteness, fragmentation'.[56]

Rather than functioning as fixed points that enact and enable domination and inequality,

categories of identity based on gender, class, sexuality and race, are mapped against the

theme and repeating motif of borders and boundaries within the novels. Smith utilises this

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[54] Johannes Wally, 'The Return of Political Fiction?: An Analysis of Howard Jacobson's Pussy (2017) and Ali Smith's Autumn (2016) as First Reactions to the Phenomena 'Donald Trump' and 'Brexit' in Contemporary British Literature.' *Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik*, 43, 1, (2018), 63–86. (p. 81). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26556725> [Accessed 16 August 2023]
[55] Ellen Berry, *Negative Aesthetics*, p. 2.
[56] Ibid.

process of mapping to recast subjectivity by presenting the reader with fluid characteristics that resist control. Using recognisable references to the reader's assumed knowledge of popular culture and experience, Smith uses parody and farce to demonstrate how fixed categories of identification based on a socio-cultural codex of meaning are arbitrary and open to deterritorialisation. In this way she is demonstrating how individual subjectivity is not a fixed entity and therefore can't be contained within the restrictive categories of identity markers but is in a constant motion of flux and change, even at the smallest points of intersection. Her characters embody the shifting multiplicities of becoming, taking their new experiences and interactions into themselves and making space new ideas at the same time as they release other prejudices or beliefs.

For example, in contrast to Wally's critique that Smith's readers are predominantly among an educated elite or middle-class demographic, her use of contemporary popular culture references such as daytime tv shows would be familiar to a much wider section of the UK society. In *Autumn* Elisabeth's mother Wendy regularly watches such a show – an antique hunting programme called *The Golden Gavel*, in which members of the public are paired with celebrities in a competition to buy and sell antiques for profit. Using this format, Smith highlights and plays with the social categories that constrict individuals within designated subject positionalities, demonstrating their fallibility and modes of deterritorialization already in operation; Wendy's position as viewer shifts to participant when she becomes a contestant on the show, members of the public are distinguished from the celebrity contestants by their coloured boiler suits, whereas the celebrities are allowed to wear their own clothes. The implication of clothing as indicative of status is perhaps a subtle commentary here – the coloured boiler suits both contain the contestants as a nondescript group with connotations of working-class attire and institutionalised uniforms (prisons/detention centres), but also sets them apart from the celebrities and experts that have the freedom to express their individuality through their

clothes. The celebrities also arrive in classic cars – a marker of wealth, prestige and

privilege, whereas the 'normal' people are already in place waiting for them:

> I wonder which make of vintage car you'll get to go in, she says.
> No, because the members of the public don't get to, her mother says. It's only the
> celebrities and experts who get to do that. They arrive. We're already there at the
> shop waiting to meet them.
> Why don't you get to go in a car? Elisabeth says. That's outrageous.
> No point in devoting airtime to people who nobody knows from Adam driving
> about the place in old cars, her mother says.[57]

The demarcation of members of the public from the contrasted category of 'celebrities

and experts' is enacted through these recognisable visual indicators on screen. By drawing

attention to the tactics employed to separate people into categories within popular

culture narratives such as these seemingly mundane tv shows, Smith is highlighting the

ways in which categorisation defines and restricts cultural power and value and is so

entrenched in our cultural psyche thereby inevitably impacting our cognitive processes

and subsequent behaviours. The character development of Wendy throughout the novel

signals Smith's deterritorialization of these boundaries, and her encouragement of the

reader to notice them as embedded social constructs that can be challenged and

subverted.  The theme of geographical boundaries and borders is also examined as

inherently bound up with notions of individual and group identity, represented throughout

the quartet in various forms of fenced off land or property. Wendy's subjective position

moves from passive observer — of the television show and the enclosure of public land

near to her house — to active participant. She moves from a stance of inaction and

passivity — requesting Elisabeth take action to fight against the enclosure, to a position of

activist resisting enforced boundaries on multiple levels at the end of the novel:

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[57] Smith, *Autumn*, p. 131.

> Go and see it, her mother says. I want you to do something about it.
> What can I do about it? Elisabeth says, I'm a lecturer in history of art.
> Her mother shakes her head.
> You'll know what to do, she says. You're young.[58]

Wendy forms a romantic relationship with Zoe, one of the celebrities she meets on The Golden Gavel, exposing the arbitrary nature of the enforced divide between the two types of people on the show, as well as a shift in her earlier ideological stance of disparaging people from the LGBTQ community that she directed towards Daniel. Her outrage at the enclosure of public land is also converted into tangible activist action:

> You'll never believe what your mother's gone and done, Zoe says. She is laughing so much that Elisabeth can't not laugh too.
> She got herself arrested. She threw a barometer at the fence, Zoe says.[…]
> Zoe tells Elisabeth that her mother'd been held for an hour, got off with a caution and is right now at the antiques yard down the road at the junction, stockpiling more stuff to throw at the fence, that her mother's new plan is that every day she's going to go and get herself arrested (and here she imitates Elisabeth's mother perfectly) *bombarding that fence with people's histories and with the artefacts of less cruel and more philanthropic times*.[59]

Smith's deployment of comedic scenes and farce such as this one is overlaid atop the more serious thematic context of the action in allegorical episodes throughout the novels. In this case, Wendy's anger is representative of the wider social context of increasing privatisation of common land and the restriction of public access to green spaces. Symbolised by the use of the barometer – a tool that measures atmospheric pressure - Wendy physically protests at the borders of capitalist control with the collective pressure building amongst the UK population.

This symbolism continues through the quartet where Smith points to the ways in which structures of power and control can be destabilised and deterritorialised through

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[58] Smith, *Autumn*, p. 55.
[59] Ibid., pp. 254-5. Italics in original text.

individual and collective action. In *Winter* the issue of gentrification and underfunding of public services within the UK is represented in microcosm as apathetic Sophia sees land fenced off and marked for luxury flats, and her son Art observes the division of public library space between public and private use. Art notices that front entrance of the library that was previously available to everyone, has been reserved for use only by people in the new luxury flats. His presence in the library is due to his need to use a computer, so he goes to the only place where free access to computers is publicly available. Smith's concern for the safety and sanctity of public libraries as both a communal resource of information and a space of public support, is a theme that runs throughout her oeuvre. Her inclusion of a scene that demonstrates the real time observable effects of public funding cuts and privatisation of public resources will again hold affective power for contemporary readers able to witness similar scenes in their own local communities:

> It was quite difficult to get a place on one of these old pcs and a lot of people are now standing waiting for one of the only five that are working. Some of the people in the queue have an urgent look like there are things they really have to do soon. One or two people look frantic. They pace about behind the people in the pc cubicles. Art doesn't care. Today he doesn't care about anything. The famously gentle Art, is giving way to no one else's needs and is staying in this makeshift fucking cubicle as long as he likes and as long as he chooses to.[60]

Contemporary readers will understand the context of the frantic people waiting to use the computers, their need of the service greater than Art's, for essential transactions such as filling in job applications, benefit or housing forms. They will have no access to alternative provision like Art, who has a smart phone and the financial capacity to buy himself a new laptop. Yet his ignorance and callous disregard at the urgency of other people's situations compounds his position as one of privilege that prioritises individual advancement over collective care and support.

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[60] Smith, *Winter*, p. 48.

Charlotte breaks off her relationship with Art following several rows in which their

opposing views are representative of the cultural divide between outrage and apathy.

Charlotte's feelings of overwhelm are viscerally conveyed in response to Art's ignorance

and indifference towards the British government's right-leaning tactics of inciting division

amongst the population. A distraction from environmental damage and climate change

driven by neoliberal ideologies of hyper-consumerism, allows the privileged elite (of which

Art and Sophia are a part) to ignore the suffering of a growing proportion of the

population living in poverty, as well as the destruction of the natural world, without feeling

any guilt for their own contribution to, and complicity with structural inequality. Both

Sophia and Art are in a position of moderate wealth and privilege and their apathy at these

social changes is representative of the wider public attitude embedded in a neoliberal

culture of individualism.  In a conversation with Charlotte in which she shows concern for

the wide reaching effects of these systemic problems, Art responds by reaffirming their

own position of safety:

> We're all right, he said. Stop worrying. We've enough money, we've both got good
> assured jobs. We're okay.
> You're default to selfishness is not okay at all, she said. Then she started shouting
> about the effect of forty years of political selfishness.[61]

Art's employment as a copyright infringement investigator for a large corporation,

positions him as the epitome of an acquiescent, law-abiding citizen, accepting the socio-

political frameworks of injustice that perpetuate inequity without question. Charlotte is

opposingly framed as his agitator, attempting to penetrate his closed off mind with her

own outrage. She hacks into his Twitter — a nature writing account — as an act of

disruption; posting falsified tweets identifying improbable species of bird and claiming

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[61] Ibid., p. 55.

false witness to natural occurrences such as snow fall during a balmy winter's day. Art

presumes that his followers, who he assumes are all discernible nature enthusiasts, will

immediately see that these tweets are false. However, to his surprise, he receives vitriolic

abuse, his account attracts more attention and gains new followers as a result of these

falsified claims:

> The replies are already foaming like badly poured lager. Fury and sarcasm and
> rancour and hatred and ridicule, and one tweet which said, *if you were a woman
> I'd be sending you a death threat right about now*. Art is not sure whether this is a
> po-mo joke or not. Worse, a couple of media sources, an Australian one and an
> American one, have picked it up and run with it, with his twitter ID still on it. First
> Photos Central London Snowfall.[62]

Using a singular fictional example, Smith provides an easily recognisable analogy of the

effect of mainstream and social media swaying influence over an unquestioning public.

Contemporary readers may have observed the effects of the rhetoric and propaganda

promulgated through the national press and fake social media accounts that fuelled the

pro-Brexit Leave campaign prior to the EU referendum, and how it garnered support and

mass adherence based on false claims of bolstering the UK economy and the National

Health Service, as well as encouraging extreme xenophobia and hostility towards

migrants.[63] Smith's metamodernist stance is evident here as she critiques the idea of a

post-truth society and seeks to engage the reader with a critical mindset where questions

of authenticity and validity are prioritised.  Art and Sophia are both characters that

represent the apathetic, individualistic majority of neoliberal capitalism, observing the

restriction of the freedoms of others without concern. Their self-centred ideologies are

disrupted and destabilised by the characters of Charlotte, Lux and Iris whose actions of

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[62] Ali Smith, *Winter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017), p50. Italics in original text.
[63] See Hannah Marshall and Alena Drieschova, 'Post-Truth Politics in the UK's Brexit Referendum'
*New Perspectives*, 26: 3 (2018), 89-106.

care and kindness all symbolise the power of resistance, individual agency and collective

action against wider constructs of power, coercion and control.  Iris represents the positive

change that can be wrought by grass-roots activism and direct active help, spending her

life protesting against injustice and working with organisations and volunteer groups

supporting refugees and asylum seekers. In the same way that Charlotte vehemently

challenges Art's attitude with visceral outrage, Iris similarly counters Sophia's ignorance

and sense of entitlement and indifference with her own very different experiences. In a

conversation between the estranged sisters, where Sophia's nonchalant expectations of

wealth and privilege lead her to assume Iris's recent trip to Greece was for a holiday or

second home, she is confronted with the harsh reality of displaced people fleeing from war

and trauma:

> Thousands of holidaymakers arriving every day from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, for
> city-break holidays in Turkey and Greece. And the people from Yemen who've
> nothing to eat, they head for their holidays into Africa, where there's loads to go
> round for everybody especially in the countries where people are already starving,
> though the more sub-Saharan holidaymakers tend to head for Italy and Spain, also
> popular resorts with the people running away from Libya. A lot of my old friends
> are over in Greece, your friends'll be interested in that. [64]

Iris's reframing of the movement of displaced people into Sophia's holiday narrative shows

up the absurdity of this polarity – that the people Iris helps have no safety, security or

place to call home, while others like Sophia and her wealthy friends have more than they

need. Smith's inclusion of the Greenham Common women's peace camp is referenced as

an example of the effective power of solidarity and care, of disruptive bodies holding

space and deterritorialising paradigms of control. Setting this against the unsafe conditions

faced by asylum seekers and refugees, Smith demonstrates how small and acts of

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[64] Smith, *Winter*, p. 232.

solidarity and holding space (Iris later opens up Sophia's house as a place for these

displaced people to stay) can create ripples of positive change.

In *Spring,* detention centre employee Brit is the hard-boiled character that Smith

challenges with free-thinking, free-moving disruptor Florence. Florence is a magical child,

one of Smith's regular character types favoured for their power to disrupt solidified adult

opinions and challenge the accepted structural inequalities. Florence is the daughter of an

asylum seeker, separated from her mother by the immigration system and has the

unexplained ability to move through locked doors and defies physical boundaries. She

enters the high security detention centre where Brit works, observes the appalling

conditions the detainees are being kept in, and goes directly to senior management to

question why they are being kept in these conditions:

> She went so quiet I couldn't hear much, though I could hear the word why, the
> occasional why I could hear. […] this girl had been visiting several other IRCs and
> persuading people to do all sorts of unorthodox things like cleaning toilets
> properly.[65]

Smith uses Florence as an agent of change to demonstrate the power inherent in

questioning the mistreatment of others, challenging injustice and remaining open to the

possibility of kindness in order to bring about positive change. In this passage a detention

centre worker is listening to the conversation between Florence and the manager in which

the only words she hears Florence speak are 'why?'. Smith leaves space in the text for the

reader to fill in the gaps. In this way, the reader becomes an active co-producer of the text

as they imagine what a young child could have said to a person in such a position of power

to stir them to action. Any reader familiar with the endless questioning capabilities of

children can imagine the repeated need for 'why?' when faced with only inadequate

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[65] Ali Smith, *Spring* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019, p140. Italics in original text.

answers to the most basic of questions - why are detained asylum seekers not provided

with basic sanitation whilst they are being held against their will? Later in the book, Smith

provides a full account of the dialogue between Florence and the detainment centre

manager which reaffirms the power of questioning as a tactic for challenging inequity and

injustice:

> —Okay, so what I plan to do is, when you can't or don't answer a question I ask, I
> won't bother you with it again, I'll just go on to the next question. So my next
> question is: Why do you handcuff the people who come here when they're being
> brought here or taken out of here, when they aren't actually criminals?[66]

The dialogue between them operates as a rhythm of unanswered questions, with neither

party answering the other. The centre manager becomes increasingly unnerved by

Florence's questions and in turn asks her why she's asking and who put her up to it. The

role of the reader then, is to reflect on her questions as legitimate requests for

information, backed up with her knowledge of UK legislation, as they go unanswered. The

questions, posed by Florence, and by proxy Smith herself, are such that they ask the

reader to consider the significant structural inequalities that allow migrants detained in

these centres to be treated so poorly and denied basic human rights, and how those

frameworks are manipulated by those in power to perpetuate these inequities.

 *Spring* is directly influenced by Smith's work as patron of the Refugee Tales

project, a charity that supports refugees and asylum seekers and seeks to end indefinite

detention. In the acknowledgements Smith thanks the refugees and detainees she has

personally spoken to about their experiences of being detained indefinitely at a UK

Immigration Removal Centre. The detail she provides is therefore rooted in factual

accounts and while her anger radiates off the pages of the quartet, so too does her

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[66] Smith, *Spring*, pp. 203-204.

unwavering commitment to hope, as a tactic of resistance against apathy and indifference,

and her belief in the power of community and finding the commonality among differences

to bring people together:

> The telling of stories is an act of profound hospitality. It always has been; story is an ancient form of generosity, an ancient form that will tell us everything we need to know about the contemporary world. Story has always been a welcoming-in, is always one way or another a hospitable meeting of the needs of others, and a porous artform where sympathy and empathy are only the beginning of things. The individual selves we all are meet and transform in the telling into something open and communal.[67]

It is within this communal space of hospitality and commonality of kindness that a

collective becoming is forged – beginning with the reader, drawing them in to the

possibilities for change, reflecting on their own capacity for action and agency, and

showing how narratives can be disrupted from within.

## Art as activism

Another thematic tactic deployed in the quartet is that of art as activism. Smith's

influences and references to multiple and varied creative mediums throughout the

Seasonal quartet convene to build a picture of artistic production as a creative force of

becoming. By weaving intertextual references from Dickens and Shakespeare to Katherine

Mansfield, Rainer Maria Rilke, Tove Jansson and Rachel Carson into her novels, Smith pays

homage to the creativity of authors that have come before her and showcases the work of

four female artists across the quartet. A proponent of interdisciplinarity and overlapping

creative forms, Smith champions creativity and artistic production in all its forms — from

prose and poetry, cinema and theatre to sculpture and painting, and uses these

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[67] Ali Smith, 'A Welcome from our Patron, Ali Smith', Refugee Tales <https://www.refugeetales.org/about> [accessed 15 October 2023] (para. 3 of 5)

highlighted art forms as springboards for new ways of thinking about ingrained cultural narratives.  Speaking about the importance of connecting art forms in her Goldsmith's Prize lecture, Smith extols the generative possibilities available within the plasticity of the novel form when it borrows techniques and tactics from these other mediums:

> Its structural possibility learns from the sculptural arts, where something extra-dimensional happens to the form – say you decide, like Henry James or Georges Perec, to cut a Barbara Hepworth-like hole in your novel either by leaving something unsaid, like James so often does, leaving readers with a hole at the centre of their reading, then that unsaid thing that pierces the work will also pierce the reader.[68]

As I have demonstrated, Smith's narratological innovations that leave space within the text for the reader to be affected, do so in such a way that invokes becoming-woman as a tactic of undermining structures of fixity, and opens up new avenues of thought that operate outside of normative paradigms. The influence of Barbara Hepworth's sculptures is evident not only in their appearance in the quartet as pieces of art to be considered, and as elements of her story connecting the books in a continuum, but also in the way Smith borrows Hepworth's technique of leaving space for the viewer/reader. By invoking Hepworth's style of building a hole into the work of art, Smith is asking her readers to think about what they can bring to this space carved out for them - how does the reader fit into this narrative? What interpretations do they bring and how does their reading of her text inform its meaning? These are all questions Smith leaves open for her readers to think about. The presence of Hepworth's windows are also visual markers of continuing vistas available to those curious readers that want to keep looking beyond the obvious. In *Autumn*, Elisabeth tells her mother about a large stone sculpture that Daniel has in his house, although not named, we can assume by Elisabeth's description of its distinct shape

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[68] Ali Smith, 'The novel in the age of Trump' in *New Statesman*, 15 October 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/2017/10/ali-smith-s-goldsmiths-prize-lecture-novel-age-trump> [accessed 18 October 2023]

that it is one of Hepworth's stones. Later, in *Winter,* the ghostly image of the floating head accompanying Sophia solidifies to become the lump of stone that is the missing piece of the sculpture, taken from Daniel by Sophia after their affair. The stone is then returned to the dying Daniel at the end of *Summer* when the Greenlaw family come together with Art and Charlotte to visit him on his death bed. The Hepworth sculpture acts as both the frame and the window through which the quartet may be viewed, making space for these seemingly separate characters to connect as the two parts of the stone are reunited in a thread of commonality. Smith plays out the rhythms of connection through the journey of the stone across lifetimes and the repeating seasons. The stone, made from the aged material of the earth, holds time and meaning within it, for the characters it passes between and for the reader to uncover.

In *Autumn*, Smith also shines a light on lesser known 1960's pop artist Pauline Boty and her work representing Christine Keeler and other key figures and events in contemporary politics and culture. Both Boty and Keeler were reduced to their physical appearance as beautiful women by the male bias of the cultural zeitgeist and subsequent gatekeepers of social and cultural history. Boty's artistic and intellectual contributions to the shaping of British cultural critique were side-lined over those of her male contemporaries as her work was quietly forgotten after her untimely death. While the media representation of Christine Keeler following the Profumo affair was laden with sexism and misogyny that affected her for the rest of her life,[69] her attempt to forge her own narrative as a means of staying financially independent was routinely ridiculed and dismissed, and Keeler herself was reduced to nothing more than a sexual object. The end papers in *Autumn* contain a reproduction of Boty's painting of Marilyn Monroe entitled,

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[69] Caroline Davies, 'Christine Keeler, former model at heart of Profumo affair, dies at 75', *The Guardian*, 5 December 2017, < https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/dec/05/christine-keeler-former-model-at-heart-of-profumo-affair-dies> [accessed 10 January 2024]

'The Only Blonde in the World', another famous female figure beleaguered by the world's media as a trope of her own sexualised identity. The Tate gallery label of Boty's painting reads: 'She identified with the challenges Monroe had faced. Boty wanted to be taken seriously intellectually and be free to embody her sexuality at a time when the two were seen as mutually exclusive.' [70] Smith's affinity with Boty's artistic endeavour to represent and question the now, and her feminist praxis of critiquing patriarchal structures of control, leads her to include Boty, Keeler and Marilyn together in a section towards the end of the novel reflecting on the body as a political instrument of multiplicity. Taking the fragmented pieces of Boty's life and artistic legacy from biographical detail, quotes from interviews, and Smith's own affected response to the art, she reframes Boty away from narrative of 'the only (female) blonde in the British pop art scene' and towards a more nuanced view of a complex, intelligent artist who was not afraid to use her body and sexual allure (like Keeler and Monroe) to draw attention to her work and centre herself alongside it:

> So now she was repainting the commission. It would be full of questions now, not statements. It would still look like the image everyone thought they knew, but at the same time *not be* it. Keeler trompe l'oeil. And even an eye that didn't at first notice, even an eye that took the pose for granted, would still know, unconsciously – something not quite as you expect, as you remember, as it's meant to be, can't quite put your finger.
> The image and the life: well, she was used to that.[71]

After situating her readers in the midst of the 1963 Profumo affair scandal, Smith writes from the perspective of Boty reframing Christine Keeler in paint. Using a different version of Lewis Morley's iconic image to evoke a familiar yet different feel, Boty's painting of Keeler asks the viewer to think again about the multiple ways we can read an image, the values we attribute the subject(s) within those images and how this might change if we

[70] Pauline Boty, *The Only Blonde in the World*, 1963, oil paint on canvas. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/boty-the-only-blonde-in-the-world-t07496> [accessed 16 October 2023]

[71] Smith, *Autumn,* pp. 242-243. Italics in original text.

look through a different lens. Smith suggests a moment of uncanny when a familiar image

is made unfamiliar in the same way she moulds her fiction – to ask questions in the spaces

in between familiarity and uncertainty. As per the earlier discussion on the role of

ambiguity within the texts, Smith deploys these literary and philosophical techniques to

open up these spaces of uncertainty. Emphasising points of not-knowing where the reader

can pause, reflect and insert their own cognitive unfolding into the text, contributing to

the meaning making of the text through the reading process, a becoming of the reader

through their newly formed lines of flight/thought.



Figure 12. The end papers of Ali Smith's *Autumn* showing an image of Pauline Boty's
painting *The Only Blonde in the World*.

Smith's use of the surname Gluck in *Autumn* also suggests a covert reference to a lesser-

known twentieth-century artist – Hannah Gluckstein, a gender non-conforming painter

known as Gluck, who invented a new type of framing technique that incorporated multiple

layers to integrate the artistic work into its surroundings by matching the wall where it was

hung.[72] Although not specifically mentioned in the novel Smith's carefully considered use

of names for her characters suggests a richness of contextual and critical commentary if

the reader only delves deeper into the breadcrumbs left for them. In this case, Smith's

potential allusion to Gluck not only signals to the hidden or erased figures of female, non-

binary and gender non-conforming artists whose achievements have been disregarded or

downplayed by the gatekeepers of historical record, but also the need to re-think how we

interact with art and re-conceptualise the frame as an approach to artistic collaboration -

to consider how the art we encounter becomes part of our own multiplicities. In his

comparative analysis of the fiction of Smith, Max Porter and Eley Williams, Alex Calder

observes how these accessible experimental works utilise self-conscious metafictional

devices, including the subjective relationality of encounters with other art forms to imbue

the reader with critical and affective insights:

> By continually alluding outwards to other artworks, their texts focalize on the
> connective possibilities of artifice while acknowledging the instability of their own
> fictional forms, thereby communicating an empathic value that encounters with
> literature can provide.[73]

Smith wants us to re-frame our position as viewer from passive observer to active

participant and is asking her readers what happens when we open ourselves up to being

affected by art and use those feelings of awe, overwhelm, disgust, sadness and whatever

else we feel, to ask questions of ourselves and the world around us.

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[72] Rosie Broadley, 'The Great British Art Tour: Gluck shapes herself with gender defiance', *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/feb/02/the-great-british-art-tour-national-portait-gallery-london-gluck> [accessed 17 October 2023]

[73] Alex J. Calder, 'Artfulness: Intertextuality, Wordplay, and Precariousness in Contemporary Experimental Fiction', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 63:5, (2022) 547-570 (p. 553). <10.1080/00111619.2020.1865256> [accessed 29 May 2023]

As this chapter has shown, Nelson and Smith both use their respective forms to deterritorialise the textual body of the book for the purpose of blurring the lines between reader and text, reality and representation, actant and passive observer. Their use of verisimilitude as a reliable narrative technique to assimilate the reader into their narrative forms, presents a familiar and knowable access point by which to gain entry. They then rupture this recognition through the disruption of expected narrative patterns and offer up suggested diversions and modes of agitation. Lines of flight that the reader might take up as part of their own becoming. Nelson's inclusion of academic theory into her own life writing, and Smith's multiple beginnings and overlapping character narratives and thematic content offer multiple different versions of a singular textual event to the reader, without ever suggesting which is more important or definitive. Both authors present viscerally affective responses to contemporary political issues and events. Their stylistic devices utilising both white space on the page and room in the text for gaps, pauses and uncertainty to break the narrative into its schizo-form, provide an opportunity for the reader to insert themselves and bring their own affective responses, leaving the text open, not just to interpretation, but as an entry point for the reader to continue thinking through these schizo-narratives in their own trajectory of becoming.

## Conclusion

This thesis has interrogated the affective possibilities of a sub-set of contemporary experimental literature and argued that the stylistic and formal innovations deployed within these texts engage a form of feminist literary activism as part of the reading experience. By examining the fiction of Ali Smith, Eimear McBride and Nicola Barker and the autotheory of Maggie Nelson, I have proposed that these texts are examples of a subgenre of experimental writing that I defined as schizo-narratives; texts that split and splinter the reading experience, drawing the reader in as co-producer of the text. The heart of this research has been the theoretical underpinning of a Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophical and literary framework. Deploying their concepts of becoming-woman and minor literature as an approach to textual-analysis, I have considered how these authors have utilised formal innovations to destabilise the reader through the reading experience. The concept of becoming-woman, as the first step in the process of becoming, is engaged through this rupturing of the reading experience, demonstrating how the positions held by reader, author and text are deterritorialised to navigate new spaces of thought and possible affective qualities rising from the cognitive processes inspired by reading these texts. Deleuze and Guattari posit becoming-woman as a process to be engaged with that undermines and subverts normative frameworks of power centred on patriarchal paradigms of dominance. Becoming-woman therefore holds much potential to create new ways of thinking and being. It is the first step in challenging the binary foundations that organise our existing worldview and is the beginning of a cognitive rupturing that holds potential to branch onto wider affective possibilities. The textual analysis in this thesis demonstrates how these authors utilise literary practices that manifest a mode of becoming-woman in their subversion of traditional narrative forms by challenging reader's expectations and stimulating new modes of thought. These new branches of thought are

in Deleuzian terms, lines of flight or cognitive escapes away from normative patterns of

thinking and participating in relation to a text. As Hannah Stark attests:

> The power of the light of flight is that it provides an escape route from established
> patterns and coherences. The line of flight is creative and experimental; it is not
> concerned with coding or overcoding but with mutation This is not about great
> ruptures in systems but 'the little crack, the imperceptible ruptures' which enable
> lines of flight to slip into gaps, everywhere.[1]

Utilising Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical approach to determine what these texts do,

rather than attempt to uncover what they mean, I have suggested ways in which the

affective qualities of the texts may engage the revolutionary potential of reading.

In Chapter One I examined Deleuze and Guattari's literary critique to situate a

feminist history within their conception of minor literature. Unpacking the key terms and

concepts they employed to define their model, it was productive to understand the

theoretical positioning of minor literature as a destabilising literary force. Setting the idea

of becoming minor against a notion of a fixed majoritarian as a normative ideal or

standard embedded within socio-political structures of power, Deleuze and Guattari

suggest that literary innovations hold power to agitate and disrupt the stability of language

and associated systems of order and meaning. Thinking through their distinctions of molar

and molecular forms as a framework for reconfiguring individual capacity to transgress

fixed boundaries of social power, helped to relate this capacity for change to the reader's

encounter with the experimental text. Building on Alex Houen's work on literary

potentialism and Shady Cosgrove's development of literary ethics, I set out a case for a

feminist literary activism rendered through an affective reading encounter. Foregrounding

key critical thinkers in affect studies, including Felix Guattari's logic of affects and Eve

Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of reparative reading, I interrogated the use of the refrain as

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[1] Stark, Feminist Theory After Deleuze, p. 91.

an affective aesthetic quality and suggested that repetition and the identification of various aspects of rhythm were generative textual devices that engendered an affective reader response.

Mapping a development of experimental writing from early modernism, I interrogated Deleuze and Guattari's examples of minor literature from Woolf and Kafka as texts that function to undermine the stability of the majoritarian dominant order. I then traced these destabilising aesthetic practices through to work by female literary innovators of the mid to late twentieth-century, demonstrating parallels and similarities between writers such as Clarice Lispector, Kathy Acker, Ann Quin and the contemporary authors chosen for this study. This first chapter also establishes a tension between the various theoretical positionings and categories that these contemporary texts operate within. Indebted to their modernist predecessors whilst utilising postmodernist tactics in their experimental practices, the work of these authors also contributes to a blurring of genre classifications and complicates the boundaries of literary definitions. I foregrounded recent scholarship by Kaye Mitchell, Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard to highlight how these contemporary experimental practices agitate against borders of categorisation, thus bolstering their capacity to destabilise normative frameworks from within the spaces of academic discourse and a general readership.

In my second chapter I outlined how the Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophical framework is deployed as a methodology to analyse the contemporary experimental texts chosen for this study. I began by defining my term schizo-narratives as texts that splinter the reading experience by stimulating new modes and trajectories of thought through their formal and linguistic innovations. Relating this to narratological interventions into the role of the reader informed by Umbert Eco and David Bleich, I considered how various types of literary texts, genres and classifications within literary criticism and theory have

positioned the reader in relation to notions of open/closed texts and modes of active and passive reading. I argued that the active experience of encountering open experimental texts proves fruitful for engaging a feminist literary activism, contextualising this micro-activism of cognitive rupturing in relation to a wider feminist politics within the molar schema of contemporary feminist concerns for real women and their lived experience. Here I found it useful to refer to examples of mainstream feminist responses to continuing issues of societal and cultural sexism and misogyny from commentators Caroline Criado Perez, Rebecca Solnit and Laura Bates. Within this wider context I was able to consider how a project of minor literature holds the capacity to enliven an activation of becoming for the reader as a process that prioritises multiplicity and difference expressed through aesthetic practices of literary experimentation. Connecting this to recent scholarship by Amaleena Damlé as work that takes a Deleuzian conceptual approach to apply becoming as a feminist interrogation of embodied female experience, helps to situate this project within contemporary feminist agendas in literary scholarship.

I then set out the terms of schizoanalysis as a technique of literary analysis that identifies a creative and productive molecular desire as the motivating force of literary experiment. Here I suggested that Deleuze and Guattari's conception of schizoanalysis is a productive reconfiguration for feminist literary critique as it prioritises the positive and generative differences at play within individual subjectivity. Highlighting how these schizo-texts disrupt the reading experience through their formal and linguistic fragmentation, I argued that they encourage the reader to reflect upon their own potential for embracing a fragmentary mode of being and thus release their own power as individual agents of change. I then unpacked the theoretical framework of rhythmanalysis as methodology and suggested that the examination of rhythms emerging from embodied experiences and patterns of everyday lived reality holds potential for author and reader to co-produce the text as an act of becoming. I incorporated critical reader response theory by Alison

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Gibbons to suggest that the multimodal forms used by the authors in this research

contribute to a specifically embodied form of cognitive poetics. Connecting this individual

reading experience outwards to a larger web of a collective reading public, I suggested that

the reading experience of a general readership encountering schizo-narratives holds

power to generate a wider social and political impact as a form of revolution by degrees. I

then considered how these schizo-narratives functioned as texts that express the subject

in process and how this contributes to a becoming through the writing process and for the

reader through their encounter with the text.

I began Chapter Three by unpacking Deleuze's philosophy of time and examining

how this informs the conceptual framework of becoming as a continual process. I used

secondary criticism from James Williams to illustrate how this theoretical approach can be

related within a context of virtual and actual realities as a process of becoming through the

reconfiguration of subjective temporal experience. Linking this into a feminist theoretical

reappraisal of temporality from Julia Kristeva and tying in modernist narrative techniques

of stream of consciousness and rupturing linearity from Virginia Woolf and Dorothy

Richardson helped to reframe a female-centred history of narrative experimentation that

prioritised fluidity, repetition and difference as key components of embodied female

temporal experience.

I then began the analysis of my primary texts to demonstrate how Ali Smith's

Seasonal quartet and Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY* navigate alternate theories of temporal

experience and spatial boundaries that defy narrative conventions of linearity, progression

and containment. I demonstrated how Smith's emphasis on rhythms, repetition and

natural cycles reconfigure an alternative temporal experience for her characters whilst the

contemporary now represented in the novels disrupts the boundaries of containment

between author, text and reader, opening up new spaces for readers to participate in the

co-production of textual meaning. I then focussed in on the use of disruptive characters as catalysts that create temporal and spatial divergences within the texts. I argued that the characters of Florence in Smith's *Spring* and the girl in Barker's *H(A)PPY* both function as critical points that enable the surrounding characters becoming. Highlighting the problematic narrative of a singular constructed notion of temporality, the textual analysis demonstrated how alternate frames of references are invoked to draw the reader into a mode of questioning that disrupts dominant paradigms of knowledge premised on the supposition of a universal understanding of time and space. Through this deployment of disruption and fragmentation, I suggested that Smith's Seasonal quartet and Barker's *H(A)PPY* activate alternative ways of thinking about temporal modes and experience, as well as challenging social and cultural normative framework of boundaries and containment that restrict movement and the free flow of bodies.

Building on from this in Chapter Four I analysed the use of narrative voice in Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY* and Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* to identify how their use of linguistic rupturing and multimodal forms conveyed their characters as fragmented selves or schizo-subjects. I defined a schizo-subject as an individual subject embodying the process of becoming; showing how these individuals were always in flux and undergoing constant change as their subjectivities were deterritorialised and reterritorialised with each affective singularity that became part of them or left their embodied form.

I began by interrogating the philosophical, cultural and literary construction of subjectivity as a unified human subject, identifiable as a person or character. I proposed an alternative conception of subjectivity utilising the Deleuzo-Guattarian framework of collective assemblages, in which an individual subject is not a static being but a collection of fluctuating and changing singularities - an entangled corporeal subject-in-process. Drawing on new developments in crip theory and specifically the work of Margaret Price to

reconfigure notions of selfhood as an imbrication of bodymind, I position the schizo-subject or fragmented self as a disruptive site of becoming within social and cultural spaces that holds potential to destabilise patriarchal frameworks of power and oppression. In my close reading of Barker's *H(A)PPY* and McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, I analysed how both authors employed multimodality, referring again to Alison Gibbons' work on cognitive poetics to uncover how these texts stimulate new thinking and affective responses from the reader. I argued that these multimodal forms are utilised to help the reader feel the physical rupturing that the character's bodies enact as they disrupt and resist patriarchal socio-political structures of their respective environments. I argued that through Barker's use of colour, repetition, images and musicality and McBride's deployment of fragmented prose and linguistic experimentation, the characters in these texts utilise their bodies to break through systematic constraints attempting to hold them accountable to oppressive systemic expectations. In focusing on the splintering of selfhood, I analysed how these texts recover a notion of subjectivity from the trappings of identity categories based in patriarchal frameworks of binary codes and suggested that the schizo-subject offers a reconfiguration of subjectivity as embodied expression of fluid and powerful desire.

In my final chapter I examined how the fragmented schizo-subjects presented in Chapter Four and the fragmentation of temporal experience examined in Chapter Three are invoked to provide social commentary in a wider context of political urgency. I argued that this reconfiguration of the subject as an assemblage of shifting multiplicities engages a mode of becoming-woman by defying normative paradigms of personhood. In this reading, becoming-woman is enacted through the refutation of traditional constructs of subjectivity and the potential this holds to unpick existing frameworks of power and oppression. I began this chapter by examining the affective qualities of genre bending as expressed within these schizo-narratives, specifically how *The Argonauts* and the Seasonal

quartet cross genres to incorporate multiplicity of form as a tactic that fosters a sense of commonality. This commonality reaches across disciplines and fields of inquiry, but also breaks down boundaries of containment that separate reader from author and distance reader from text. Developing this into an analysis of autotheory within the Argonauts I draw on the work of Lauren Fournier and Kaye Mitchell to suggest that Nelson's use of self-narration continues a tradition of feminist literary activism through performance of the embodied self.

In the textual analysis of Ali Smith's Seasonal quartet and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, I demonstrated how identity constructs and their associated power values can be undone from the queer spaces of the marginalised as a mode of becoming-woman. Highlighting Smith and Nelson's critique of socio-political constructs that centre a white, patriarchal, heteronormative majoritarian, I examined how the minor subject positions of the marginalised within the molar schema of everyday reality can be taken up to challenge the authority of a dominant majority. From Nelson's application of Kosofksy Sedgwick's definition of queer as a tactic of resistance that transgresses the boundaries of a dominant heteronormative culture, to Smith's multidisciplinary approach of blending literary and scientific references with artistic mediums and content bolster her thematic concerns to bring the reader into a conversation with the text and encourages self-reflexive questioning, openness and curiosity.

This research aims to inspire further scholarship on literary activism within experimental texts and seeks to provide the theoretical groundwork for future feminist engagement with activism through reading. Blurring boundaries and defying containment these literary innovators speak back to their modernist predecessors and inspire new experimental practitioners with their influence already evident in the recent work of authors such as Maddie Mortimer and Eley Williams. Throughout the theoretically

informed textual analysis in these chapters, this thesis has argued that schizo-narratives

operate as a mode of feminist literary activism to foster a generative and affective reading

practice that engages readers with challenging and self-reflexive modes of questioning in a

reciprocal interaction of textual production. I have demonstrated how these contemporary

texts continue a tradition of a feminist experimentation that challenges dominant

frameworks of patriarchal heteronormativity from the specific and embodied lived

experience of marginalised bodies, demonstrating how the Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical

concept of becoming-woman can be utilised as a tool for a disruptive feminist activism.

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