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on Social Media in No One is Talking About This by Patricia
Lockwood

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Preface

Before starting, I would first like to clarify a few key terms necessary for understanding Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This (NITAT)* and its forthcoming analysis in this thesis. First, *NITAT* is a novel the foregrounds the internet. However, Lockwood obscures some aspects of the novel to discuss them metonymically. Significantly, Lockwood uses 'the portal' as a metonym for social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This metonymic transformation implies that social media acts as a gateway, transporting users away from their immediate reality to a space elsewhere. The portal refers to a social media platform in the novel and it is separate from social media in reality. When a particular social media platform is relevant, I will name it as such (i.e. Twitter). Another significant instance of renaming are the allusions to Donald Trump as 'the dictator.' The signifier, 'the dictator,' is not my personal evaluation of Trump's politics, but Lockwood's deliberate allusion to Trump, his politics, and his time as president of the United States of America. To be clear, all uses of 'the dictator' refer to the fictional political character in the novel. Trump will only be named when relevant.

Second, the novel's fragmentary form warrants an explanation. Fragmentation is a central aspect to this thesis and the novel. Therefore, I would like to clarify the term 'fragment.' In order to demonstrate Lockwood's use of fragmentation, I quote the following fragments at length to maintain their effect:

"What are you doing?" her husband asked softly, tentatively, repeating his question until she shifted her blank gaze up to him. What was she *doing*? Couldn't he see her arms all full of the sapphires of the instant? Didn't he realize that a male feminist had posted a picture of his *nipple* that day?

...

She had become famous for a post that said simply, *Can a dog be twins?* That was it. Can a dog be twins? It had recently reached the stage of penetration where teens posted the cryface [sic] emoji at her. They were in high school. They were going to

remember “Can a dog be twins?” instead of the date of the Treaty of Versailles, which, let’s face it, she didn’t know either.

...

This had raised her to a certain airy prominence. All around the world, she was invited to speak from what felt like a cloudbank, about the new communication, the new slipstream of information. She sat onstage next to men who were better known by their usernames and women who drew their eyebrows on so hard they looked insane, and tried to explain why it was objectively funnier to spell it sneazing [sic]. This did not feel like real life, exactly, but nowadays what did? (Lockwood 13-14, original emphasis).

These paragraphs and the ellipses that separate them are indicative of the fragmentary form that the novel assumes. Each paragraph is a fragment. Although the length of the fragments varies from a few words to as long as three quarters of the page, the average fragment is a few sentences long. The brevity of these fragments resembles Twitter posts, commonly known as ‘tweets.’ Tweets, restricted to a character count, populate Twitter accounts, often appearing as disconnected snippets unified only by the user posting them. Lockwood’s fragmentary novel is not an exact replica of Twitter. The novel has no time stamps, no usernames, and each paragraph does not adhere to a specific word count. Instead, fragmentation evokes the form of social media feeds. A ‘feed’ is a stream of text, image, and video-based content shown to a user (“Feed”). The novel’s fragmentary form merely reads *like* a feed.

Finally, I would like to mention the issue of anonymity in Lockwood’s autofiction. Anonymity is a significant topic in the forthcoming analysis. None of the characters are named which not only complicates the novel’s genre, but also referring to the novel’s characters in my analysis. The narrator refers to characters based on their relationship to a primary character whom I will call the protagonist. I will expand on this further in a later chapter. To avoid convoluted constructions, such as ‘the protagonist’s niece’s diagnosis,’ I refer to some characters using the possessive pronoun ‘her’ (i.e. ‘her niece’) which aligns with the manner the novel names characters.

1. Introduction

Identity is determined by a complex set of characteristics, experiences, associations, and perceptions. The combination of these elements characterizes an individual's sense of self. An individual may emphasize and diminish parts of their identity to suit a given context. Identity, then, impacts behavior. For example, an individual who identifies as a mother and a doctor will behave differently at work because her role in a professional setting is inherently different from the role she occupies at home. Different roles require different social behaviors depending on a given situation. As such, identity is multifaceted as individuals adapt to different environments and social groups. Identity is a dynamic negotiation between personal self-perceptions and social expectations. Any discourse on identity is an exploration of the cyclical loop between individuals and society.

Identity is not static. It does not merely exist, rather identity is formed. "Identity formation," according to Erik Erikson (1968), "employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning" (22). By this, Erikson means that "the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him" (22-23). Put simply, identity formation is the negotiation and development of an identity based on reflection, observation, and social influence that is then mirrored in an individual's social environment. Social influence and the communities which exert this influence are significant aspects in the expression and reception of an individual's identity. Erving Goffman (1959) places the dynamic between an individual's identity formation and an audience at the center of his seminal work titled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

Goffman analyzes identity in terms of performance. He argues that identity performance refers to “all activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and some influence on the observers” (Goffman 5-6). Identity is realized when others perceive an individual’s performance of it. His work relates identity performance to dramaturgy, describing impression management as a process in which individuals spotlight and suppress certain elements of their identity in front of an audience (Goffman 5-6). With the overwhelming presence of social media and the internet, identity has yet another stage for its performance. Individuals perform identity when they interact with other individuals in various environments. As the internet increasingly becomes an integral part of daily life, individuals inevitably perform their identity online. On the internet, identity formation is not only informed by the characteristics attributed to social roles, categories, experiences, and affiliations, but also the content an individual is exposed to and consumes. What turns identity into performance is the individual’s expression of these various aspects including the influences induced by internet exposure.

Autofiction names a form of identity performance as authors present readers with a version of their identity in a fictional novel. Autofiction is a seemingly self-explanatory genre. ‘Auto’ designates the self while ‘fiction’ denotes the imaginary quality of some forms of prose. In practice, autofiction blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. Autofiction can be defined as “a combination of real and invented elements; onomastic correspondence between author and character or narrator; and stylistic and linguistic experimentation” (Effe and Lawlor 1). In other words, autofictions typically contain an entanglement of fact and fiction as well as detectable continuity between the author and a character or narrator by means of a shared name. Autofictional novels must be read as an “autobiographical narrativization of the writing process *and* a fictional

representation of a writer-character” (Effe and Gibbons 76, original emphasis). As a genre, autofiction demands to be understood as a construction. The construction of identity in autofictions finds its parallel in identity performance on the internet. Just as users mediate their private and public personas on social media platforms, authors blur the distinction between autobiographical fact and fictionalized elements in their autofictions.

Novels reflect changes in society. In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Theodor Adorno argues that “[a]rt develops by way of the social whole; that is to say, it is mediated by society’s ruling structure” (287). Mark K. Holland (2013) expands this argument as she states, “[O]ur notion of what language is, and how it works, and how humans stand in relation to it, dictates the kinds of literature we find in a period, the questions that literature raises about what it is to be human, and therefore also our notion of human” (1). Twenty-first century literature differs from twentieth century literature as a result of widespread access to technology, developments in the socio-political climate, and most relevant to this thesis, the internet’s influence on social conditions. The internet not only influences language used online, but also language used in other forms of media such as novels. Author Sally Rooney affirms this influence in an interview when she states, “[A] large part of my style has definitely developed through writing emails” (Nolan). Attempts to portray the nuances and impact of the internet are already present in cultural productions such as literature, film, and art. Existing scholarship concerning literature and social media has largely centered on the adaptation and proliferation of literary texts online as well as other iterations of electronic literature. Bronwen Thomas’ *Literature and Social Media* (2020) primarily focuses on the production and proliferation of electronic literature such as serialized tweets (i.e. Twitterfiction). Spencer Jordan (2020) delves into modes of postdigital storytelling. Among his examples, he describes hypertext fiction as a multimodal form of storytelling. Readers are not constrained to read a narrative from start to finish

as is the case with non-digital novels but are directed towards different aspects of the narrative based on readers' decisions (Jordan 67-68). There is also considerable work concerning the use of social media as a tool for presenting and furthering narratives. Neil Sadler (2022) focuses on factual events as they are recorded on Twitter. His work is preoccupied with the manner in which narratives are constructed through fragments. Maria Mäkela's (2019) article focuses on a similar subject as she explores the narrative put forth by users on Facebook. Although all of this research is useful to this thesis, there is a dearth in research concerning the impact of social media on traditional literature. My analysis aims to bridge this gap by returning to the novel, specifically *NITAT* by Patricia Lockwood.

NITAT is an autofiction published in 2021 by Patricia Lockwood. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize the same year ("The 2021 Booker Prize for Fiction Shortlist"). Lockwood's novel is an exploration of the effects of constant exposure to social media, dubbed 'the portal' in the novel, and her protagonist's continual effort in cultivating a persona online. Her novel is a genre-defying attempt at storytelling as Lockwood depicts an anonymous protagonist and her identity in Twitteresque fragments. As I will argue throughout this thesis, the narrative presents readers with multiple sets of dualities, specifically fact and fiction, online and offline, as well as the individual and collective. The novel's fragmentary form and incorporation of memes cleverly rendered into text subtly enforces the influence social media has on *NITAT*. Lockwood's novel aims to explore how identity performance is affected by exposure to the internet and belonging to various communities both on- and offline. Though this novel is far from being the first to incorporate aspects of a technology-driven society, *NITAT* is an ideal candidate for analyzing identity performance and the internet through the lens of a novel.

This thesis' primary focus is on identity and the various elements that inform identity performance in an autofiction, specifically *NITAT*. As *NITAT* is a novel about the internet in the twenty-first century, exposure to the internet and social media is paramount to understanding identity and its performance online. As the internet becomes ever more integrated into daily life, identities and their performance are naturally characterized by it. This thesis is guided by the following research questions: (1) How does Lockwood narrativize online identity performance? (2) How is the protagonist's identity performance informed? The first half of this thesis' analysis, namely Chapter 3, focuses on the novel's formal structures such as genre, narrative perspective, and fragmentary form. In this chapter, I delve into these aspects to demonstrate how Lockwood establishes the protagonist's identity and situates the novel in the context of the internet through form. The second half of this thesis, Chapter 4, focuses the significance of social influence as it pertains to humor. Humor exemplifies the pervasive effects of the internet on the protagonist's identity performance. The common thread that ties these two halves together is my focus on identity and its performance in the novel. The goal of this thesis is to demonstrate how Lockwood simulates online identity performance through narrative form.

2. A Narratological Approach

Since Serge Doubrovsky first used the term 'autofiction' to describe his 1977 novel, *Fils*, the genre has recently seen a resurgence in the early twenty-first century. Autofiction challenges traditional notions of autobiography and fiction as it allows authors to construct an identity that engages with factual lived experience and imagined scenarios. Within specific regard to this thesis' analysis of *NITAT*, this autofiction allows for an exploration of the influence the internet has on identity performance. The forthcoming analysis concerning identity performance in Lockwood's autofiction relies on a narratological approach as I examine the novel's structure, narrative

perspectives, and the protagonist's characterization. I rely on Gerard Genette's (1983) understanding of internal focalization, Anna Kornbluh's (2019) work concerning free indirect discourse, as well as an evaluation and subversion of fragmentation's and humor's postmodern associations. What is central to the forthcoming analysis is an understanding of the various authorial selections and formal features that comprise *NITAT*. In the subsequent subchapter, "It's All Selection: Fragmentation, Autofiction, Identity Performance, and Reconstruction," I delve into these selections and begin this subchapter with an exploration of form, specifically fragmentary form, before delving into autofictionalization and identity performance. I then connect these ideas to reconstruction as a reading strategy. These concepts have one significant aspect in common: the process of selection. In Subchapter 2.2, "The Narrative Perspective and Free Indirect Discourse," I discuss the value of the narrative perspective and free indirect discourse in an autofictional novel. In Subchapter 2.3, "Affect, Humor, and Memes," I explore the implications of affects, particularly humor, in the novel.

2.1 Selection then Reconstruction: Fragmentation, Autofiction, and Identity Performance

Selection is the backbone of the narrative strategies Lockwood employs in *NITAT*. Selection implies a sense of inclusion and exclusion. Selection influences form. Form has been defined and, sometimes paradoxically, redefined in various ways by academics over the centuries. Plato describes his essential Forms as "remaining unchangeably in the same state for ever [sic]" (183). He later admits that essential Forms also "manifest themselves in a great variety of combinations, with actions, with material things, and with one another, and so each seems to be many" (Plato 179). Defining form appears to be an elusive task. Angela Leighton (2007) notes that "form, without its shaping partner, might be so disembodied as to mean nothing at all" (2). An observation that suggests that the notion of form requires another element in order to take shape. For Leighton,

form “can also mean body, shape, or matter” while its shaping partner can include feeling, authority, meaning, time, and poetry (2). Similarly, Caroline Levine (2015) asserts her own definition of form as she argues that “‘form’ always indicates *an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping*” (Levine 3, original emphasis). The basis of Levine’s work on form is founded on the notion that form “[means] all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (Levine 3). Levine’s definition fits neatly into Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) statement: “Narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge” (19). Lyotard and Levine agree that narration as form is a legitimizing force for social institutions, discourse, and conventions of transmission. Although Lyotard is ultimately critical of grand narratives which uphold societal institutions, form nevertheless enables narratives to be told and understood. This thesis’ working definition of form primarily relies on Levine’s: form is an organizing principle that determines the method or structure which communicates information.

Narrative is a type of form. Like form, the concept of a narrative does not have a stable definition and may have slightly different connotations depending on the context. Narratives are an account of events, whether factual or fictitious. Novels and other literary works contain fictional narratives just as newspapers report factual narratives. Narratives can also refer to the technique or process of telling a story not specific to literature. What distinguishes form from narrative is the former’s ability to determine how a story is organized and presented to readers. Narrative is the interdependent elements of structure, genre conventions, and stylistic elements, whereas form is the specific method or structure through which a narrative is told. In terms of novels, the relationship between form and narrative is both “the enabling condition and the product of reading” (Rooney 18). Form is not static, rather, as Leighton puts it, “[f]orm is not a body but an agent. It *forms*” (7, added emphasis). This thesis dwells on the interplay between form and content,

primarily the genre conventions, narrative techniques, and formal devices used in *NITAT*. Lockwood's *NITAT* relies on the selections made in its fragmentary form, autofictional genre, and identity performance. These selections culminate in the reader's ability reconstruct the protagonist's identity. I delve into these topics accordingly.

Lockwood's novel takes the form of fragments, or fragmentary form. Fragmentary form is the organizing principle through which the novel is communicated. Fragmentation is not new literary invention. Fragmentation is closely tied to postmodernism. The purpose of fragmentation, and other postmodern strategies, is to critique grand narratives and disrupt authorities and power. Fragmentation as a form suggests what readers perceive are merely parts of a whole, implying some aspects are missing. Fragmentation specifically names a form of the "cut-up literary object" postmodernism prefers (Hassan 505). Postmodernism, according to Lyotard,

puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable (81).

Lyotard contrasts postmodernism with modernism's nostalgic sentiments and the forms through which readers or viewers are offered "solace and pleasure" (81). Thus, fragmentation supports postmodernism's tendency towards questioning institutions and deconstructing preconceived notions. Lyotard exclaims on behalf of postmodernism: "Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save honor of the name" (82). Considered through a postmodernism lens, fragmentation opposes grand narratives, totality, and cohesion, instead representing a multiplicity of perspectives which emphasize the subjective nature of reality.

Despite postmodernism's use of fragmentation against totality, I argue that fragmentation is a form that suggests a selective presentation. Rebecca Varley-Winter (2018) bases her

understanding of fragments “on the premise that they always exist in relation to other (real or projected) forms, incorporating drafts, translations, broken syntax and quotations, all which gesture to a mythically complete structure of their immediate presence” (4). Varley-Winter’s argument asserts an alternative interpretation of fragmentation. Fragments relate to one another as they hint at the potential to coalesce into a unified whole. Her work is grounded in the idea that “literary fragmentation is, at heart, about conflicted textual embodiment” (Varley-Winter 8). The notion of conflicted textual embodiment refers to the tension between wholeness and incoherence that fragmentary texts communicate. Varley-Winter’s valorizes fragmentation’s ability for embodiment and cohesion rather than support its use against totality.

The contradiction between fragmentation’s ability to amalgamate into a cohesive whole and its utility against totality is at the heart of Frederic Jameson’s (1991) postmodern analysis on fragmentation. Jameson concludes that “it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but ‘*heaps of fragments*’ and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory” (25, added emphasis). The subject, occasionally referred to as the individual, Jameson speaks of has lost its capacity to organize experience cohesively, thus resulting in ‘heaps of fragments’ (Jameson 25). Although Jameson admits that the word fragmentation itself is “probably too ‘totalizing’” (Jameson 372), his overall argument appears to overlook the unifying notion of the word *heap*. Critic Sianne Ngai (2007) aptly points out this inconsistency in Jameson’s work, noting that the word ‘heap’ becomes “eclipsed from the sentences—and eventually from [Jameson’s] analysis” (287). For Jameson, it seems the ability of the subject to create cohesion, stems not from what emerges out of the accumulation of fragments, but rather a coherence that seems to be predetermined by traditional prose (Ngai 287). Similar to Varley-Winter’s argument, Sadler presents an argument which stands

in direct contrast to Jameson's. Sadler contends, "The whole and part are understood [...] to relate to one another dialectically: the individual parts of stories can be understood only in relation to the whole while the whole is itself defined by its constituent parts" (18). Lockwood employs fragmentation as the vehicle to convey the narrative and, by extension, her novel's genre, and narrative techniques. To use Leighton's term, narrative and fragmentation are each other's shaping partners. Drawing on Ngai's, Sadler's and Varley-Winter's arguments, fragments imply the existence of a whole and amalgamate to form a whole. Fragmentation as a form for narrative is a selective means of representing and organizing which then influences its interpretation.

Selection is also detectable in the process of autofictionalization. Autofictionalization is the process in which authors engage in self-creation, meaning that authors blend their personal experiences with fictional elements. Through autofictionalization, "the author aims to represent their self, or a dimension of their self, while also purposefully taking creative liberties in the act of self-narration" (Effe and Gibbons 66). In essence, autofictionalization is the deliberate alteration or embellishment of factual events from the author's life. Authorial intent is paramount to this process. According to Alexandra Effe and Alison Gibbons (2022), autofictionalization names the "creative, explorative thinking in the pursuit of self-understanding, self-performance and self-creation, and readerly positioning" as its goals (66). As products of authorial selection, autofictions are a form of self-presentation. Therefore, autofictions emphasize not only the hybridization of autobiography and fiction, but also underscore the author's subjectivity as a central aspect of the genre. Autofictions demand to be read as texts that attempt to pursue autobiographical and fictional ends. Autofictionalization does not just determine the authorial process of self-presentation, but it also determines the novel's reading experience. Autofictional writing "refers to the *intentional* production of a text both as autobiographical and as fictional, and the complementary intention

that the text be recognized as such” (Effe and Gibbons 66, added emphasis). The intentional production of a fictional text based on autobiographical fact reflects the author’s deliberate selection.

Authors use different degrees of fact and fiction in order to construct an identity in their autofiction. Writer Jessica Winter (2021) muses on the implications of autofictional writing as authors are either “forced to confirm that her material is autobiographical, [...] forfeiting both the privacy and power of transfiguration that fiction promises. [Or] If she denies [autobiography], then she surrenders a badge of authenticity [...] [laying] herself open to accusations that she is appropriating the pain of others” (Winter). For Winter, autofictional writing presents authors with a double bind as the genre forfeits any notion attributed to fiction as a barrier or mask. Critic Jonathan Sturgeon dismisses debates concerning the varying degrees between fact and fiction. He instead focuses on how autofiction “[redistributes] the relation between the self and fiction [...] [and] eschews the entire truth vs. fiction debate in favor of the question of how to live or how to create” (Sturgeon). Sturgeon acknowledges the resurgence of autofiction in the 2010s which he attributes to the death of the postmodern novel. Ultimately, autofiction resists easy categorization as authors “[tell] a fiction of the self” (Sudjic 110). It is an inherently hybrid genre in which authors present themselves as a result of various selections, embellishments, and alterations.

The intentional self-presentation in autofictions can be productively linked to identity performance as they both rely on either an individual’s inclusion or exclusion of information pertaining to themselves. Goffman broadly defines identity performance as “all activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and some influence on the observers” (5-6). His work takes on a dramaturgical tone as he describes identity performance in terms of front and backstage behavior, delineating a sense

of impression management as individuals foreground and suppress certain elements of their identity. Autofictional novels can be understood as identity performance. After all, autofictional novels are a deliberate representation of an author. Lockwood's *NITAT* not only narrativizes the protagonist's identity performance online, but the novel is also a curated performance of Lockwood's life. I use performance in the Butlerian sense that "the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (Butler, *Gender* 185, original emphasis). Typically, identities are performed through the "items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he goes" (Goffman 7). Goffman states that these items form an individual's 'personal front' and lists "insignia of office rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like" as defining contributions to this front (7). For a novel, a characters' personal front is entirely dependent on the author's description of that character. As *NITAT*'s protagonist is anonymous and there are no physical descriptions of her, readers must rely on her social interactions in order to determine her identity.

Similar to the reception of autofictions, identity performance is not only how an individual presents themselves, but it is also how an individual is received by the collective. In other words, individuals share their identities and those identities are, in turn, understood by society. According to Peter Burke and Jan E. Stets (2009), "[s]ociety creates opportunities for the development of the self, and it provides a set of meanings through language that allows individuals to lay claim to who they are, that is, their identities" (2). Identity, then, is a social product. The function of identity and identity performance is not only the individual's expression of characteristics they attribute to themselves, but it is also the negotiation of social expectations and influence into that identity.

What is still missing is a connection between identity and its performance online. Erika Pearson's (2009) and Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Miller's (2022) respective works bridge this gap. Pearson argues that on the internet "the audience and the performer are disembodied and electronically re-embodied through signs they choose to represent themselves" (Pearson). These identity performances, according to Phillips and Milner, call attention to the fact that notions of 'real' and 'fake' are relative and which mask is most appropriate within a given context (67). Individuals attempt to control the manner in which they are perceived. However, there is reason to believe that online identities are similar to offline identities in this process of shaping and selecting. Phillips and Milner argue that "[o]nline and offline experiences are in fact so fundamentally intertwined that it's impossible to parse where the embodied ends and the digital begins" (66-67). This suggests that "lived experiences of gender bias and other markers of embodied identity are directly encoded into every tweet, every comment, every image. Online and offline experiences are in fact so fundamentally intertwined that it's impossible to parse where the embodied ends and the digital begins" (Phillips and Milner 66-67). Thus, the continuity between online and offline experiences exhibits itself through identity performance online. Like autofictionalization, identity performance is the deliberate accentuation and concealment of different facets of the self. In this sense, identity is its own type of fiction.

Readers understand the relationship between NITAT's fragmentary form, genre, and focus on identity performance through the act of reading. When readers engage with a text, the novel's formal features encourage a reconstructive strategy of reading. Before discussing reconstruction, it is important to define deconstruction. Deconstruction, another concept often associated with postmodernism, is an approach that prioritizes indeterminacy as it rejects any stability between language and meaning as well as reality and experience (Derrida 25). Wolfgang Funk's (2015)

concept of reconstruction, however, offers “to rekindle the connections between the constituents of the act of communication by renegotiating the relations and hierarchies between the individual elements” (5). Reconstruction is an attempt to bridge the gaps created by postmodernism’s deconstruction. As such, it is “the form of engagement which is induced by the *oscillation of the artwork*, an engagement which appeals to the reader’s authentic responsibility in their encounter with the text” (Huber and Funk 152, added emphasis). Reconstruction is a strategy of reading activated by the instability generated from oscillating between various formal features. Oscillation enables readers to reconstruct and ultimately participate in a “discourse that gives meaning to our experience” (van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen 11). The narrative’s tendency to oscillate between fictional and non-fictional elements enhances a sense of hybridity as well as ambiguity. It aims to reframe deconstruction’s indeterminacy by restoring meaning. Funk argues, “reconstruction is founded on an attitude of confidence in the power of sign systems to actually convey experience” (Funk 5). Huber and Funk insist on the significance of formal features in literature to encourage reader engagement. As I have previously defined, form is an organizing principle and includes all configurations of “patterns of repetition and difference” (Levine 3). Leighton, too, acknowledges the importance of form, suggesting that it “is not a garment of thought, to hide or reveal its proper (bodily) matter, but rather a complex of already active ‘interpretations’” (18). Form renders meaning perceptible in the act of reading. *NITAT*’s narrative strategies activates a strategy of reading through which readers reconstruct the narrative into a cohesive whole. As such, the formal elements used to construct *NITAT* as a narrative establish and contextualize the protagonist’s identity.

Fragmentation, autofictionalization, and identity performance are all processes determined by selection, combination, and disclosure. *NITAT* is a product of all these various selections.

Lockwood uses these various processes as narrative strategies to spotlight certain elements and overlook others based on what is appropriate at a given context. In doing so, Lockwood fictionalizes her identity as she curates aspects of her identity to include and alter. The novel's genre and fragmentary form make the fact that Lockwood selected, combined, and fictionalized aspects of her life more obvious. The protagonist's identity, too, is a product of selection and exclusion. The novel's formal features encourage reconstructive strategies of reading which suggest that those very features narrativize and inform the protagonist's portrayal. Lockwood's autofictional novel is not only about an identity performed online but is an example of identity performance itself.

2.2 The Narrative Perspective and Free Indirect Discourse

The novel's autofictional genre implies a sense of continuity between the author and a character or narrator. This continuity is often expressed through onomastic correspondence, specifically a shared name. However, neither the narrator nor any of the other characters in *NITAT* share a name with Lockwood. Given this lack of onomastic correspondence, the narrative perspective plays a significant role in *NITAT* as the novel features a protagonist, narrator, and characters who all remain opaquely anonymous. *NITAT* is primarily written in third person. The narrator does not reveal any of the characters' names in the novel. Due to *NITAT*'s third person narrative perspective and the limitations imposed by anonymity, the narrator refers to all characters either by their pronouns or their relationship to the protagonist as in 'her father' or 'her niece.' As mentioned in the Preface, this analysis distinguishes the primary 'she' as the protagonist for the sake of clarity. The protagonist, in fact, is the character with whom Lockwood shares continuity. By defining characters by their relationship to the protagonist, Lockwood achieves internal focalization despite an omniscient narrator. Lockwood focalizes the narrative on her unnamed protagonist. Internal

focalization occurs when “the narrator says only what a given character knows” (Genette 189). Genette asserts, “internal focalization is fully realized only in the narrative of ‘interior monologue’” (193). Interior monologue is a narrative device which conveys a characters’ thoughts. Several distinct methods are employed by different writers to convey this interiority, but I will focus on free indirect discourse (FID) in this thesis as it is relevant to *NITAT*.¹ James Wood (2008) simply describes FID as narrative’s desire to “bend itself around [a] character, wants to merge with that character, to take on his or her way of thinking and speaking” (9). FID focuses on conveying the words which belong to a character rather than an authorial figure. Kornbluh observes that while some academics “consider FID a technique for the relay of thoughts and feelings that results in unprecedented intensification of interiority [,] [...] many other critics [...] propose that FID is better understood as a cunning *depersonalization*, an exteriorization of perspective that actuates ideology, the market, and surveillance” (35-36, original emphasis). The exteriorization Kornbluh speaks of is crucial to an analysis of *NITAT* as the novel is relayed from an external perspective, primarily third person, despite conveying the protagonist’s internalized thoughts. As Lockwood forgoes onomastic correspondence as well as first-person narration, *NITAT*’s external narration contributes to a sense of ambiguity while, paradoxically, achieving internal focalization. In doing so, Lockwood “opens up possibilities for intentional or unintentional experiential ambiguity” (Mäkelä 168). By utilizing FID and, therefore, an external narrator to refer to the protagonist in third person, Lockwood turns herself into “a character and an omniscient literary narrator at the same time, thus downplaying the fact that [she] still [shares] a first-person experience of actual events” (Mäkelä 169). The third person destabilizes any preconceived notions associated with autofiction as a genre, such as anchoring the text within the experiences of the author. However,

¹ Other methods used to convey internal focalization are soliloquy and direct interior monologue, also known as stream of consciousness, see Bickerton. These other methods, however, fall beyond the scope of this thesis.

FID mitigates some of this ambiguity as it focalizes the narrative on the protagonist. Juxtaposing the distance inherent in third-person narration with the intimacy of FID creates a tension that is both complex and ambiguous.

The third person signals a sense of mediation, a depersonalized depiction, and the subtle existence of a social panopticon. The novel itself represents a practice of policing and discipline (Miller 2). D.A. Miller (1988) argues that the novel “is essentially the story of an active regulation” (10) as it “frequently places its protagonists under a social surveillance” (18). This is a condition conveyed explicitly through *NITAT*’s narrative perspective. To use Miller’s metaphor, readers perceive the protagonist through the narrator’s external perspective, making the protagonist the object of both the narrator’s and readers’ surveillance. Miller names the relationship between the novel, the protagonist, and readers as “the novelistic Panopticon” (Miller 32). The term panopticon refers to a circular, architectural structure where ‘the inspectors lodge’ occupies the center and the prisoners’ cells, though partitioned, surround it. The significance of this structure lies in the prisoners’ inability to discern if they are being observed by the inspector who occupies the center of the structure (Bentham 35-36). Bentham’s panopticon is the object of many academics’ interests, including Michel Foucault. At its core, Foucault’s (1975) analysis in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* is not only interested in the panopticon as an architectural structure, but also as a metaphor for broader mechanisms of power and surveillance in society. Foucault concludes that “[o]ur society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance” (217). For Miller, the novelistic panopticon names a near invisible institution which “gives solidity of specification [,] [...] points to what it entails to act wisely” and ultimately, restrains us (32). In other words, Miller argues novels function to remind us that we, too, are under surveillance. For *NITAT*, the novel’s third person narrator and internal focalization signals to the unification and restriction of the narrator,

the protagonist, and Lockwood's voices. By employing FID, Lockwood implicitly achieves a sense of intimate spectatorship in her novel.

Third-person narration is not the only narrative perspective employed in the narrative, first person plural and second person are sporadically used throughout the narrative. The shifting narrative perspective signals to the significance placed on the mutually informing relationship between the collective and individuals. Thus, an autofictional narrative about identity and the internet with shifting narrative perspectives subtly emphasizes the point of influence. By influence, I am referring to the impact social expectations have on an individual's identity. The shifts in the narrative perspective between third person, first-person plural, and second person elucidate the idea that identity and identity performance are products of the endless feedback loop between the individual and the collectives to whom they belong. The internet influences an individual's presentation of themselves online. Of course, individuals more or less influence the social media platforms and other users too. This influence simultaneously stems from external sources such as the internet's never-ending stream of content and connection as well as internalized behaviors within individuals. Concerning these internalized behaviors, Geert Lovink (2022) specifies, "[d]oomscrolling, subliminal liking habits, and selfie culture [...]. With the ever-growing evidence of such manipulations that result in 'behavioral modifications,' we no longer have to explain the overwhelming presence of smartphone use in everyday life" (Lovink 17). These behaviors specify the actions users perform out of compulsion. Byung-Chul Han (2017), too, describes the internet as a space where "data is not surrendered under duress so much as offered out of an inner need" (9). He observes, "Today, unbounded freedom and communication are switching over into total control and surveillance. More and more, social media resemble digital panoptica keeping watch over the social realm and exploiting it mercilessly" (Han, *Psychopolitics* 8). Han names this inner

need to offer up data as auto-exploitation. Han forms his concept of auto-exploitation within an economic context, namely neoliberalism, where “everyone is an *auto-exploitation labourer in his or her own enterprise*. People are now master and slave in one” (*Psychopolitics*, 5, original emphasis). Han’s notion that “[t]he digital panopticon thrives on its occupants’ voluntary self-exposure” (*Psychopolitics*, 39) bears a strikingly resemblance to Judith Butler’s (1997) argument that “the subject produced, and the subject regulated or subordinated are one, and that compulsory production is its own form of regulation” (Butler, *Psychic* 84). Miller’s, Foucault’s, Butler’s and Han’s concepts, despite the different terminology, describe the internalization of societal expectations within individuals and those individuals perform those societal expectations. What Han adds to existing arguments concerning the panopticon is the pervasive influence of digital media and the illusion that one is free. With the prevalence of digital media, the behavior and desires attached to being online have become normalized. The protagonist is one such subject as she is an individual who, at the start of the novel, has already gone through this normalization. Consequently, her online identity is performed through the enactment of these norms. The observation of her performance is enacted through the grammatical shifts that coincide with the shifts in the narrative perspective. *NITAT*’s shifting narrative perspective demonstrates through grammar from what perspective the protagonist is observed and communicates the social influence she is subject to. Thus, the protagonist’s identity is not only rooted in factual and fictional elements influenced by the novel’s genre, but she is also equally influenced by social expectations. As we will see in the forthcoming analysis, the protagonist’s actions are either aligned with the values of the collective represented by the portal, or the collective represented by her family.

In sum, the shifting narrative perspective subverts expectations attached to the autofictional genre. By avoiding the first person ‘I,’ Lockwood favors the distance created by third person and

the inclusionary implications of first person plural and second person. By employing FID and the shifting narrative perspective, Lockwood creates tension between intimacy and spectatorship. FID and the shifting narrative perspective make explicit what the novel's genre implies: identity and its performance are a negotiation between the individual and the collective. The novel's narrative perspective conveys through grammar that the protagonist's identity is shaped by the surveilling gaze from the collective. In the last two subchapters, I have primarily been concerned with *NITAT*'s structural elements such as genre, form, and narrative perspective. What is still missing is an understanding of *NITAT*'s use of humor, specifically memes. In the next and final subchapter in this section, I discuss the significance of affects, memes, and humor.

2.3 Affect, Humor, and Memes

Affect encompasses the emotions, feelings, and mood generated by a narrative via language, imagery, tone, and other literary devices. The formal features discussed thus far elicit the affective reality of social media in part by evoking its form. In *NITAT*, the implications of affects in terms of humor and memes demonstrates the curation involved in performing an identity. Jameson laments the waning of affect which refers to the partial loss of affect, feeling, emotion, and subjectivity due to commodification and further reification (Jameson 10-11). This waning of affect suggests that individuals become more detached from their emotions as a result of being increasingly exposed to external images and pushed towards consumption. For Jameson, the waning of affect is interconnected with the crisis of historicity. The crisis of historicity emphasizes the impact of media and capitalism on understanding history and historical time, as the latter concepts have become fragmented or challenged (Jameson 9). As such, the crisis of historicity makes understanding history and historical time ambiguous as individuals are unable to understand these concepts cohesively (Jameson 22). Consequently, the crisis of historicity and the waning of

affect results in the loss of the individual exemplified through pastiche, parody, and other ironic modes (Jameson 16-22). Pastiche, parody, and other ironic modes exemplify postmodern attitudes as marked by a loss of emotion, historical meaning, and individuality.

Significantly, Brian Massumi (2002) disagrees with Jameson's assertions concerning the waning of affect. Massumi argues, instead, that affect "has not waned. Instead, its qualitative relational cast has transformed in tandem with the transformation in society" (xx). Massumi's work, *Parables for the Virtual* delineate the affective turn which opposes Jameson's waning of affect. The affective turn describes "a concept of affect as a form of *bodily* feeling that is distinct from emotion, cognition, and language" (Houen 3, original emphasis). Massumi equates affect with intensity and suggests affect "is embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin—at the surface of the body, at its interface with things" (27). Affects are then "*less* formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether; *less* 'sociolinguistically fixed,' but by no means code-free or meaningless; *less* 'organized in response to our interpretations of situations,' but by no means entirely devoid of organization or diagnostic powers" (Ngai 27, original emphasis). My argument follows Massumi's work concerning the affective turn in that affect has not waned, but rather transformed with society. In novels, affects refer to an individual's emotional experience and/or the visceral, bodily response that a text evokes in both the character and the reader. Affect encompasses the emotions, feelings, and mood generated by the narrative via language, imagery, tone, and other literary devices.

For Massumi, the affective turn emphasizes the significance of affects, the individual, and their subjectivity. He argues, "[T]he perception of this *self-perception*, its naming and making conscious, that allows affect to be affectively analyzed" (39, original emphasis). It is an individual's perspective, or, subjectivity, that enables affect to be analyzed. Gibbons' 2017 work,

“Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect,” details how the affective turn is demonstrated through an emerging body of works, namely autofiction, displaying something akin to the return of affect rather than a waning of affect (85). Gibbons conceives of the affective turn as a “subjectivity [...] linked to an external reality through personal connection and situatedness” (Gibbons, “Autofiction” 122). Massumi and Gibbons both foreground the ability for individuals to make sense of their reality through their subjectivity. Gibbons argues that “subjects are shown to desire meaningful attachments with others and are susceptible to heartfelt personal experiences that may in turn shape their identities” (“Autofiction” 120). As her work focuses on autofiction, Gibbons’ use of the term subject refers to the character or narrator with whom authors identify. Authors of autofiction create a character imbued with their situatedness and subjectivity. For Ngai, too, affect is rooted in subjectivity, stating that “the difference between emotion and affect is still intended to solve the same basic and fundamentally descriptive problem it was coined in psychoanalytic practice to solve: that of distinguishing first-person from third-person feeling, and, by extension, feeling that is contained by an identity from feeling that is not” (27). Applying Massumi and Ngai’s arguments concerning the affective turn to autofictional narratives reveals how it manifests through situatedness and subjectivity. For *NITAT*, situatedness and subjectivity manifests in the novel’s interior focalization. The novel prioritizes the identity of a single individual: the protagonist.

Humor is a significant aspect of the protagonist’s portrayal and thus, it is integral in applying the affective turn to my analysis of *NITAT*. Lockwood incorporates affect in *NITAT* by evoking humor. Humor represents one way for users to establish a sense of community online as they adhere to an accepted sense of humor. The expectation around humor demonstrates Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (1983) idea of feeling rules. Hochschild states, “Feeling rules are what guide

emotion work by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges. [...] Different social groups probably have special ways in which they recognize feeling rules and give rule reminders, and the rules themselves probably vary from group to group” (56-57). An individual’s interpretation that something is funny emerges from their understanding of feeling rules surrounding humor. When something is not funny and therefore, does not adhere to feeling rules, social groups regulate this behavior through negative reactions which serve as rule reminders. Feeling rules shares similarities with Papacharissi’s concepts of sociality and sociability. Sociality, according to Papacharissi, “refers to the sum of social behaviors that permit the individual to traverse from the state of individuality to that of sociality and fellowship” (316). Sociability, however, “refers to the ability to perform the social behaviors that lead to sociality, and thus, reflects one’s inherent potential to engage in such social behaviors” (316). Sociality and sociability refer to social behaviors “embedded and borne out of SNSs² as social platforms” (316). Individuals communicate belonging by performing a set of social behaviors on social media platforms. Sociality, sociability, and feeling rules all focus on the dynamic between individuals and collectives by emphasizing that individuals’ performance of behaviors is directed toward and received by an audience. The audience is particularly significant as social media platforms multiply an individual’s performance as it is “communicated across collapsed and multiplied audiences” (317). The sociability that emerges from social media platforms “moves beyond community, *recognizes identity as performance*, and defines as culture a converged set of practices that are social, political economic, personal, and work-related, as long as they contain a semiology that affords connection” (Papacharissi 317, added emphasis). Humor’s ability to communicate belonging, especially online, is tenable through the protagonist’s identity performance. It is

² Papacharissi’s acronym for ‘social networking sites.

through identity performance that individuals can communicate their identity and belonging to online communities. For the purposes of analyzing *NITAT*, I will primarily refer to sociality and sociability due to their correlation with social behaviors on social media platforms. In terms of behavioral regulation, I will rely on Hochschild's feeling rules. Humor manifests in the novel through memes, emojis, deliberate misspellings, and internet references. As such, the protagonist communicates her identity as one that is marked by her knowledge and exposure to these internet elements.

A notable way Lockwood elicits humor is through memes and memetic practice. Memes are indicative of sociability on the internet. Memetic practice is the replication and mutation of memes. Richard Dawkins (1976) coined the word 'meme' in 1976 to address the need for "a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*" (192, original emphasis). Originally, the word meme was meant to be a counterpart to genes as "[c]ultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that [...] it can give rise to a form of evolution" (Dawkins 189). Objects of cultural transmissions, according to Dawkins, includes "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (192). Dawkins' meme, however, does not directly correspond with the internet. Gretchen McCulloch (2019) traces the evolution of the word meme from Dawkins' original use to Mike Godwin's 1994 article for *Wired* which accurately describes its current use. Godwin's description of meme bears a resemblance to Dawkins' original, though its definition takes on a more viral tone rather than merely genetic happenstance. Godwin describes memes as "infectious idea[s] (call it a 'viral meme') may leap from mind to mind, much as viruses leap from body to body" (Godwin). This definition describes the means through which memes are remade and recombined. As McCulloch points out, meme, in its twenty-first century use, "isn't just something popular, a video or image or phrase that goes

viral. It's something that's remade and recombined, spreading as an atom of internet culture" (McCulloch 24). Memes are an image-based media and are often duplicated, remixed, and redistributed online. Successful memes often go viral which means that it reaches several hundreds of thousands or even millions of users. At their core, memes convey a sense of humor. By incorporating memes into *NITAT*, Lockwood creates another connection between her novel and the internet. An example of memes in the novel is Lockwood's incorporation of the Blinking White Guy meme also known as Drew Scanlon Reaction. Lockwood does not explicitly name this meme as she refers to it as "caucasianblink.gif" (Lockwood 53). Some of Lockwood's references are transform a primarily visual medium to a textual format. In some cases, this transformation is a direct translation which is evident in the Blinking White Guy reference as '.gif' names an image file type ("GIF image"). Other references are more descriptive as is the case with the Galaxy Brain meme: "*Galaxy brain*, until something starry exploded" (Lockwood 107, original emphasis). "Galaxy brain" names the meme while "something starry exploded" describes what the meme image looks like (Lockwood 107). In addition to memes, Lockwood incorporates viral trends, pop culture, etc. in a similar manner to achieve the same humorous effect.

Like many humorous things, it is difficult to pin down exactly what makes memes funny. Phillips and Milner state that "one must be familiar with the various historical and political references, and furthermore with the source image subsequent iterations are riffing on" (112). The relationship between humor and memes creates in-groups consisting of individuals who 'get' the joke. Whether or not readers understand memetic humor, these utterances convey belonging. Thus, recognizing a meme is a way to identify with particular online communities. Popular memes include lolcats, Advice Animals, and Cheezfriends. Members of the Cheezfriends online community "tended to reside on the site *I Can Has Cheezburger* and demonstrated their

community membership fluency in the stylized lolspeak³ itself, rather than technical prowess of creating the memes [...] it was easy for them to linguistically tell apart the newbs⁴ from the true Cheezfriends, even without any cat images to help” (McCulloch 242-243). What recognizing a meme signifies is “I am a member of internet culture [...] and if you don’t get this, then you aren’t” (McCulloch 258). Members of online communities often interact with each other through a set of memes and linguistic patterns. There are memes about linguistics, political affiliations, video games, and thousands of others which websites, like Know Your Meme, attempt to preserve (McCulloch 259). Unlike digitally mediated humor, however, *NITAT* does not use any visual media such as emojis or GIFs. Instead, *NITAT* relies solely on “creative spelling, syntax, and grammar to communicate that ‘this is play’ and furthermore that ‘I am one of you’” (Phillips and Milner 109). The connection between the text and its readers is only forged when readers are “familiar with the various historical and political references, and furthermore with the source image subsequent iterations are riffing on” (Phillips and Milner 112). Memes are quickly adopted and discarded and as such, reinforce groups of people to continue being online. The rationale behind this is that continuous exposure to the internet is the only way to ‘get’ and know about the newest memes. By including internet elements in *NITAT*, the protagonist’s recognition and understanding of those elements situate the novel within her subjectivity. Affect, then, manifests through the emotions elicited and associated with humor as well as the protagonist’s unique perspective.

³ McCulloch exemplifies lolspeak by providing a translation of the Bible that reads, “Oh hai. In teh beginning Ceiling Cat maded teh skiez An / da Urfs, but he did not eated dem” (qtd. in McCulloch 243). This excerpt, according to McCulloch, is “the closest thing lolcat has to a peer-reviewed text” (243). To be clear, lolspeak names the speech pattern used in lolcat memes. Lolcat memes are humorous images featuring stylized texts and photos of cats.

⁴ Newb, also spelled ‘noob,’ refers to “a person new to or inexperienced in a particular sphere or activity, esp. [sic] computing or video games; a novice” (“Noob”).

As this chapter is coming to a close, I would like to recapitulate that the novel's genre, fragmentation, identity performance, the narrative perspective, humor, and affects emphasize the interplay between form and content in Lockwood's novel. These formal features establish the protagonist's identity and its performance as a product of selection. Lockwood adds another layer of complexity to the protagonist's identity through the shifting narrative perspective. The novel's shifting narrative perspective demonstrates through grammar that her identity results from the dynamic between individuals and collectives. This dynamic is further contextualized as Lockwood employs affects through eliciting humor which emphasizes the protagonist's subjectivity. The combination of these elements enables a narratological approach for this thesis' analysis of identity performance in *NITAT*. In the forthcoming chapters, I will exemplify through close readings that the protagonist's identity is one that is marked by her exposure to the internet. With the rise of technology and social media, the internet is not just a place for users to connect and socialize, but it is also a space for performance and to be seen performing. Lockwood thematizes identity and identity performance by creating an anonymous protagonist in her autofiction.

3. Fictionalizing the Self and Identity

This chapter primarily concerns itself with the formal and structural elements of *NITAT*. As such, the goal of this chapter is to establish how these formal and structural elements establish the protagonist's identity. Subchapter 3.1 features a discussion on how fragmentation evokes the form of social media feeds and how it is indicative of the protagonist's identity and the novel's context. Subchapter 3.2 focuses on the novel's genre and the protagonist's anonymity. This subchapter focuses on a discussion concerning how autofiction and anonymity obscures the continuity between the protagonist and Lockwood through autofictionalization and anonymity. Subchapter

3.3 explores the novel's shifting narrative perspective and use of free indirect discourse. Subchapter 3.3.1 delves into the specific implications of the shifting narrative perspective and free indirect discourse concerning their connections to social influence. In Subchapter 3.4, the ideas developed in the previous subchapters are finally linked to the concept of reconstruction.

3.1 Fragmentation as a Narrative Strategy

Readers quickly realize the narrative is fragmented upon opening *NITAT*. As I have already established, fragmentary form is selective approach to presentation. When considered through a postmodern lens, fragmentation is a tool against totality, deconstruction, and “undoing” (Hassan 509). I only agree with postmodern assertions concerning fragmentation in that it presents “the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (Lyotard 81) as it reflects the novel's thematization of the internet and its abstract nature. However, *NITAT* presents readers with fragments which amalgamate into a cohesive narrative revolving around a single, individual protagonist. Fragmentation is characteristic of the twenty-first century zeitgeist “[a]s the volume of information available has increased, there has been a trend towards the division of information into ever smaller chunks” (Sadler 2). Leighton reminds us that form requires a shaping partner and thus, Lockwood's use of fragmentation is narrative's shaping partner. Through fragmentation, Lockwood attempts to communicate what online experience *feels* like in a non-digital novel. Fragmentation is indicative of the form in which content is presented to users on the internet. The internet, particularly social media, is comprised of small chunks of fragmented information which form an endless, vertical feed. The vertical form of a feed has become the defining characteristic of social media as it is the most prevalent format through which content is consumed (“Feed”). Content often found on social media feeds is typically short and funny, which consequently leads

to its third characteristic, addicting. Since *NITAT* foregrounds the internet and social media, its fragmentary form calls to mind the feed.

The novel's fragmentary form reflects the disembodied, yet information-rich nature of social media feeds. As a narrative strategy, fragmentation evokes social media's form which in turn simulates the affective reality of social media. Sadler states that "[n]arrative knowledge is, therefore, [...] defined by constant movement between mutually informing parts and wholes" (18). The novel's fragmentary form does not only resemble social media feeds like Twitter, but it also encourages readers to interpret the novel as such. The various fragments naturally coalesce into a coherent whole as readers engage with and interpret them. The novel appears to be aware of its own form. The narrator refers to the fragments as "these disconnections [which] were what kept the pages turning, that these blank spaces were what moved the plot forward" (Lockwood 63). The concise nature of online texts promotes a seamless reading experience, encouraging prolonged engagement with digital content. Through fragmentation, the novel achieves a comparable effect despite its analog form. Instead of lengthy paragraphs of prose, the narrative employs fragments to engage the reader to continue reading. In one of these fragments, the narrator mocks the plot. The narrator humorously explains, "[t]he plot was that she sat motionless in her chair, willing herself to stand up and take the next shower in a series of near- infinite showers, wash all the things that made her herself, all the things that just kept coming, all the things that *would* just keep coming" (Lockwood 63-64, original emphasis). This explanation implies that the nature of the plot, and by extension the narrative, is endless which is similar to the experience of a social media feed. The narrator characterizes the plot, much like social feeds, as growing, evolving, and pushing forward. The narrative even urges readers to "[k]eep reading a little longer, not totally against your will" (Lockwood 198). Here, the narrator breaks the narrative fourth wall and speaks directly to the

reader encouraging them to continue reading as if directly referring to the way the narrative's format facilitates a smooth, uninterrupted reading experience. As such, Lockwood uses fragmentation to facilitate the ease of reading content online by replicating the form of social media platforms like Twitter. Lockwood utilizes fragmentation to evoke the reading experience of social media feeds which encourages an interpretation of the novel's various fragments into one, unified narrative. Lockwood implicitly situates *NITAT* within the context of the internet through form.

Fragmentation makes the essence of social media feeds perceptible to readers. Fragmentation simulates the experience of being "confronted with a flood of atomistic bits of information" (Sadler 2). As I exemplified in the Preface, the novel's fragments appear one after the other in a seemingly disconnected order. It is the narrative's internal focalization on the protagonist enables readers to amalgamate the fragments into a coherent narrative. Sheils observes that "*NITAT* begins in the spirit of diagnosing the internet as a narrative disorder, in part by aping it, using fragments and ellipses to produce a thematic and dramatic miscellany without any obvious temporal logic or arresting scene of reading" (Sheils 102). He goes on to say that "the reality which saves the protagonist from the virtual world is also a re-induction into the logic of literary fiction" (Sheils 102). It is true that some of the fragments become noticeably longer after the birth of the protagonist's niece. However, the narrative never recovers from fragmentation and remains fragmented until the end. Afterall, "[w]hen she set the portal down, the Thread tugged her back toward it. She could not help it" (Lockwood 99). 'The Thread' has a direct analog with social media feeds in actuality as it refers to "a 'conversation' in the form of a series of posts generated in response to the same initial message" ("Thread"). The fact that the protagonist is "tugged" back towards the portal and "could not help it" hints at the protagonist's internet addiction (Lockwood 99). Any attempt to escape the influence of the virtual world is thwarted and thus, the narrative

remains in fragmentary form. The narrative assumes fragmentary form because the protagonist is characterized by her chronic use of social media and the internet.

Although the novel evokes the form through which social media content is consumed, the novel's fragmentary form is not synonymous with the protagonist's feed on the portal. The portal is a digital space external to the narrative and readers only have access to the protagonist's posts on the portal when the narrator includes them. Readers do not have the ability to directly interact with the text in the same sense users interact with the protagonist's posts on the portal. In other words, readers are a passive audience, rather than actively and directly interacting with content via retweeting, liking, or commenting. The novel's fragmentary form conjures a reading experience similar to that of a social media feed but is not a social media feed itself. The social media platform in the novel is known as the portal. Readers understand that the portal is external to the novel as the narrator introduces the protagonist's posts on the portal as such. The narrator refers to the majority of the protagonist's posts on the portal through descriptions rather than direct quotation. One instance of this is when the protagonist posts a photo of James Joyce's bust in St. Stephen's Green. The narrator reports, "The whole park was so wet it looked deep, like something you could dive into and end up on the other side. She took a picture, with raindrops on the lens, and she put it in the portal. And then, because whimsy still belonged to the person, she leaned forward and made a soft pooting sound in the statue's ear" (Lockwood 48). In these two sentences, it is clear that the picture is on the portal and does not include the flatulence joke. The protagonist's photo of the Joyce bust attempts to portray her identity as one that is well-read and romanticized. Her flatulence joke, however, portrays her as silly. This descriptions of the protagonist within this fragment demonstrates that fragments are the vehicle through which the protagonist's identity and the narrative as a whole are conveyed. It is not that the protagonist is either well-read and

romanticized or silly, the protagonist is both. The novel's fragments portray the protagonist to have a multidimensional, yet cohesive identity.

Fragmentation as a narrative strategy has two significant implications. First, fragmentation evokes a reading experience similar to that of consuming content online. Thus, contextualizing the novel on the internet. Second, fragmentation names the strategy through which Lockwood depicts an individual, like many readers, whose identity is defined by the time spent online. To be clear, the narrative is fragmented because of the protagonist's chronic engagement with fragmented content on the portal and the internet. Her chronic exposure to the internet shapes the environment of *NITAT*'s fictional world resulting in a fragmented narrative. Understanding that *NITAT*'s fragmentary form is symptomatic of the protagonist's internet addiction highlights how the novel's form implicitly performs her identity. Fragmentation embodies the protagonist's identity performance within the context of a primarily disembodied space. In the following subchapter, I delve deeper into the novel's autofictional genre and the implications of anonymity.

3.2 Autofiction and Anonymity

A significant aspect of the protagonist's identity is a result of *NITAT*'s autofictional genre. To reiterate, autofiction is "a genre descriptor for literary works featuring the author and focusing on events from the author's life that are nevertheless (to lesser or greater extents) fictionalized" (Gibbons, "Dissolving" 400). Autofiction is an inherently hybrid genre as it straddles the boundary between autobiography and fiction. Therefore, "reading autofiction involves an oscillation between, or a combination of, two attitudes of reception" (Effe and Gibbons 62). These attitudes refer to the nonfictional and fictional elements that compose an autofictional novel. Readers often grapple with the sense that autofictional novels swing between the autobiographical and fictional aspects of the novel. In *NITAT*, these autobiographical aspects suggest that Lockwood selected

elements from her personal experience which she included in her autofiction in various degrees of truth. It is a simple truism that “[e]very literary text inevitably contains a selection from a variety of social, historical, cultural, and literary systems that exist as referential fields outside of the text” (Iser 4). What differentiates autofiction from fiction is the deliberate selection and integration of factual elements from an author’s life into an otherwise fictional novel. Through autofictionalization, these very selections enable Lockwood to turn herself into a figure in her novel. The incorporation of personal experience indicates continuity between the protagonist and Lockwood as the author. The protagonist’s virality online serves as an example of Lockwood incorporating aspects of her personal life by altering them for the purpose of the narrative. The protagonist becomes viral for a post on the portal simply stating, “Can a dog be twins?” (Lockwood 13) whereas Lockwood became viral for her poem titled, “The Rape Joke.”⁵ Another alteration to autobiographical fact is that Lockwood changes her father’s occupation in from a priest in actuality to a police officer in the novel (“Patricia Lockwood: Postmodernism for the Internet Generation”). Although Lockwood changes her father’s occupation in the novel, his fictional career maintains a similar level of authority. A significant connection that remains true for both Lockwood and the protagonist is their respective niece’s in-utero Proteus syndrome diagnosis.⁶ In an interview, Lockwood confirmed that she deliberately included her niece’s condition in order to work through her own grief (“Patricia Lockwood: Postmodernism for the Internet Generation”). Despite varying degrees of truth and fiction, the protagonist’s identity is nevertheless comprised of these elements. This deliberate entangling of fact with fiction is exactly what is meant by autofictionalization.

⁵ According to *The Guardian*, “The Rape Joke” garnered “over 10,000 Facebook likes within hours of being posted” (Groskop).

⁶ Proteus syndrome is a condition shrouded in mystery as it is extremely rare. Proteus syndrome has “an estimated prevalence ranging from 1:1,000,000-1:10,000,000 population [and] [l]ess than 100 cases have been reported in literature” (de Cássia Capelato Rocha, et.al). It is characterized by abnormally increased tissue growth.

Lockwood creates a fictionalized version of her identity by entangling factual elements from her life with fiction which results in *NITAT*'s anonymous protagonist.

Lockwood's deliberate portrayal of an anonymous protagonist deviates from expectations pertaining to autofiction. Lockwood is not directly represented in the work even though *NITAT* contains elements of her identity. By dissolving her own identity in an autofiction, Lockwood creates a novel that complicates readers' relationship with authorship. *NITAT* lacks onomastic correspondence as none of the characters, including the narrator, share a name with Lockwood. The protagonist is only understood to correspond with Lockwood either because of an understanding of the novel's genre or knowledge of the similarities they share. Lockwood turns to perceived anonymity and autofictionalizing events in her life to present herself. By perceived anonymity, I am highlighting the fact that Lockwood and the protagonist have an undeniable shared identity despite any ambiguity suggested by the protagonist's anonymity.

Anonymity is a significant aspect of the protagonist's identity in *NITAT*. Anonymity represents an aspect of online identity which enables users with a greater sense of freedom to behave however they would like on the internet. John Suler (2004) explains that anonymity gives people an opportunity to feel less vulnerable and therefore, provides people with the opportunity to act in a way they otherwise would not (Suler 322). Anonymity does not insinuate that all anonymous users behave out of character, but it does provide them with the opportunity to do so. Anonymity serves a productive function as the novel incorporates social media via the metonymic use of the portal. The protagonist's online and offline identities are differentiated by what she explicitly posts on the portal and her offline interactions. Significantly, the protagonist remains anonymous throughout the narrative. It is important to note that the protagonist is only anonymous to readers. Her identity is neither anonymous to users on the portal nor her friends and family.

Readers cannot demand, at least not directly, the protagonist to “EXPLAIN [HERSELF]” (Lockwood 62) like her father does for something she “posted while hammered and watching 1776” (Lockwood 62). The post in question is, “why should I care what the founding fathers intended when none of them have ever heard a saxophone” (Lockwood 63). This instance exemplifies the identity the protagonist creates online while demonstrating the social backlash she receives because of that identity. By obscuring her own identity while writing intimately about her experiences in online spaces, Lockwood uses anonymity to explore various political and personal themes with a similar sense of freedom that many users feel when they are online.

Anonymity does not sever the protagonist’s connection with Lockwood despite the fact that it further obfuscates the already unclear boundaries in the novel’s autofictional genre. It simply renders their correspondence ambiguous and may invite projection by the reader. This ambiguity strengthens Lockwood’s ambition to turn herself into a figure in her autofiction. Lockwood fictionalizes and universalizes her experience by creating an anonymous protagonist in her autofiction, allowing readers to attribute their own experiences on the internet onto her protagonist. Thus, Lockwood’s personal experience, thoughts, and convictions transform into a symbolic representation of an individual. For instance, the protagonist, upon learning of her niece’s diagnosis, decided she “could try to pray. She could put on a white nightgown, kneel down, and fold her hands—though she doubted that her cries would be heard, considering how recently she had written in the portal that *jesus [sic] was a thot and a hoe*” (Lockwood 139). This excerpt begins with a moment of helplessness in the face of a diagnosis beyond the protagonist’s control. This moment functions to humanize the protagonist as it is a relatable experience to negotiate during moments of grief and uncertainty. This comedic element reflects the narrator’s unfiltered communication of the protagonist’s interiority. Anonymity mitigates some of the vulnerability

associated with self-disclosure. Lockwood imbues the protagonist's identity with nuance by including both her online and offline experiences anonymously.

In sum, anonymity plays a significant role in Lockwood autofictionalizing her identity. Anonymity names a strategy for presenting oneself online. It allows users to express themselves freely in online spaces, in ways that might not be possible in offline settings. Lockwood draws attention to identity as *NITAT*'S central focus due to the lacuna created by writing an autofiction with an anonymous cast of characters, most importantly the protagonist. Readers do not begin to interpret the protagonist's identity through her name, but rather through other elements, such as her connection to the author, family dynamics, and her exposure to the internet. *NITAT*'s anonymous protagonist presents readers with an identity that challenges the binaries between fiction and nonfiction. In the following subchapter, I continue to delve deeper into the protagonist's identity by focusing the narrative perspective.

3.3 *NITAT*'s Shifting Narrative Perspective

Having established *NITAT*'s fragmentary form, genre, and use of anonymity, this subchapter demonstrates the significance of the novel's narrative perspective in shaping the protagonist's portrayal. The novel begins with a line elucidating the relationship between the protagonist, the portal, and the mind: "She opened the portal, and the mind met her more than half-way" (Lockwood 1). This opening line immediately pairs the protagonist with the portal. 'The mind,' also referred to as the communal thought, serves as a metaphor for the collective that resides within the portal.⁷ The portal and the mind name the context for the protagonist's forthcoming portrayal.

⁷ I will return to this aspect in Subchapter 3.3.1, "The Influence of Social Expectations on Identity Performance," as it is more relevant in this section. However, I could not allow 'the mind' to go unrecognized and to shorten the quote would do this excerpt a disservice.

From a grammatical point of view, the protagonist is primarily depicted in the third person ‘she’ as opposed to the first person ‘I’ typically found on social media. Rather than utilize first person ‘I,’ the novel’s third person perspective mimics online audience’s experience on social media platforms. Although it is true that users typically post content about themselves on their personal feeds, users spend the majority of their time interacting with content posted by others or mediated by secondary or tertiary platforms. This is evident in the ability to republish posts from other users onto one’s own platform, when users post content from other social media platforms, and when electronic devices notify users of updates and news. When the protagonist’s phone announces, “YOU HAVE A NEW MEMORY” (Lockwood 86), it acts as a mediator between her and her own memories. Thus, the protagonist’s phone places her at a distance from her memories. The memory in question depicts the protagonist “trying to get a good picture of her butt in a hotel bathroom” (Lockwood 86). The protagonist meets this memory with fondness as she hopes to look back on this photo one day to remind “herself as she really was” (Lockwood 87). This instance demonstrates how the protagonist is dependent on her phone to relay her memories. As the protagonist’s phone makes a spectator out of her own life experiences, external narration makes spectators out of readers.

Despite the distance created by third person, the narrative remains rather intimate. Her phone’s reminder of an old photo demonstrates just how “[p]latforms know us intimately” (Lovink 102). The fact that her phone reminds the protagonist of her own memories highlights the intimacy between her and technology. This in turn indicates the closeness relayed through the novel’s internal focalization. Internal focalization is when the narrative conveys information only the central character knows (Genette 193). Lockwood achieves internal focalization through FID. According to Kornbluh, FID is “a technique for the relay of thoughts and feelings that results in

unprecedented intensification of interiority” (35). FID has the capacity to convey first person content through third person perspective and blurs the boundary between a character’s internal thoughts and the narrator’s voice. In her autofictional novel *I Love Dick* (1997), Chris Kraus’ namesake protagonist aptly points out, “It was written in the third person, the person most girls use when. They want to talk about themselves but don’t think anyone will listen” (Kraus). Lockwood, too, uses third person to discuss her personal experience. She does so in order to create distance between the narrative and the reader, while simultaneously establishing intimacy through internal focalization via FID. The narrator clearly conveys first-person thought through third-person narration in a fragment that states, “‘I have a theory,’ she said to the crowd, and then paused, for somewhere she thought she heard someone groan. She tried to resume, but couldn’t recall what she was going to say—something about being a woman in our time” (Lockwood 118-119). The narrator conveys the protagonist’s inner world and juxtaposes her thoughts with her dialog to make this distinction more overt. Readers understand that the protagonist felt uncertain after hearing a groan in the crowd, but her audience in the novel’s fictional world is unaware. *NITAT* remains within the protagonist’s interiority throughout the narrative as the narrator prioritizes her perspective despite external narration.

Aside from third person, the narrative voice occasionally shifts to the first-person plural pronouns, ‘we’ and ‘our,’ as well as the second person ‘you.’ In doing so, Lockwood instills another layer of complexity in the narrative perspective. The use of first personal plural and second person yoke the protagonist, the narrator, the portal, and, most importantly, the reader. Although all texts aim to captivate readers regardless of the narrative perspective, the use of first-person plural and second person directly engages readers to participate in the narrative. *NITAT*’s narrator often switches seamlessly and quickly between narrative perspectives. One fragment begins with

the narrator talking about the protagonist in third person, “Sometimes *she* wanted to watch an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie that didn’t exist” (Lockwood 69, added emphasis). By the end of this fragment, the narrator switches to second person:

In the past this would have been classed as existential longing, and a French book would have been written about it, and it would eventually be made into an out-of-the-box blockbuster starring none other than Arnold Schwarzenegger, and just when the weather turned, *you* would settle down to watch it with a big bowl of the snack that was not quite what *you* were hungry for either” (Lockwood 69-70, added emphasis).

The switch from third person to second person projects the protagonist’s desires onto the reader. The protagonist is not the only one who wants to watch the film, but the reader does too. The shifts in the narrative perspective do not end here but occur once more in the following fragment. It begins with the narrator relaying one of “[*t*he portal’s favorite stories [...] about interracial friends who met playing online Scrabble and eventually invited each other to Thanksgiving dinner” (Lockwood 70, added emphasis). In this fragment, the focus is not necessarily the protagonist *per se* but the portal as a community. By the end of this fragment, the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘us’ are used to replace the portal: “*We* reveled in these stories, which were not untrue. But there was some untruth in the degree to which they comforted *us*” (Lockwood 70, added emphasis). By using first-person plural, the reader and the protagonist become part of the ‘we’ who revel in the portal’s favorite stories. The reference to the Thanksgiving story is based on a true story. In 2016, Wanda Dench accidentally texted Jamal Hinton an invitation to Thanksgiving dinner which “led to a years-long tradition [...] and a now-classic holiday story online” (O’Kane). By using ‘we,’ Lockwood does not just grammatically yoke the reader and the protagonist together, but she directly refers to a viral story that the reader likely recognizes. Thereby, closing the distance establishing relatability between the protagonist, the narrator, and the reader. Within these fragments, the narrative perspective quickly shifts from the detached third person to second person,

and, finally, to the inclusive first-person plural. The narrative perspective shifts at random throughout the narrative in this manner. The shifts to the first-person plural and the second person do not discard the novel's focalization on the narrative but reveals an attempt at softening the distance created from third person narration. As such, the narrative's third person omniscient narration is not "as omniscient as it seems [...] [.] [A]uthorial style generally has a way of making third-person omniscience seem partial and inflected" (Wood 10). The biased aspects of third person are amplified in *NITAT*'s shifting narrative perspective. The novel's internal focalization, however, grounds the narrative to the protagonist despite these shifts.

It is clear the narrative perspective in *NITAT* is not as straightforward. To reiterate, *NITAT* is primarily told in third-person external narration with occasional slips into first-person plural and, for a handful of fragments, in second person. To reiterate, Lockwood's conscious avoidance of 'I' through third-person narration creates distance between the narrative and the reader, though attempts to mitigate this distance are found in the shifts to second person and first-person plural. The novel persists in internal focalization regardless of these shifts. As the protagonist remains the central focus of the novel, her portrayal can be understood as the result of the mediation between these various perspectives. The deliberate exclusion of the first-person 'I' in favor third person, first-person plural, and second person suggest the significant role of social influence on individuals and the formation of their identities. I exemplify this influence on the protagonist in the following subchapter.

3.3.1 The Impact of Social Influence on Identity Performance

The tension between intimacy and spectatorship captured by FID is made explicit by the protagonist's posts on the portal and the communication of her interiority. Readers perceive the protagonist through an understanding of her interiority which is established grammatically through

different degrees of detached and inclusive. The shifting narrative perspective hints at the significance of social influence in the protagonist's identity performance. Social influence refers to the external expectations placed on individuals by society. Society names a social solidarity characterized by institutions (e.g. laws) mutually adhered to by interdependent individuals despite any demographic divisions (Durkheim 136-139). Societies are not limited to non-digital contexts and can be applied to collectives, or perhaps more accurately, communities online. The novel's shifting narrative perspective and FID encourage an understanding that the protagonist constantly negotiates and renegotiates her opinions and beliefs concerning a variety of topics throughout the novel ranging from politics to what it means to be online. Her compulsion to reassess her principles arises from interactions with either her friends, family, the portal, or a combination of the three. In the subchapter to come, I highlight examples that demonstrate how the protagonist grapples with social expectations placed upon her by social influences, or, what I term, the collective. As such, the protagonist is treated as the subject of the novel. Butler insists that individuals, or subjects,⁸ are formed through subjection which is "the principle of regulation according to which a subject is formulated or produced" (*Psychic* 84). In *NITAT*, the protagonist's identity performance is partly formed through subjection.

An important example of the protagonist reconsidering her perspective is evident in a series of fragments that discuss her views concerning anti-police discourse. Several other fragments hint at the protagonist's alignment with anti-capitalist ("Capitalism! It was important to hate it") and anti-authoritarian forms of government ("Politics! The trouble was that they had a dictator now") (Lockwood 4). Therefore, it is surprising that the protagonist struggles to integrate anti-police sentiment into her identity. In trying to hate the police, "every fiber in her being strained [...]"

⁸ Following Butler's example, I use the terms individual, subject, and identity interchangeably in this analysis.

[because] her father had been a policeman” (Lockwood 19). When discussing this internal conflict with her therapist, her therapist suggests to “[s]tart by hating Officer Big Mac, a class traitor who is keeping the other residents of McDonaldland from getting the sandwiches that they need, and who when the revolution comes will have the burger of his head eaten for his crimes” (Lockwood 19). The therapist humorously aggrandizes McDonalds by transforming the international corporation into a fictional country wrought with class tension and revolution. In doing so, the therapist’s suggestion insinuates that hating the police is a steppingstone towards criticizing the current economic system. However, her therapist’s insight produces “a fresh wave of discouragement” (Lockwood 19). The protagonist’s resistance to anti-police discourse despite “trying to hate the police” indicates the significance and influence her family wields over her identity and its performance (Lockwood 19). As demonstrated by her father’s reaction to the protagonist’s drunken 1776 post, the protagonist is aware of the fact that she can be observed by members of the collective (i.e. her family, the portal, her therapist) which affects her behavior, and therefore, her identity performance.

The protagonist’s frustration with her father after her niece’s in-utero Proteus syndrome diagnosis finally compels her to express anti-police sentiments online. In a conversation shortly after her sister’s in-utero diagnosis, her father says, “‘They’ll do an abortion right up to the very minute... you know, *health of the mother*,’ putting the last phrase in finger quotes, even as his daughter sat before him in her wheelchair” (Lockwood 133, original emphasis). According to the narrator, her father’s identity is stereotypically conservative: he is a pro-life police officer who hypocritically believes his daughter’s circumstance grants her an exception to the very thing he “spent his entire existence crusading against” (Lockwood 133). Her father’s stance on abortion changes as his daughter’s and granddaughter’s conditions change. Consequently, the protagonist’s

convictions shift as well. Triggered by her father's hypocrisy, the protagonist suddenly decides to post anti-police sentiments on the portal. The narrator describes it as if it were a compulsion: "When that sentence woke her in the purple part of night, she would tug her phone off the bedside table, post the words *eat the police* in the portal, wait for it to get sixty-nine likes, then delete it" (Lockwood 133). The phrase 'eat the police' is a play on the expression 'eat the rich,' which has origins in the French Revolution before rising in popularity in 2019 as "a slogan that serves as both signifier of class struggle and a play on literal consumption of the flesh of the wealthy" (Lavin). In exchanging the word 'rich' for 'police,' the protagonist directs this slogan towards the police while still alluding to class struggle. Although her frustration with her father's fluctuating convictions triggers her to post anti-police sentiments on the portal, the protagonist could not allow it to be a permanent aspect of her identity as it is perceived online. The possibility of her father seeing her post compels her to delete the 'eat the police' post. By removing her post, the protagonist represses the desire to conform with her therapist's political convictions and to retaliate against her father's hypocrisy precisely because of her relationship with her father. The protagonist prioritizes family ties over expressing political dissatisfaction online. In doing so, the protagonist oscillates between claiming and repressing this aspect of her identity. Although the protagonist is anonymous to readers, she is not anonymous to members in her social circle and is, therefore, still accountable for the way she performs her identity online. The fact that she posts and deletes 'eat the police' demonstrates the role that the collective (i.e. her family and therapist) plays in the content she posts on the portal and thus, the identity she performs online. The protagonist's identity online "only exist[s] in so far as [she] actively communicate[s] that existence," especially online (Phillips and Milner 72). The narrator communicates both the protagonist's public portal posts and her interiority and therefore, demonstrates the pressures of performing an identity online. The

protagonist suffers from a conflict of beliefs. Although the protagonist's therapist encourages her to participate in anti-police sentiment, her 'eat the police' post is nevertheless a performance that does not fully align with her offline identity because of her father's profession. Thus, the protagonist's decision to delete this post demonstrates that the sentiment expressed by 'eat the police' is dissonant with her identity, and that her family's scrutiny of her online presence influences her identity performance.

The protagonist's internal conflict about anti-police sentiments is revealed through the attention placed on her body. Her body becomes the site where two dissonant attitudes attempt to co-exist. The act of posting and deleting 'eat the police' "calmed the thrash of helplessness in her stomach so muscular that it almost seemed to have its own heartbeat" (Lockwood 133). The act of posting and reposting 'eat the police' becomes a strategy for regulation, repression, and reiteration as she tries to reconcile the reality of her niece's condition, her father's profession, and her own moral conviction. Butler writes, "the subject produced and the subject regulated or subordinated are one, and that compulsory production is its own form of regulation" (*Psychic* 84). The protagonist's attempt to participate in anti-police discourse can be understood through her post in the portal though she upholds forms of social regulation, namely self-regulation, by deleting it. Lockwood's autofiction narrativizes identity by exemplifying how identity is formed and performed in relation to social roles. The protagonist's identity performance is mediated by the affordances of twenty-first century technology, namely social media. The narrative simulates identity performance online not only because it includes the protagonist's posts on the portal and her interiority, but also because it demonstrates the influence of the collective on her performance.

The protagonist's family is not the only collective that influences the protagonist's identity performance on the portal. After the dictator's election, she posted a photo which featured her

“crouched down and having her period on a small sculpture of twisted brown pipe cleaners that was labeled THE TREE OF LIBERTY” (Lockwood 40). Based on Lockwood’s American nationality and the fragment’s discourse surrounding abortion, it is clear that the dictator in question refers to Donald Trump. An abortion ban was a notable aspect of Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign. After winning the election in 2016, “one of the biggest changes [was] playing out in abortion politics. [...] That includes [...] the possibility of overturning Roe v. Wade, the landmark 1973 abortion decision” (Tavernise and Stolberg). The image of her bleeding onto a tree called, ‘The Tree of Liberty’ alludes to the bipartisan conflict regarding abortion in the U.S. exacerbated by the Trump’s election and his pro-life campaign promises. This political situation inspires the protagonist’s post. When her husband remarks, “Wouldn’t that mean that you were the tyrant in this scenario?” (Lockwood 40). The protagonist tells him “not to quibble” (Lockwood 4), stifling any unwanted critical analysis on her post. In this remark, the protagonist demonstrates how she, like many users on the portal, “[avoid] negativity in all forms because negativity makes communication stall” (*Transparency* 7). In an ironic turn of events, the protagonist’s post is received negatively by the portal, and she is consequently banned due to ‘The Tree of Liberty’ post. Afterwards, she decides to “take a rest from political commentary for a while” (Lockwood 40). The protagonist’s disregard for her husband’s apt observation conveys the prioritization of her subjectivity. Ironically, it is the attention of society, specifically the portal, that acts as a regulating factor which ultimately removes her and her post from the platform. Thus, the persistence of the individual and their subjectivity is in constant negotiation with the influence of the collective.

The protagonist’s depiction in the third person hints at the influence the collective has over the political discourse she participates in on the portal. To be clear, the protagonist’s therapist

encourages her to adopt anti-police sentiments which leads to her ‘eat the police’ post. In the case of ‘The Tree of Liberty’ post, the election of the dictator inspires her political commentary, and she is banned from the portal for two days as a result of this post. In both examples, too, an external source compels her posts to be removed. In the ‘eat the police’ post, it is her family’s social expectations that compels the protagonist to remove her post. However, the portal removes ‘The Tree of Liberty’ post *for* the protagonist rather than *by* the protagonist. In each case, the expectations from the collective—whether it is her family or the portal—dictate the content she posts online and thus, influence her identity performance. While her family’s influence is certainly detectable in the protagonist’s ‘eat the police’ post, Lockwood focuses on the portal’s influence on the protagonist’s identity. This focus manifests in moments of self-reflection which expose her interiority such as the following fragment:

She had not realized what a close call she had had till recently, for now in the portal, men were coming up through the manholes to confess how near they had come to being radicalized, how they too had wandered the sewers of communal thought for days at a time, dry-mouthed and damp under the arms. How they were exposed to the mutagenic glowing sludge just long enough to become perfectly, perfectly funny, just long enough to grow that all-discerning third eye (Lockwood 130).

What triggers this moment of self-reflection is her niece’s diagnosis and birth. The protagonist realizes the effects of chronic social media exposure, namely the portal. Her sense of identity and its expression have been influenced by dominant modes of sociality enabled by social media. The ‘mind’ referred to in the first line of the novel, ‘communal thought,’ and the ‘all-discerning third eye’ hint at the sociality embedded and enabled by the portal and refers the collective that exists on the portal. The mind, or the collective on the portal, enables communication and regulates unwanted behavior online. The portal and the mind are described gruesomely as the fragment quoted above conjures images of sewers and monsters. This description of the portal appears to be a criticism without discarding the role of the collective (Lockwood 3). After all, social media

demonstrates that “Platform = society” (Lovink 98). The portal, a social media platform, facilitates social interactions in a digital space and represents society as it enforces its own rules and regulations upon users. The mind is the collective. Social media has evolved beyond a solely social function to become a reflection of society itself.

Lockwood simulates online identity performance by including the protagonist’s portal posts and juxtaposing them with her offline interactions and internal thoughts. By distinguishing and juxtaposing these performances, readers understand that these performances originate from the same individual identity. The protagonist exemplifies the multifaceted nature of identity as individuals naturally emphasize and suppress different aspects of their identity based on a given social context. In essence, the protagonist’s identity is multilayered, yet cohesive. Ultimately, these instances demonstrate how the protagonist performs her identity in the portal and how her performance is regulated in some way by the collective. Lockwood achieves this grammatically through the narrative perspective and the protagonist’s posts on the portal. As *NITAT* is an autofiction with an anonymous protagonist, the portrayal of her identity relies on elements such as the narrative perspective and her actions as depicted by the narrator. The narrative perspective shifts from third person, first person plural, and second person which suggests the significance of the collective on the protagonist’s identity. Although the protagonist remains anonymous throughout the narrative, her identity is nevertheless a result of the collective’s influence whether it is online or offline. Readers acquaint themselves with the protagonist through their understanding of the negotiations between her as an individual and the influence of social expectations. As the novel oscillates between fact and fiction, online and offline, individuals and collectives, as well as different narrative perspectives, the narrative’s thematization of duality implies the protagonist’s identity is the result of constant negotiation between these various poles.

In the following subchapter, I demonstrate how my previous arguments concerning the novel's genre, narrative perspective, and fragmentary form encourage a strategy of reading known as reconstruction.

3.4 A Path Towards Reconstruction

The subchapters prior have established that the novel's autofictional genre, use of anonymity, and shifting narrative perspective establish the protagonist's identity in the narrative. To be more specific, Lockwood entangles anonymity with autofiction to draw attention to identity. She further complicates her autofiction by employing a shifting narrative perspective which emphasizes the significance of the collective on the protagonist's identity. Lockwood creates yet another layer of complexity through the narrative's fragmentary form as it communicates a significant aspect of the protagonist's identity: her internet addiction. These arguments can now be meaningfully connected to one another through the concept of reconstruction. As I discussed in Subchapter 2.1, reconstruction occurs when the reader engages with the instability induced by oscillations in a text in order to piece together elements of the novel to create meaning beyond mere representation. The novel oscillates between its narrative perspectives as well as its factual and fictional elements. Lockwood layers the various aforementioned narrative strategies in order to create instability. It is this instability that formally engages readers in reconstruction.

Instability can be detected in the ambiguous correspondence between the protagonist and Lockwood as the protagonist's identity oscillates between fact and fiction. By blurring fact and fiction to create an autofiction, Lockwood creates a novel that questions the stability of personal identity. This is further compounded with the fact that the protagonist is anonymous. Anonymity further obscures correspondence between Lockwood and the protagonist especially since Lockwood does not make use of the autobiographical 'I' in her autofiction. In this sense, instability

is communicated on both a genre and character level. However, an intertextual reference to Lockwood's lecture at the British Museum in 2019 provides strong evidence for correspondence between the protagonist and Lockwood. The narrator accurately reports that "[s]he had been asked to give a lecture at the British Museum. The lecture was about the portal, and she stood at the podium and clicked through the PowerPoint she tried to pretend she still lived there, that she still pumped with the blood that knew" (Lockwood 205). The narrator even quotes Lockwood's lecture, "She was asked to give a lecture at the British Museum. This was hardly deserved. She had, in a sense, stolen her way there, bit by bit, scroll by scroll, gold piece by gold piece. Still, she stood there, and locked them in her mind for an hour" (Lockwood 206). The *London Review of Books*' publication of Lockwood's lecture not only confirms that she created a PowerPoint for her talk, but they also provide a transcript verifying that the narrator quotes Lockwood's actual speech verbatim (Lockwood, "Communal"). Despite the ambiguity inherent to autofiction as a genre and anonymity, the protagonist is clearly a product of Lockwood's autofictionalization. It is from the correspondences that exist between Lockwood and the protagonist that readers are able to reconstruct her identity.

The novel's fragmentary form instills instability as it presents readers with a narrative form that appears disjointed on the surface. It is in the act of reading that fragmentary form compels readers to simultaneously reconstruct the protagonist's identity and the online environment which shapes her. Consider the following two fragments:

Her husband would sometimes come up behind her while she was repeating the words *no, no, no* or *help, help, help* under her breath, and lay a hand on the back of her neck like a Victorian nurse maid. "Are you locked in?" he would ask, she would nod and then do the thing that always broke her out somehow, which was to google beautiful brown pictures of roast chickens—maybe because that's what women used to do with their days.

...

He did not have this problem, this metastasis of the word *next*, the word *more*. He took only as much as he needed of something, and that was enough. When she asked him once what his last meal would be, he replied, instantly and thoughtfully, “Banana. Because I wouldn’t want to be full when I die” (Lockwood 21).

Although there are no descriptions of her physical appearance, attention to her body can be found in these two fragments as it pertains to her internet addiction. Lockwood turns fragmentation against its deconstructive associations. The repetition of the words ‘no’ and ‘help’ exemplify the description of the protagonist’s relationship to the portal as it exemplifies the “metastasis of the word *next*, the word *more*” (Lockwood 21). This notion of ‘more’ is further exemplified by the fact that she “google[s] beautiful brown pictures of roast chickens” which again points to continuation as suggested by the word ‘more’ (Lockwood 21). By way of contrast, the protagonist’s husband is depicted sans internet addiction in a simple, independent clause (“He did not have this problem”) (Lockwood 21). However, the protagonist has an internet addiction. Metastasis likens the protagonist’s relationship to the portal to cancer, not through mere simile but, more radically, through metaphor: the protagonist’s relationship with the internet *is* cancer. This metaphor reinforces the understanding the protagonist is chronically online and the negative effects of prolonged exposure to the portal. The information conveyed through the fragments communicates what the novel’s fragmentary form implicitly implies: the protagonist’s identity is defined by the influence of the internet. As such, the combination of her descriptions, anonymity, the narrative perspective, and fragmentary form enable readers to reconstruct her identity. In these fragments, it is clear that the protagonist is characterized by her chronic exposure to the internet. Fragmentation’s ability to communicate potential interpretations enables readers to engage in reconstruction (Huber and Funk 156). The narrative attempts to write against the disembodiment associated with virtual reality. Instead, *NITAT*’s fragmented form creates a novel that evokes social

media feeds to convey an identity situated within the context of the internet. Readers reconstruct the protagonist's identity within this context.

As the novel is primarily told in third person, Lockwood's employment of FID creates an unstable narrative perspective as the narrator slips into the protagonist's inner thoughts without explicitly signposting. The instability created by FID encourages reconstructive reading strategies as the reader discerns aspects that contribute to her identity. The narrator states,

She lay every morning under an avalanche of details, blissed, pictures of breakfasts in Patagonia, a girl applying her foundation with a hard-boiled egg, a shiba inu [sic] in Japan leaping from paw to paw to greet its owner, ghostly pale women posting pictures of their bruises—the world pressing closer and closer, the spiderweb of human connection grown so thick it was almost a shimmer and solid silk, and the day still not opening to her. What did it mean that she was allowed to see this?” (Lockwood 8).

The narrator communicates some of the content the protagonist consumes on the portal's feed through descriptions. These descriptions enable readers to reconstruct the protagonist's preferences and interests as “feeds can be seen as a form of content curation” (“Feed”). Therefore, this fragment provides readers with a glimpse into the protagonist's personal taste, hobbies, and values. The narrator's reference to “the spiderweb of human connection” indicates the interconnectedness of the portal. However, the phrase, “the day still not opening to her,” suggests that she struggles to make sense of this digitally mediated social experience (Lockwood 8). By asking, “What did it mean that she was allowed to see this?” the narrator communicates an instance of self-reflection. The protagonist questions the dominant system of sharing content online. This foreshadows many of the self-reflective moments that the protagonist will experience as the narrative continues. The overwhelming stream of content she encounters on the portal affects her understanding of the world and her place in it. Readers reconstruct the protagonist's identity through an understanding of her interiority, the content she consumes, and her emotional state. The

protagonist's subjectivity enables readers to reconstruct her identity through assembling the information the narrator provides through the novel's fragments such as the one quoted above.

The instability induced by FID is exacerbated as the narrative perspective shifts between third person, first-person plural, and second person. Through *NITAT*'s shifting narrative perspective, Lockwood "performatively [draws] attention to the incompatibility of the roles of author, narrator and character [...] to keep the autobiographical 'I' in a state of continuous oscillation" (Funk 126). The shifting narrative perspective destabilizes the relationship between the protagonist, the narrator, and the reader. The combined effects of anonymity and the shifting narrative perspective in an autofictional novel engages readers in piecing together the elements that make up the protagonist's identity. An example of the narrative's shifting perspective and reconstructive tendency is evident in a fragment describing an interaction between the protagonist and a dog. The narrator reports,

During those weeks animals came up to her on the street and pushed their soft muzzles into her palm, and she always said the same two words, never wondering whether they were a lie or not, the words that dumb things depend on us to say—because when a dog runs to you and nudges against your hand for love and you say automatically, *I know, I know*, what else are you talking about except the world? (Lockwood 135, original emphasis).

This fragment begins in the third person and as such, clearly conveys the protagonist's interiority through external narration. The narrator communicates one of the protagonist's experiences and demonstrates how she is friendly towards animals. The narrator briefly turns to first-person plural by using the pronoun 'us' which collapses the distance between the reader and the protagonist. The use of 'us' reframes the experience and calls upon the notion of the collective and ideas around shared responsibility. By the end of the fragment, second person narration replaces third person and first-person plural. As such, the protagonist's experience is projected onto the reader. As the fragment ends with a rhetorical question in the second person, the fragment transforms for

spectatorial to confrontational. The reader becomes complicit in the story and is encouraged to participate in meaning making. The shifts in the narrative perspective encourage reconstructive interpretations as it reshapes the relationship between the narrator, protagonist, and the reader. By obscuring her identity with fictional elements and anonymity, the inconsistency in the narrative perspective activates a sense of uncertainty concerning who invents whom. Although Lockwood is the author of *NITAT*, the shifts to second person suggests that the reader participates in the formation of the protagonist's identity too. Thus, the novel's instability encourages co-creation.

Lockwood employs anonymity, genre, fragmentary form and shifts in the narrative perspective to draw a parallel with co-creation often found online. In this sense, the novel mimics the participatory nature of the internet. Reconstruction works through these various layers of instability to restore meaning. Readers reconstruct the protagonist's identity by connecting the complex layers of formal elements which constitute the novel's hybrid nature. Reconstruction, then, names a reading strategy which enables readers to perceive the novel's seemingly disparate fragments as a cohesive whole. It is an interpretative tool that is activated by reader engagement. It is through reconstruction that the protagonist can be understood to have a unified identity comprised of multiple facets communicated by *NITAT*'s formal elements. Through reconstruction, readers understand how the portrayal of the protagonist's identity can be understood as performance. In the following chapter, I delve into the novel's preoccupation with humor as it contributes to establishing and informing the protagonist's identity and its performance.

4. Curating Identity Online

In Chapter 3, the analysis explored the various narrative strategies and forms Lockwood employs to establish and narrativize the protagonist's identity in *NITAT*. This included genre conventions, fragmentation, the narrative perspective, and reconstruction. This chapter's focus is on how the

protagonist's identity is performed. The internet's impact extends to the protagonist's expression of the self. The internet is filled with the entire range of human emotion; however, this chapter will primarily focus on humor and emotions related to humor. The focus of Subchapter 4.1 is the significance of humor and irony in *NITAT* and how these elements evoke the novel's comic disposition. The novel's comic disposition enables readers to understand the text as funny. Subchapter 4.1.1 demonstrates how the novel incorporates memes and the implications concerning the protagonist's identity in Subchapter 4.1.1, Subchapter 4.2 continues the discussion concerning the significance of humor by focusing on the role it plays in the protagonist's commodification of the self. Subchapter 4.3 connects humor to grief and how these elements communicate the protagonist's networked self as she occupies different roles in various online and offline communities. The objective of this chapter is to pursue how Lockwood presents readers with a protagonist whose identity performance is based on combined effects of the digital and non-digital influence.

4.1 Humor, Irony, and Comic Disposition

Humor plays a significant role in the protagonist's identity. Just as humor creates ingroups based on an individual's ability to understand a joke, irony, too, shares this ability. Humor and irony are often conflated with one another. Hutcheon writes, "Not all humor is ironic—though some is. Yet both involve complex power relations and both depend upon social and situational context for their very coming into being. [...] Just as irony comes into play because discursive communities exist, so humor too is said to reinforce already existing connections within a community" (25). Thus, understanding that something is humorous and/or ironic is dependent on an audience's ability to comprehend it. Humor and irony are characteristic of many online texts and interactions especially on social media. Nicholas Holm (2024) points out, "verbal irony is clearly part of the online world,

but context collapse may require ironists to be even more blatant when it comes to signaling nonliteral intent” (155). danah boyd⁹ (2011) explains that context collapse is “[t]he lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries [which] makes it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts” (boyd 49). Context collapse makes it difficult to discern whether an instance is humorous, ironic, or both. In Subchapter 3.4, I exemplified how the novel’s formal elements induce instability and enable reconstructive interpretations of the protagonist’s identity. The same instabilities can be reconstructed and interpreted as context collapse which situates the novel within the context of the internet. As such, the novel’s various formal elements present readers with a paradox. The novel’s fragments coalesce into cohesion, yet it creates the illusion of disconnection. The protagonist is anonymous, yet the narrative perspective actuates spectatorship. The novel’s autofictional genre itself is a paradox as it conflates fact with fiction. The paradox that the novel’s formal elements present readers does not remove their ability to coalesce into a cohesive whole. The novel’s reflection of context collapse merely reflects the paradoxical nature of the internet. Just as the internet blurs boundaries between space, society, and time, the novel similarly reflects these contradictions through formal dissonance. Therefore, context collapse is reflected in the novel’s formal elements just like the protagonist’s identity.

Despite *NITAT*’s reflection of context collapse on the internet, readers are able to detect humor and irony in *NITAT* through the novel’s comic disposition. Comic disposition “describes a new interpretive tendency that emerges in online contexts whereby audiences become pre-inclined to interpret any and all texts as potentially comic” (Holm 265). As I established throughout Chapter 3, *NITAT* is associated with the internet as a result of its formal elements. As text evokes the

⁹ danah boyd deliberately chooses to write her name in lowercase letters. Out of respect for boyd’s personal and political convictions, I adhere to her preferred capitalization practices. This is reflected in the consistent use of lowercase letters even when boyd’s name is used at the beginning of a sentence. Her entry in this thesis’ bibliography also reflects this exception to capitalization conventions.

affective reality of the internet through its form and context collapse, the novel assumes the comic disposition that emerges in online contexts through association. This means that despite unstable irony, which “refers to situations in which the author’s intent is unclear,” an instance of verbal irony can still be interpreted as ironic especially as interpreters are predisposed to detect comic intent (Kreuz 41). The novel’s comic disposition can be detected not only in spite of its unstable irony, but also its unstable form, specifically fragmentation, narrative perspective, and genre. Essentially, *NITAT*’s comic disposition enables readers to understand comic and ironic intent without vocal and gestural cues. Comic disposition suggests that texts, like *NITAT*, are not only formed by “social-cultural cues that encourage a particular reading [...] [but] also shaped by how a particular audience is predisposed to interpret a text as a consequence of their own experiences and history” (Holm 263). The narrative’s ability to convey a comic disposition not only identifies the protagonist as someone who is fluent in humor online, but readers share in this identification in understanding the novel’s references to the internet, too. It is through this shared sense of humor that readers and the protagonist laugh and identify with each other.

To understand the novel’s comic disposition is to understand the form of humor repeatedly referenced to throughout the novel. The narrator reflects on this humor as “[t]he funniest thing now, it seemed, was a fake ad for a product that couldn’t exist, and how we were supposed to laugh at that, when the thought of a product that couldn’t exist made us so unhappy?” (Lockwood 65). Based on this quote, the “funniest thing now” is something that inherently exhibits an ironic duality. The “funniest thing now” and the unhappiness resulting from “the thought of a product that couldn’t exist” are, in fact, the same thing (Lockwood 65). As such, the internet’s humor is one marked by context collapse and nonliteral intent. An example of nonliteral intent is a text message the protagonist sent to her mother demanding, “NEVER SEND ME THE EGGPLANT AGAIN,

MOM! [...] I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU'RE COOKING FOR DINNER!" (Lockwood 23). The protagonist stands in direct contrast to her mother's naïveté revealing that the protagonist is one such user who is terminally online. Her mother commits the social faux pas of misusing the eggplant emoji as it is often used "to represent male genitalia or as a sexual innuendo" (Spool). Although many users recognize the euphemistic use of the eggplant emoji, not every user understands it as a sexual innuendo. The misuse of emojis is often attributed to cultural differences, age, and context. The protagonist's mother uses emojis in earnest to convey what the emojis literally represent which demonstrates her lack of familiarity in the portal and the ironic uses of certain emojis. Her mother's sincere use of the eggplant emoji reveals that she differs from the protagonist in age and context. Since the sexual innuendo attached to the eggplant emoji is well-known, readers are likely to understand the protagonist's outburst. The protagonist's text in all capital letters signifies a strong emotional response in the modern emotional ecosystem of expression (McCulloch 115). The protagonist's text message conveys levels of annoyance, frustration, or anger directed towards her mother's lack of understanding of communication in the portal. The interaction between the protagonist and her mother is humorous because of the social faux pas of misusing the eggplant emoji. It is clear that the protagonist and her mother do not belong to the same communities online as they lack a shared basis for communication.

In contrast to the interaction with her mother, the protagonist shares a sense of humor with her brother. Therefore, they are able to communicate humor and irony effectively. When the protagonist's brother misspells an expletive in the message, "sup hoor" (Lockwood 86), she does not take offense to this but instead takes a moment for self-reflection directing a rhetorical question to the reader. She asks, "Why are we talking like this?!" (Lockwood 86). 'This' simultaneously refers to her brother's teasing as well as the purposeful misspelling to convey humor. Her brother's

text message is funny simply because it is misspelled and random. The misspelt expletive demonstrates her brother's playful intent which further exemplifies how internet humor derives from non-literal interpretations like the eggplant emoji. By using the plural 'we' to question this instance of humor, the protagonist not only reveals that her sense of humor and communicative strategies mirror her brother's, but also the readers. This rhetorical question is rephrased and reiterated multiple times throughout the novel. A similar question is once again inclusive of the reader in another fragment that asks, "Why were we all writing like this now?" (Lockwood 63). Unlike the rhetorical question posed after her brother's text message, the narrator offers more clarity for this question. The narrator explains, "Because *a new kind of connection had to be made*, and blink, synapse, little space-between was the only way to make it. Or because, and this was more frightening, *it was the way the portal wrote*" (Lockwood 63, added emphasis). This "new kind of connection" refers to the manner in which users on the portal communicate to one another. This "new kind of connection" is referred to throughout the novel in multiple ways including "the new and funnier way to laugh" (Lockwood 9) and "the new shared sense of humor" (Lockwood 26).¹⁰ It is a new connection because social media, or to use Lockwood's metonym, the portal, is a space where new patterns of sociability and sociality are encouraged. These new possibilities for connection and community are exemplified through the nonliteral use and intent behind linguistic acts such as the eggplant emoji and her brother's text message. The nonliteral intent and interpretations are indicative of this new humor which in turn create an intangible community based on shared understanding. By using the first-person plural, Lockwood explicitly draws attention to the parallel between the portal in the novel and social media in actuality. The protagonist and the reader are both implied to understand this new sense of humor. The expression

¹⁰ Iterations of the phrase, 'the new shared sense of humor,' such as new sense of humor or new humor all refer to the same thing.

of which is evident in the protagonist's identity performance and the reader's understanding of the text.

Significantly, the narrator compares the old sense of humor to the new humor. In one fragment, the protagonist recalls a time she listened to a man she names as "one of the secret architects of the new shared sense of humor" (Lockwood 25). She describes his voice as "the modern tone incarnate [which] had spread like a regional fire across the globe" (Lockwood 25-26). The effect of his voice is rather oxymoronic, his humorous tone spread across the globe but is likened to a regional fire rather than a worldwide calamity. This mimics in-groups on the internet: it *feels* universal, though it is entirely local in reality. The use of the word regional carries the weight of this locality as it alludes to the potentially alienating nature of humor and irony. What makes this man funny is more in line with situational irony than verbal irony. The man explains,

I had been putting my balls online for a while. I'd post regular pictures of my garage of kitchen or whatever, with increasing amounts of ball in the background. [...] And one night I went to a bar where a bunch of posters were meeting up. [...] And a dude walked up to me and handed me a business card that had *I've seen your balls* printed on it. He didn't say a single word. Then next to him, right on cue, his friend puked into a trash can. [...] And I thought to myself, nothing will ever be funny in this way again (Lockwood 26, original emphasis).

At the risk of ruining the joke, the man's anecdote is humorous because shortly after receiving a card stating "*I've seen your balls*," another individual vomited into a trash can, almost as if in reaction to having seen the man's anatomy. There is an ironic twist of fate in this man's story: the protagonist names him as "one of the secret architects of the new shared sense of humor" (Lockwood 25), yet he laments the fact that humor has now changed. Therefore, the old sense of humor appears to align with situation irony rather than verbal irony. The new sense of humor is similar to verbal irony in the sense that humor is detected through non-literal interpretations. The new sense of humor dictates interactions on the portal as it changes sociality surrounding communication and interpretation. Therefore, Lockwood relies on the novel's comic disposition

in order for readers to ‘get’ it. The novel attempts to create a community through its use these internet references to establish a shared understanding. The protagonist’s identity is imbued by these internet elements not simply because of her online presence, but because the internet fundamentally shapes her identity and thus, influences its expression.

The protagonist’s identity is performed and understood through the lens of the novel’s comic disposition. An interaction with her sister demonstrates the novel’s comic disposition and the internet’s influence on protagonist’s identity performance. The fragment states, “‘Mamma mia,’ she said to her sister’s stomach, and offered it a tiny chef’s kiss. She hoped as an afterthought, and despite all her debasements, that English would still be intact when it came time for the baby to learn it” (Lockwood 75). Readers understand this fragment’s comedic effect because of its reference to an internet meme, namely the *Italian Chef Kiss*.¹¹ The *Italian Chef Kiss* meme is used to “either earnestly react to good content or used to sarcastically respond to content that has an excess of negative qualities (Adam, “Italian”). The new sense of humor is immediately discernable in this fragment as the protagonist hopes that the baby would be able to learn English even though ‘Mamma mia’ and the chef’s kiss gesture are Italian in origin or associated with Italy.¹² By saying ‘Mamma mia’ and giving the baby a chef’s kiss, the protagonist literally performs the *Italian Chef Kiss* meme herself. This performance does not insinuate that the protagonist identifies as an Italian person but demonstrates how the internet is a space where users borrow elements from other cultures in exaggerated or stylized ways. This demonstrates context collapse and nonliteral intent as the phrase, ‘Mamma mia,’ and the *Italian Chef Kiss* meme are removed from their original cultural context and used in an English-speaking context, as though

¹¹ The asterisks are part of this meme’s official name.

¹² ‘Mamma mia’ is a common Italian expression used convey surprise. The *Italian Chef Kiss* meme refers to a gesture stereotypically associated with cooks from European descent, specifically Italian, that “indicates perfection or deliciousness” (Adam, “Italian”).

they naturally belong there. These verbal and physical gestures are what the protagonist refers to as her debasement of the English language. Despite interacting with her sister in an offline context, the protagonist participates in an internet-driven identity performance while maintaining the novel's humorous tone.

The novel's preoccupation with humor and association with the internet present readers with a comic disposition. The novel's comic disposition does not imply that the internet is only about funny content, but that readers are predisposed to interpret the text as funny. In texts, humor and irony run the risk of being misinterpreted due to a lack of vocal and gestural cues. There are no widely used marks or punctuation to signal irony and humor online despite previous efforts, although several typographic symbols have previously been enlisted in attempts to convey sarcasm such as the tilde (~) (Kreuz 142). The novel's comic disposition mitigates potential for misunderstanding as readers are inclined to interpret the text as comedic because of its association with online contexts. As such, Lockwood establishes the new humor found on the portal to be one defined by context collapse and nonliteral intent. I have already begun to discuss the role of memes in the novel. In the following subchapter, I delve into the role of memes in the protagonist's identity performance in greater detail.

4.1.1 The Role of Memes

Memes are a form of visual media which evoke humor. In both online and offline contexts, humor can either be “highly social for members of the ingroup [...] [or] destructive and alienating for members of the outgroup” (Phillips and Milner 92). Memes function in a similar way. Memes have the potential to create “a sense of community for the ingroup, but in so doing, it [creates] at least the potential for an outgroup” (Phillips and Milner 97). Thus, memes and humor function similarly in that they both have inclusive and exclusive potential. This potential is realized through the way

users employ memes to communicate emotions and attitudes. Memes represent a means of performing social behaviors that enable an individual's sociality. McCulloch states, "[M]aking and sharing memes is about policing what's in and what's out of internet culture" (241). In incorporating memes in *NITAT*, Lockwood participates in this making and sharing by turning a medium which is primarily image-based into a textual format. She does this by either naming, describing, or referring to them. By doing so, she attributes a degree of memetic knowledge to the protagonist and the other characters, demonstrating the different intangible communities formed by memetic humor. According to writer Walker Caplan (2021), there are fifty-five memetic references in *NITAT*, not including internet references whose background is already explained in the novel. The multitude of memetic references and their association with humor set a dominant humorous tone in the novel. She uses memes to affirm the novel's comic disposition, thereby creating a narrative that predisposes readers to understand the text as humorous through content as well. As form. The novel's dominant tone also implicates the protagonist's identity performance as she is primarily portrayed humorously. The role of memes in *NITAT* is three-fold: memes situate the novel on the internet, link the protagonist's identity to internet contexts, and communicate the novel's comic disposition.

In the novel, memes appear just as they do on the internet: suddenly and randomly, without any sort of introduction or preamble. Similar to the novel's use of fragments, Lockwood's memetic references situate *NITAT* within the context of the internet. Take the following fragment for instance, "*CIA Confirms 'Charlie Bit My Finger' Was on One of Osama bin Laden's Computers*" (Lockwood 57). The meme mentioned in this fragment finds its origins in a viral Youtube video from 2007 affectionately known as Charlie Bit My Finger. The original is a home video depicting two young brothers interacting. It is most famous for the older brother saying, "Charlie bit me.

And that really hurt” (jasminmakeup). Since its original release, it has been parodied, remixed, and modified into viral memes in the form of both video and image. Six years after Bin Laden’s death, news outlets began reporting en masse the contents of his computer (Phillips). Lockwood incorporates Charlie Bit My Finger by referring to a viral news story from 2017 when the CIA hacked into Osama Bin Laden’s computer (Kircher). Many headlines reporting this story were similar to the fictionalized headline in *NITAT*. The incorporation of this viral news headline and meme, Lockwood conjures the experience of the internet. The headline appears in the text in the sudden way headlines appear on social media feeds. Lockwood demonstrates the pervasiveness of the internet by including an actual viral news headline linked to a well-known meme. The appearance of this news headline and meme is funny because of its sudden appearance and its proximity to reality in an autofictional novel. What is ‘auto’ about this fragment is not that it exposes Lockwood’s interiority but that it exemplifies the content that Lockwood consumes online. Lockwood turns this news story into narrative and simultaneously suggests that the protagonist consumes this media too.

Lockwood incorporates a multitude of memes and general references to content on the internet, but the protagonist does not always recognize or identify with every single reference. The protagonist’s knowledge and understanding of memes communicates her identity in relation to online communities. When the protagonist goes to the hair salon, her interaction with the hairdresser reveals that they belong to different online communities:

Her hair had not been cut in months [...], so she took an afternoon off and went to the salon. ‘I saw a meme the other day,’ her hairstylist said, [...]. ‘It was about how cowlicks are formed, and *it showed a cow coming into a kid’s room at night and actually licking his hair, and that’s how it happens.*’

A tear slipped from her eye in the mirror. She recalled the text thread she had going with her brother, where he just sent her minor variations of *the ‘guess I’ll die’ meme*,

which to be honest she had never fully understood. ‘Oh God, did I snip you?’ her stylist asked [...].

‘No, no,’ she said, laying her hand on the stylist’s arm, [...] ‘I was just thinking that you and I ... have seen very different memes in our lives’ (Lockwood 182, added emphasis).

There are two memes referred to in these paragraphs. The first meme referenced is rather obscure. It does not have an entry in meme databases, such as Know Your Meme, and the origin is unknown. However, a user on YouTube animated and uploaded the meme ten years ago and has since garnered twenty-one thousand views (Sowards). A simple search for ‘cowlick meme’¹³ will also bring you to the correct result. The second meme is more well-known. The Guess I’ll Die meme is a stock photo of an older man in a red sweater shrugging his shoulders and the words ‘guess I’ll die’ written on the image (Adam, “Guess”). Users apply this meme to jokingly resign themselves to death when confronted with a minor inconvenience (Adam, “Guess”). The protagonist’s reaction to these memes demonstrates how they have the potential to define online communities. The protagonist either does not understand some popular memes or is simply not exposed to certain memes, thus, distinguishing herself from both her hairstylist and brother. Unlike the protagonist’s understanding of her brother’s “sup hoor” text message (Lockwood 86), the protagonist claims she “never fully understood” the Guess I’ll Die meme despite recognizing it (Lockwood 182). As for the Cowlick meme, the protagonist simply tells her hairdresser that they “have seen very different memes in [their] lives” (Lockwood 182). Although the animated video of the Cowlick meme garnered twenty-one thousand views, this particular meme is only known to a niche online community. The protagonist does not align herself with the ingroup defined by this particular example of memetic knowledge, rather she places herself in the outgroup. This does not mean that the protagonist is not an expert on the internet, but that she simply does not identify with the online

¹³ As there is no official name for this meme, I will refer to it as the Cowlick meme.

communities who associate with these instances of memetic humor. Expertise is not defined by an individual's total knowledge of a particular subject, but rather their deep understanding of certain aspects. The protagonist's knowledge and understanding of memetic references simply position her in online communities that exist within a different context.

There are memes that the protagonist explicitly identifies with. The protagonist's "most secret pleasures were sentences that only half a percent of people on earth would understand, and no one would be able to decipher at all in ten years: *grisly british* [sic] *witch pits* / *sex in the moon next summer* / *what is binch* [sic] / *what is to be corn cobbled* / *that's the cost of my vegan lunch*" (Lockwood 20, original emphasis). All of these italicized sentences refer to tweets that went viral between 2015 and 2017 (Caplan). However, the fifth sentence ("*that's the cost of my vegan lunch*") is the only one that became a meme (Lockwood 20, original emphasis). The original tweet was from "a pro-vegan Twitter account called 'Vegan Revolution' [that] tweeted a picture of their apparently cheap and awesome vegan lunch," though the image used did not quite capture its appeal (Caplan). Users turned this tweet into a meme by posting "pictures of extremely unappetizing or inadequate meals using that same caption" (Caplan). The exact contexts for all five of these sentences vary but they were all found, in some way, funny by thousands and thousands of Twitter users. The protagonist shares her interiority by declaring that these sentences are her "most *secret* pleasures" (Lockwood 20, added emphasis). The protagonist claims this instance of memetic humor as part of her identity due to her confidence. As such, the protagonist reveals an aspect of her identity by identifying with specific instances of memetic humor. Through the Cowlick meme, Guess I'll Die meme, and 'that's the cost of my vegan lunch' meme, it is clear that memes define online communities through humor. When users do not understand the joke expressed through memes, the potential engagement in sociability dissipates. By recognizing and

understanding memetic references that same potential is engaged, thereby enabling users to enact social behaviors, namely sharing and referring to memes, to express belonging. The protagonist performs her identity through her knowledge of memes and identifies with online communities based on her sense of humor.

The protagonist does not just identify with some memes, but she is also embodied by some of them. Similar to the sudden appearance of Charlie Bit My Finger, the “caucasianblink.gif appeared” (Lockwood 53), though it is more commonly known as Blinking White Guy or Drew Scanlon Reaction (Adam, “Blinking”). When the protagonist encounters this meme on the portal, “her eye traveled over it left to right as if it were one hundred thousand words” (Lockwood 53). The narrator foregrounds the protagonist’s instantaneous connection between her visual encounter with the meme to her bodily movements concerning her eye. The narrator continues:

The little strings that connect human eyes to human eyes and human mouths to human mouths *tugged her along* with the expression: she bounced her eyebrows, bobbed her head back on its neck and blinked along. Sometimes she even made a sound that corresponded with the figure of movement, a hushed zoom, or a whoop, that rose and fell with the arc of the drama. (Lockwood 53, added emphasis).

At this moment of media consumption, the protagonist’s bodily reaction intensifies by recruiting additional body parts leading up to an emotional reaction. The protagonist does not merely copy this well-known meme’s movements, but the meme “tugged her along,” implying a sense of influence without much control (Lockwood 53). The eyes of the Blinking White Guy are redoubled through the protagonist’s eyes as it replicates the meme’s eye movements as her own. This intensification is reminiscent of Massumi’s argument that affect “is redoubled by an experience of the experience” (Massumi xxxv). Memes, like the Blinking White Guy, capture and reinterpret feelings, ideas, events through humor, irony, and visual representation. On the internet, users apply the Blinking White Guy meme to situations where they want to express feelings of incredulity. The Blinking White Guy meme intensifies the protagonist’s emotions by transforming it from “the

embarrassing adolescent question of whether people saw the same color green [...] *excuse me, Linda what the fuck did you just say*” (Lockwood 53-54, original emphasis). Instead of relying on visual imagery, the narrator compensates through descriptions of the meme and its personification. This fragment ends with personifying the Blinking White Guy meme as he “[asks] you to help him put on his never-ending play, just this once more, please, you were the only one who could help him bring to life this Masterpiece of Universal Feeling” (Lockwood 54, original italics). Through personification, the Blinking White Guy meme becomes a body with a desire. His “Masterpiece of Universal Feeling” can be understood as the merging sociability on the internet that enables a sense of belonging (Lockwood 54). As the protagonist already redoubles the meme’s movements, the narrator turns to the reader to continue perpetuating its meaning. This alludes to the practice of modifying and reproducing memes on the internet. In doing so, users imbue still or animated images with meaning which are passed on to other users who, like the unnamed protagonist, understand affects through the context in which memes are shown. Memes, like the Blinking White Guy, Guess I’ll Die, and Charlie Bit My Finger, not only represent feelings and emotions, but users share memes to express their own emotions just like the protagonist. In weaving memes into the narrative fabric of *NITAT*, Lockwood, too, takes part in remixing and repurposing the Blinking White Guy meme. She does so not only to contextualize her novel on the internet, but also to communicate the influence that the internet has on the protagonist’s identity and its performance. The protagonist’s identity performance is one that is associated with and driven by the internet.

All of the memes discussed so far are humorous in their own way. Charlie Bit My Finger is funny because of the original video’s spontaneity and memorability. The hairstylist might have found the Cowlick meme to be humorous because of her profession. The Blinking White Guy meme is funny because it conveys relatable emotions of incredulity. The protagonist’s brother,

like many other users online, might find the Guess I'll Die meme funny because of its absurdist nature. The protagonist's beloved 'that's the cost of my vegan lunch' meme is funny because of the original post's absurdity. Lockwood incorporates memes like these by randomly including them, as with Charlie Bit My Finger, and through character interactions replicating how identity is expressed in online and offline interactions. Memes place the novel in the framework of the internet to convey its comic disposition. The combination of memes and the novel's comic disposition characterizes the protagonist and the other characters in the novel. Memes reflect the intangible communities formed online, where people connect through a shared sense of humor. The protagonist's interactions express this interconnectivity. By incorporating these memes into *NITAT*, the narrative hints at achieving this same connection with the reader.

The protagonist's identity demonstrates the different online communities to who she belongs based on her exposure and understanding of the memetic references. Her identity performance is shaped by her understanding of memetic references and the way she is able to relate to others through those references. The protagonist performs an identity that is defined by the content she consumes on the portal. In incorporating memes in the protagonist's portrayal, the protagonist's identity is imbued with memetic humor, indicating a sense of belonging to online communities with whom she shares this humor. The protagonist's reactions and expressions attached to these memes are indicative of her identity performance. Lockwood's novel immerses readers in a fictional world saturated with the stylings of the internet through by combining fragmentary form with references to memes, viral news headlines, and language commonly found online. Readers reconstruct the protagonist's identity through her understanding or rejection of humor, beliefs, and interactions with other characters. By incorporating memes, Lockwood narrativizes belonging to online communities and demonstrating how they inform the protagonist's

identity. In the following subchapter, I delve deeper into the effects of the protagonist's exposure to the internet by analyzing the ways in which the protagonist commodifies and performs her identity on the portal.

4.2 The Commodification of the Self and Identity Performance

Before delving into this chapter's focus on identity performance and the commodification, I would like to go off on a brief tangent concerning attention. Attention is a behavior. In English, 'attention' collocates with 'pay' as in we *pay* attention. This linguistic collocation is inherently entangled with ideas of economy. In exchange for attention, academic James Williams (2018) explains that we pay "with all the things [we] could have attended to, but didn't: all the goals [we] didn't pursue, all the actions [we] didn't take, and all the possible [wes we] could have been, but [we] attended to those other things" (45). Attention, especially in the digital age, is currency. Paying attention evokes notions of the economy, specifically the attention economy. American writer Matthew B. Crawford (2015) broadly states that "attention is treated as a resource—a person has only so much of it" (Crawford). The protagonist echoes this sentiment as she aptly states, "Your attention is holy" (Lockwood 50). Attention is a resource every individual possesses. It is "who you are, who you want to be, and the way you define and pursue those things" (Williams 46). If we accept that attention is an inherent part of human behavior, then "it's hard to avoid viewing the attention economy as a project that ultimately targets and shapes the foundations of our politics. It is not merely the user, but indeed the citizen who is the product" (Williams 48). By participating in the attention economy by *paying* attention, it produces commodified individuals.

Lockwood's autofiction is a product of the commodification of her personal experiences through autofictionalization. Therefore, the attention economy and autofiction have a significant aspect in common: the commodification of individuals. Writer Brigitte Weingart (2019) aptly

observes, “if our so-called life events are traded as a valuable resource, especially on social media, this has to have an impact on literary production” (Weingart). It is important to recall Lockwood’s own virality online and the success of *NITAT* and her previous publications including a memoir. In writing through an autofictional mode, Lockwood’s identity is part of the fabric that comprises the narrative. Anders Johansson (2014) joins in Weingart’s assertion as he points out, “We have gone from a time when *literature*, normally in the form of the book, was the commodity of literary circulation, to an age where the author is the primary commodity, the item that the audience craves and the merchandise that publishing firms and mass media provide” (125, original emphasis). Her autofiction is the product that is printed and sold to the masses. Lockwood’s authorial career exemplifies the commodification of the author figure in the publishing industry as it is in the twenty-first century. By commodifying her personal experiences through autofictionalization, Lockwood creates a staged production of her identity similar to the way users curate their online personas. Lockwood’s autofiction is a form of identity performance. Identity performance is the expression of commodifying oneself.

It is no surprise that the protagonist, too, commodifies herself. The protagonist enjoys fame as a result of her viral portal post which “had raised her to a certain airy prominence. All around the world, she was invited to speak” (Lockwood 13). Although her monetary compensation is never addressed, she attends the events she was invited to speak at, thereby commodifying herself by *spending* time at these events. A more explicit example of the protagonist commodifying herself can be seen in the novel’s politics. The protagonist turns herself into a commodity by becoming the vehicle through which the political tone of the novel is conveyed. In order to demonstrate this, I return to the protagonist’s ‘The Tree of Liberty’ post as it has compelling implications concerning the attention economy and the commodification of the self. Since the protagonist uses her body to

affirm her stance in ‘The Tree of Liberty’ post, her body becomes the site of the political battleground. The protagonist’s identity and politics are intertwined. The fragment, which I will now quote at length, states,

A month after the election, she had been banned from the portal for forty-eight hours for posting a picture of herself crouched down and having her period on a small sculpture of twisted brown pipe cleaners that was labeled THE TREE OF LIBERTY. ‘Wouldn’t that mean you were the tyrant in this scenario?’ her husband asked, but she told him not to quibble. After her account was restored, she had decided to take a rest from political commentary for a while—*not* because she had gotten in trouble but because she had made her position clear, and also it had taken like three days to get a good shot of the period in motion (Lockwood 40, original emphasis).

The fragment begins by connecting the results of the election to the protagonist’s post. As I previously mentioned, the context of this post is Trump’s recent election and the nationwide anxiety concerning women’s reproductive rights. ‘The Tree of Liberty’ post is understood as a reaction to the newly established political status quo. The protagonist performs her dissatisfaction with the election results in posting the bizarre photo described in the fragment quoted above. She uses her menstrual cycle, a biological process, as an element in the political content she posts on the portal. She commodifies her own biological processes in order to put forth this content for the sake of attention. As I previously argued in Subchapter 3.3.1, the portal acts on behalf of the collective and confirms the collective’s role in her identity performance in this scenario. Although the portal ultimately censors her, the fact that the protagonist chooses to refrain from further political commentary demonstrates that the attention she received from the portal’s reprimand, and perhaps any additional attention in the form of likes, is sufficient. The protagonist decides to “take a rest from political commentary for a while” once her account was restored and does so because she feels that “she had made her position clear” (Lockwood 40). In other words, the protagonist feels that the attention she elicited from her post was enough to validate her principles. Instead of the critiquing the socio-political landscape, the narrator centers politics and its effects on the

protagonist's identity and convictions. In this way, Lockwood's novel "make[s] the central problems of society a matter of identity instead of a matter of money" (Michaels 1023). Lockwood does not include the economic or capitalistic implications of the protagonist's political convictions. The protagonist simply performs a political attitude that is anti-authoritarian and critical of restricting women's reproductive rights. It is the protagonist's performance of these political attitudes that becomes the focus of these fragments, rather than the politics itself. In doing so, she commodifies herself. It is this commodification of the self in the attention economy, especially in an autofiction about the internet, that highlights the performative quality of politics online.

Humor plays a role in the protagonist's commodification as the 'Tree of Liberty' post is humorous in a dark, satirical way. The image itself is absurd as it depicts "herself crouched and having her period on small sculpture of twisted brown pipe cleaners that was labeled 'THE TREE OF LIBERTY' (Lockwood 40). This absurdity is juxtaposed to the irony her husband observes in that she could be seen as the tyrant in this context. After being accused of tyranny, the protagonist over explains her restraint from political commentary online, emphasizing that it is "*not* because she had gotten in trouble" which reinforces the impression that it was in fact because she had gotten into trouble (Lockwood 40, original emphasis). Lockwood weaves humor into politics in order to portray the nuanced experience of being political online. The protagonist not only communicates an interest in politics, but she also performs her politics through dark humor. She communicates dissatisfaction with the discourse surrounding women's reproductive rights while still maintaining the novel's comic disposition.

Other fragments in the novel take on a similar critical, yet humorous tone. Take for instance a fragment that begins by exclaiming, "Capitalism! It was important to hate it, even though it was how you got money" (4). The protagonist is described to have "[s]lowly, slowly, found herself

moving toward a position so philosophical even Jesus couldn't have held it: that she must hate capitalism while at the same time loving film montages set in department stores" (Lockwood 4). A fragment that follows soon after takes on near identical tone, exclaiming "Politics! The trouble was that they had a dictator now, which, according to some people (white), they had never had before, and according to other people (everyone else), they had only ever been having, constantly, since the beginning of the world" (Lockwood 4). It is the protagonist who slowly adopts an anti-capitalistic attitude, and it is other people "who hadn't stopped being stupid yet" who cause her panic about the current socio-political landscape (Lockwood 4). Together these fragments communicate the political landscape on the internet in miniature: the ubiquity of humor and irony as tools to critique dominant systems. The 'Capitalism' fragment is funny because the protagonist compares herself to Jesus. The 'Politics' fragment is funny because of its absurdity. Humor's ubiquity is exactly what inhibits its effectiveness in critiquing capitalist systems of oppression. The dominant system subsumes humor and irony rendering it so universal it is nearly invisible. When the narrator asks, "We were being radicalized, and how did that feel?" (Lockwood 65). There is no answer. Although the protagonist performs interest and concern about the status of the socio-political landscape, her actions are limited to her posts on the portal and her convictions communicated by the narrator's access to her interiority. Her identity performance, especially concerning politics, is precisely that – a performance. Humor is just part of it.

The protagonist's participation in political discourse on the portal is deeply entangled with humor and demonstrates how her identity is performed both on the portal and in the narrative. As demonstrated through the 'The Tree of Liberty' post, the protagonist essentially uses her body to communicate her political dissatisfaction. In doing so, she turns her body into a commodity for politics. Her 'The Tree of Liberty' post is an example of her online identity performance which

exemplifies how the protagonist entangles humor with politics. The protagonist uses humor to critique systems of oppression such as infringements on women's reproductive rights and capitalism. In praxis, however, humor ultimately proves to be ineffective. The protagonist does not affect change as her post is removed from the portal. Humor is merely a part of her online activism and thus, her identity performance. Readers understand the protagonist's politics as an element in her characterization and as such associate her identity with her political stance. Humor has yet another function left to be discussed: its role in grief. In the following subchapter, I explore humor's role in grief and how humor points to a network of communities.

4.3 Being Online in Times of Grief

Her niece's Proteus syndrome diagnosis and premature death is the source of grief for the protagonist and many of the other characters in *NITAT*. Although most pregnancies and births are cause for celebration, her niece's Proteus syndrome diagnosis is a burden on the protagonist and her family. Despite her niece's early diagnosis, "[n]one of the doctors, nurses, or specialists ever breathed a word about abortion. Because twenty-six weeks was already too late? Because it was Ohio and the governor's pen was constantly hovering over terrible new legislation?" (Lockwood 122). This observation has political undertones which allude to Trump's anti-abortion agenda (Crockett). Unlike the protagonist's reaction to the dictator's election referred to in Subchapter 3.3.1, her initial reaction to her niece's diagnosis is not expressed through another political image or quippy anecdote tinged with political sentiment on the portal. Instead, she "went silent in the portal" (Lockwood 124). The narrator goes on to list several things that users on the portal avert their eyes from such as "the nudeness that received only eight likes, from the toothpaste on the mirror in bathroom selfies, [...] from the journalists who were making mistakes in real time" (Lockwood 125). At the top of the list of things the portal avoids is "the ones who were in mad

grief, whose mouths were open like caves with ancient paintings inside” (Lockwood 125). The comparison between the individuals’ mouths and the caves summons an image that implies the emotional and primal depth from which grief arises. It is this grief that the protagonist identifies with and ultimately causes her silence online. The aversion users have to grief reveals that it is not an emotion that abides by the feeling rules accepted on the portal. Recalling the fact that feeling rules govern emotional exchanges, the aversion to grief on the portal necessitates the protagonist’s withdrawal from the social media platform (Hochschild 56). Unlike the protagonist’s experience with ‘The Tree of Liberty’ post, she does not require a rule reminder prompting her to remember what social behaviors surrounding grief are accepted on the portal. The protagonist simply “knew how it was” (Lockwood 124). The protagonist knows that the portal avoids negativity such as grief. Society now “avoids negativity in all forms because negativity makes communication stall” (Han, *Transparency* 7). Silence in times of grief is the accepted behavior pertaining to sociability online. By being silent, the protagonist performs the social behavior which permits her to participate in sociality enabled by social media platforms such as the portal. Her silence is the performance of her allegiance.

Negativity, grief, and her niece’s diagnosis all contribute to the protagonist’s newfound silence on the portal. Susan Sontag (1989) explains why silence is the widely accepted response to disease:

Any disease that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally, contagious. Thus, a surprisingly large number of people with cancer find themselves being shunned by relatives and friends and are the object of practices of decontamination by members of their household (6).

Even though Proteus syndrome is not a disease, it is a medical condition that is treated as a mystery due to its rarity. Therefore, individuals who have a Proteus syndrome diagnosis are, to use Sontag’s term, morally contagious. Sontag’s observation that friends and family often ostracize cancer

patients is similar to the portal's aversion to grief. It is precisely the negativity associated with grief and disease that these collectives, specifically the portal, avoid. However, negativity is no longer confined to disease. Negativity, in general, is shunned as individuals generally avoid it. That is not to say that there is no negative content on the internet, but that negativity "disturbs and delays the smooth communication of the Same" (Han, *Transparency* 2). Han uses the 'Same' to refer to communication characterized by a "a chain reaction of likeness" (Han, *Transparency* 2). Negativity interrupts continuity. The protagonist's silence on the portal reflects her understanding of sociality by complying to the accepted sociability on the portal. In her compliance, the protagonist not only demonstrates her understanding of the emerging sociability on social media platforms, but also indicates her desire for digital detox.

Digital detox as a concept has gained significant attention in recent years. "Acts of detox," Michael Dango (2022) argues, "seek to regain control of an environment not of your making by making instead a safe space of intimacy" (50). Dango's assertion can be related to Sonntag's observations about friends and families seeking to decontaminate themselves of their relative's perceived contagiousness. A simple search for digital detox generates hundreds of articles claiming the best ways to set boundaries with technology. Reporters Sarah Kessler and Richard Warner (2023) explain that digital detox as a phrase comes "from the language of substance abuse treatment" which indicates a sense of something amiss with a user's relationship to technology. The protagonist's previous remark concerning the aftermath of her 'Tree of Liberty' post and how she wants to "take a rest from political commentary for a while" (Lockwood 40) alludes to detox behavior similar to her newfound silence. Her silence communicates compliance to the norms in the portal without being reminded of those norms unlike her experience with 'The Tree of Liberty'

post. The protagonist's silence in the portal hints at her desire to decontaminate herself own online addiction, rather than her niece's condition.

The protagonist's desire to decontaminate her life from online addiction is evident in the novel's attempt to recover from fragmentary form. After the protagonist declares her silence, some of the fragments begin to resemble traditional prose in terms of their length since the novel begins to focus much more on her niece's body and medical condition. This emphasis on her niece's body is exemplified by one fragment that states, "The error was in an overgrowth pathway, which meant that what was happening to the baby could not and would not stop" (Lockwood 131). This fragment describes Proteus syndrome in a nutshell: it is a medical condition characterized by an abnormal increase in cell production. The issue of excess and overgrowth is mirrored in the protagonist's internet addiction as it is described as a "metastasis of the word *next*, the word *more*" (Lockwood 21). Thus, the protagonist's internet addiction and her niece's medical condition are both characterized by excess. The protagonist's digital detox represents an attempt to 'cure' herself of her internet addiction. The text's shift towards traditional prose does not negate the coherence suggested by fragmentary form but symbolizes how the protagonist is attempting to change a fundamental aspect of her identity. As a reminder, *NITAT*'s fragmentary form is a result of the internet's influence on the protagonist's identity. The text's attempt to shift towards traditional prose is indicative of the protagonist's digital detox and an attempt to cure herself of her internet addiction. Despite the attempt to recover from fragmentation, the novel remains fragmented and as such, the protagonist remains marked by the influence of the internet. Lockwood does not attempt to provide any answers to internet addiction, but rather demonstrates a way of existing alongside it.

Although she abstains from participating on the portal, the protagonist does not give up the internet entirely. She “disappeared into the internet” shortly after her niece’s diagnosis and declaring her silence on the portal (Lockwood 130). When the doctor urged the protagonist and her family not to do their own research on Proteus syndrome, the protagonist declares she “would rather die than not look something up. She would actually rather die” (Lockwood 137). The protagonist’s relationship with the internet intensifies to fill the lacuna left by the portal. She is not alone in this intensification. The protagonist and her sister are both preoccupied with searching for information on Proteus syndrome online. The protagonist reads comments “on a forum where they were avidly discussing another Proteus case [...] [like] ‘And look on the bright side [...] Like hey! More legs!’” (Lockwood 137). Her sister often spoke of probability, more specifically “the Numbers [...] how often *things go right*” (Lockwood 137-138, original emphasis). The protagonist and her sister share in the overwhelming reality of the baby’s health condition. In the end,

[t]his is what happened: they knew someone. They knew someone at the hospital and so the tall stack of her sister’s paperwork rose to the top like cream. When the Ethics Committee signed off finally on a thirty-five week delivery, the female doctor, in silk headscarf and rose-gold Michael Kors watch, the doctor who might now be barred from the country, the doctor who was not allowed at any point to mention termination, the doctor who must have felt a ping in her lower belly the moment we lost the Supreme Court, the doctor actually wept (Lockwood 140).

Lockwood weaves a long thread of words to forge a connection between the protagonist, her niece, the doctors, the legislative forces and back again. The complex layers of networks within networks to emphasize the multitude of audiences for whom the protagonist’s identity performs. She is still connected to these different communities even though she does not identify with all of them. What distinguishes the community on the portal with the medical and family communities is the specificity. Communities on the portal, as evidenced in part by memes, are defined by a shared sense of humor and exposure to content online. In other words, the collective on the portal is defined by the accepted social behaviors attributed to the emerging sociability online. The

collective represented the medical staff and the protagonist's family is evidenced by the actionable plan of induced labor at thirty-five weeks. Her identity is informed through feelings of belonging and exclusion not limited to a singular context, but rather multiplied through digital and non-digital spaces and interactions. The protagonist has a multifaceted, yet unified identity.

The shift towards grief does not remove the role humor plays in the text. Humor transforms grief. Even in moments where her niece's Proteus syndrome is a source of distress, a reference to a meme appears and evokes humor in an otherwise serious scenario. For instance, the protagonist and her sister plan to go to the Cincinnati Zoo with her niece. The protagonist is concerned with the logistics of bringing her niece to the zoo. She tells her sister, who is also the mother, "We can put her in the double stroller, with her oxygen tank on one side, and wheel her through the crowds" (Lockwood 156). Her sister responds solemnly before adding a humorous touch, "'Yes,' said her sister, [...] and bowed her head for such a long time that it seemed she was going to cry. '*We can also mourn Harambe*'" (Lockwood 156, added emphasis). Harambe was a silverback gorilla kept in captivity at the Cincinnati Zoo and is now immortalized as a meme. In 2016, Harambe "was killed by staff members at the Cincinnati Zoo after a 4-year-old boy entered his enclosure" (McPhate). The news story quickly gained popularity online as "[m]ore than 80 petitions have been started in the three days since zoo officials at Cincinnati Zoo shot and killed a silverback gorilla named Harambe" ("People Petition to Get Justice for Harambe"). Harambe is now "a medium of cultural evolution with no message, signifying nothing so much as its own virality. [...] Harambe is the message that became a medium capable of carrying any signal, without becoming identified with any of them" (Rao). Writer Venkatesh Rao emphasizes Harambe's mutability as it is widely applied to a wide array of messages ranging from humorous tributes to lewd calls for justice. Similar to the Blinking White Guy meme, Lockwood participates in the replication of the

Harambe meme. The Harambe meme softens the solemnity surrounding the protagonist and her sister's trip to the zoo. Mourning for Harambe subtly implies mourning for her niece too. The humor in referring to Harambe lies in the understanding that it represents a moment on the internet when a large online community participated in the virality of Harambe's untimely death and the dissemination of relevant humorous memes. Lockwood prioritizes humor even in moments of grief.

From humor to grief, the protagonist is clearly someone whose identity is shaped by the content she consumes as well as the people who surround her. The novel demonstrates that social media, through the metonymy that is the portal, is an integral part of identity performance in the twenty-first century. The protagonist's performance is commodified and multiplied across different platforms – the portal and the novel – and audiences such as her family members, followers, and the novel's readers. Humor and grief make the dynamic between individuals and collectives tangible by delineating the network of communities that influence the protagonist's identity. The protagonist's identity persists to be defined by the collectives she belongs to and associates within a particular context. As such, the protagonist is an individual defined by interconnectedness. This does not mean that she remains incoherent and fragmented. Her identity exists because of her connections to these multiple collectives. It is this interconnectivity that communicates how identity is formed through a negotiation between individuals and collectives in both offline and online contexts.

5. Conclusion

This thesis has thus far examined the various narrative strategies Lockwood employs to portray identity performance online in the form of a novel. My analysis throughout this thesis has been guided by the following research questions: (1) How does Lockwood narrativize online identity performance? (2) How is the protagonist's identity performance informed? Lockwood narrativizes

identity through the novel's formal features. Autofiction is a hybrid genre that integrates factual elements from the author's personal experiences with fictional elements. As an autofiction, *NITAT* communicates a form of identity performance as Lockwood puts forth an entirely curated identity. Lockwood's and the protagonist's shared similarities assuage the ambiguity created by the fact that Lockwood is not directly represented in the novel. The novel's shifting narrative perspective, the protagonist's anonymity, and the novel's genre strengthens the position that the novel's focus is identity performance as reconstruction fills the lacuna created by uncertainty. Lockwood begins to incorporate internet elements through its fragmentary form which attempts to recreate the experience of scrolling through social media feeds. The novel's fragmentary form is an expression of the internet's influence on the protagonist. The comic disposition enables a portrayal of the protagonist in a humorous lens. The novel's fragmentary form and comic disposition demonstrate the impact of the internet on identity and community. These formal elements work in tandem to create a narrative environment through that presents readers with a protagonist whose identity is contextualized and influenced by the internet. This is evidenced by the protagonist as she models the language, humor, and irony commonly found in online spaces during the twenty-first century. The protagonist's interactions exemplify "new patterns of sociability and routes to sociality" (Papacharissi 317). Not only does the autofictional genre communicate identity performance on the author level, but also the protagonist's identity, too, is performed on the character level through the aforementioned narrative strategies. Placing *NITAT* within the context of the internet and centering the novel on an anonymous protagonist whose identity is profoundly influenced by her immersion in the internet and the communities she engages with, Lockwood creates a novel that simulates how users negotiate, curate, and perform their identities based on self-perception and societal expectations.

Through these formal features and references to the internet, Lockwood simulates online identity performance. Lockwood's simulation of online identity performance is explicitly demonstrated through the protagonist's posts on the portal and the tension it causes in her offline life. In doing so, Lockwood exemplifies the internal processes that the protagonist undergoes in order to curate an identity on the portal. The protagonist's anonymity draws attention to the notion of online identity performance, too. Anonymity highlights the fact that the protagonist's identity is unknown and therefore, must be reconstructed from the clues communicated by the narrator. The fact that the narrator relays information about the protagonist hints at a curated, or selected amount of information. By simulating online identity performance online in a novel, Lockwood creates a novel that attempts to reflect what it means to be on the internet in the second decade of the twenty-first century: the networked self. The networked self is "communicated across collapsed and multiplied audiences, [and] seeks social opportunities for expression and connection" (Papacharissi 317). The protagonist exemplifies the networked self as she seeks opportunities for connection highlighting the interconnectedness of the different collectives. As the protagonist's identity is defined by the internet and the portal, her characterization and interactions with other characters communicates how new "patterns of sociability and routes to sociality [...] emerge" (Papacharissi 317). The protagonist's identity is one that is adaptative and multifaceted. It is not that the protagonist's identity is comprised of separate identities, but that the integration of these facets comprises her identity. In other words, her identity performance is demonstrated through the different expressions of the same core identity.

This is not to say that the protagonist's identity is fragmented. It is that the protagonist's identity takes shape based on the audience for whom she is performing. This reflects Burk and Stets' assertion that identity "is understood across various roles and situations [...] because it refers

to important aspects of the individual who is always present” (172). As the novel demonstrates its inability to recover from fragmentary form, it solidifies the position that the influence of the internet is a fundamental aspect of the protagonist’s identity. This influence is reiterated in the protagonist’s interactions with other characters and her understanding of memetic humor. Lockwood’s narrativization of the protagonist’s identity exemplifies the influence of technology on social systems in the twenty-first century as she explicitly engages with knowledge of social systems on the internet. In doing so, the protagonist represents a networked self in the sense that she is informed by sociality established by online communities. The novel, then, mimics social media platforms in the sense that it acts as the platform on which the protagonist performs her identity. Social media platforms

provide props that facilitate self-presentation, including text, photographs, and other multimedia capabilities, but the performance is centered around public displays of social connections or *friends*, which are used to authenticate identity and introduce the self through the reflexive process of fluid association with social circles. Thus, individual and collective identities are simultaneously presented and promoted” (Papacharissi 304-305, original emphasis).

Lockwood’s portrayal of the protagonist relies on a solely textual representation that does not include physical or material descriptions. The protagonist’s identity is entirely gleaned from her interactions and the contextualization of her identity within the framework of the internet. Afterall, online identity refers to “a configuration of the defining characteristics of a person in the online space” (Kim et al. 1762). The protagonist’s identity in *NITAT* is no different as Lockwood situates her within the context of the internet and her social relationships. Without a name or physical descriptions, the protagonist’s identity is performed through her social connections.

The protagonist’s identity is one performed for audiences as she seeks opportunities for expression and connection. The audiences are not limited to her immediate networks such as family but extends to include users on the portal and the novel’s readers. Lockwood calls attention

to the deeply intertwined relationship between identity and the internet to contextualize the dualities between the collective and the individual, fact and fiction, and finally, online and offline. Her identity is defined by the multiple connections afforded by the internet as well as the collectives revealed by her niece's condition. As a networked self, the protagonist's identity performs interconnectedness as she is defined by it. The notion of a network suggests "patterns of interconnection and exchange that organize social and aesthetic experience" (Levine 113). Lockwood uses fragmentation, the narrative perspective, and references to elements on the internet to convey how an individual functions within a network of social relations both online and offline. Thus, Lockwood asserts a collective of overlapping networks and their impact on an individual and vice versa. By organizing the narrative through fragmentation and a shifting narrative perspective rather than a specific persona, *NITAT*'s form demonstrates moments in which complex and invisible social forces collide and overlap.

Ultimately, the novel asks readers not only to co-create meaning through reconstruction, but also urges readers to meditate on their own relationship with the internet. When the protagonist asks the rhetorical question, "[O]h, have I been *wasting my time*?" (Lockwood 120, original emphasis), this is not merely a self-reflective moment for the protagonist. It is a question the reader is forced to ask themselves exactly in the moment in of reading. It is the attempt for connection, as seen in this moment, which compels me to conclude that *NITAT* is not only a novel which exemplifies the networked self, but that it is also an example of a networked novel. The novel is, of course, a hybridized performance on the genre level as it intermingles factual aspects of Lockwood's life and fictionalized elements, but it also evokes a digital space in a non-digital format. Although the novel is entirely text-based, Lockwood explicitly seeks to present readers with a hybrid narrative which evolves and revolves around a transmedial landscape, including

references to memes, other novels, films, and references to viral internet trends at large. It is the novel's hybridized nature that enables Lockwood to explore the increasingly transmedial tendencies of twenty-first century human subjectivity and knowledge structures. *NITAT* repeatedly calls upon the nature of the network not only through its recurrent thematization of the collective's influence upon individuals, and vice versa, but also through the way the novel's form engages readers in the co-creation of meaning. As such, Lockwood encapsulates the internet, the communities it fosters, and their combined effects on the protagonist's identity which impart onto readers a way of being in an information saturated world. Lockwood attempts to spotlight the ripple effect of the internet on identities by focusing on an individual. It is through *NITAT*'s anonymous protagonist that the networked self is realized.

This thesis contributes to analyses and critiques of not only autofictions, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to the growing body of work addressing the intersection between literature and the internet. As I mentioned in the Introduction, there is ample work concerning the proliferation of literary texts online through the form of instapoetry, twitterfiction, and hypertext (see Thomas 2020). There is also a significant amount of work involving the use of social media as a tool for narrativizing events in real time (see Mäkela 2019, Sadler 2022). Although this research was helpful in writing this thesis, academic interest concerning the effects of the internet on traditional modes of literature (i.e. the novel) was minimal at the time of writing. Therefore, this thesis directly contributes to filling the lacuna in literary analysis concerning the impact of the internet on novels and prose. However, there are still questions this thesis does not address: How does the protagonist's character development throughout the novel reflect broader societal changes induced by digital technology? How does the novel address issues of mental health and the effects of constant exposure to the internet? How does *NITAT* incorporate linguistic changes induced by

technology? These questions cover a range of aspects in *NITAT*, though related to many of the themes discussed in this thesis, fall beyond the scope of my research. By virtue of *NITAT*'s dependence on the zeitgeist, Lockwood's novel serves as fertile ground for research concerning several areas aside from online identity and the effects of digital technology in literature.

Regardless of any themes and topics left for want, the findings and insights gathered from this analysis offer an addition to a long literary history concerning the effects of form and identity in interpreting novels. To recapitulate, Lockwood's *NITAT* portrays an anonymous individual whose identity is expressed through her interactions with other characters and posts on the portal, which is similar to identity performance online. It is the readers' responsibility to interpret her performance based on the digital context evoked by the novel's form, memetic references, incorporation of viral news headlines, and humor. It is through the protagonist's identity performance that Lockwood explores the tension between individuals and collectives, exemplifying how this dynamic manifests in digital and non-digital contexts. In uncovering these complex dynamics between technology, the collective, and individuals, this study serves as an exploration of how societal norms, digital platforms, and identity performance mutually and cyclically inform one another. It is an accepted truth that novels provide readers with an understanding of the world we live in as well as worlds that seem completely foreign to us. As we navigate an increasingly digitalized world, understanding the changing dynamics of social interactions and ways of being will be crucial in forging authentic and meaningful connections moving forward.

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Abstract

Identity is the unique amalgamation of traits, experiences, and roles which define an individual's sense of self and their place within society. Identity is communicated through its performance. As the internet and social media have become more and more pervasive in recent years, it is inevitable that identities are performed in these digital spaces. Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This (NITAT)* turns identity performance on social media into narrative form. The aim of this thesis is to identify the narrative strategies Lockwood employs to simulate identity performance online in novel form. An evaluation of the novel's genre, fragmentary form, use of affects, and shifting narrative perspective reveals how Lockwood creates an anonymous protagonist whose identity is defined by the online and offline communities she belongs to. *NITAT*'s protagonist offers potential for evaluating a plethora of aspects connected to humor, politics, and accepted social behaviors in digital spaces, reflecting contemporary discourse on the internet.

Keywords: autofiction, social media, identity, identity performance, fragmentation, humor, affects, Patricia Lockwood

Zusammenfassung

Identität ist eine einzigartige und persönliche Verschmelzung von Charaktereigenschaften, Erfahrungen und Rollenbilder, welche das Selbstwertgefühl und den eigenen Platz in der Gesellschaft definieren. Identität in diesem Sinne wird indirekt durch eine Performance kommuniziert und aufgrund der wachsenden Gegenwärtigkeit des Internets sowie von sozialen Medien ist die Performance der Identität in diesen digitalen Umgebungen unumgänglich. Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This (NITAT)* verwandelt diese Darstellung der Identität in sozialen Medien in eine Erzählform. Das Ziel dieser Masterarbeit ist die Identifizierung der Erzählweisen, welche von Lockwood verwendet werden um die Performance dieser Identität in digitalen Umgebungen in Romanform zu simulieren. Eine Evaluierung der Literaturgattung, der verwendeten fragmentarischen Form und Affekten sowie die verändernde Erzählperspektive soll zeigen, in welcher Form Lockwood einen anonymen Protagonisten kreiert, dessen Identität durch persönliche Online- und Offline-Gemeinschaften definiert wird. *NITAT*'s Protagonist bietet ein breites Spektrum an Möglichkeiten für eine kritische Evaluierung von Aspekten wie Humor, Politik und akzeptierte soziale Normen in digitalen Umgebungen, welche einen gegenwärtigen Diskurs im Internet widerspiegeln.