QUEER REALITIES: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FICTION AND THE
BOUNDARIES OF UTOPIA

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that contemporary forms of American and British queer realism—specifically, those focused on gay masculinity—are consistently attenuated by narrative invocations of the utopic mode. I analyze Alan Hollinghurst’s 2004 *The Line of Beauty*, André Aciman’s 2007 *Call Me by Your Name*, and Hanya Yanagihara’s 2015 *A Little Life*. The backward temporal movement in each of these novels problematizes its textual construction of present and future; consequently, in each novel, life itself becomes utopized, a process which bears upon both the aesthetic qualities of contemporary literary realism, and also upon our understandings of queer lives in and beyond fiction. The contemporary realist novel functions as a complicated portrait of the ways in which the realities of race, gender, class position, and sexuality collide with the whims of utopic fantasy—a collision marked both by impermanence and possibility. My critical introduction sketches out salient debates about literary realism’s history through and beyond postmodernism, queer theory’s conceptualizations of the “anti-social” turn and the affective turn, as well as the modulations of queer utopia and queer of color critique. Chapter I argues that Alan Hollinghurst’s 2004, Man Booker-prize winning novel, *The Line of Beauty*, is fundamentally a narrative of fantasy. By starting with the novel’s invocation of Henry James and its own meta-realist emphasis, I suggest the text’s status
as a rejoinder to the supposedly “hysterical” realisms from which it emerges. I then argue that the novel’s strategies of narrative focalization construct homophobic conservatism as an object of satire, but that these strategies fail to recognize their reinscription of white gay masculinity as the primary arbiter of queerness. Chapter II examines two iterations of the same narrative: André Aciman’s 2007 novel, Call Me by Your Name, and Luca Guadagnino’s 2017 film adaptation of the same name. I claim that both novel and film deploy numerous and contradictory frameworks in depicting the temporalities of queer desire, and that these fluctuating movements across time and space challenge the realities of the early 1980s in northern Italy. Within novel and film, clear apprehension of a single gay reality becomes extremely difficult; consequently, the coextant, interlaced, and melodramatic structures of temporality and affect participate in a Muñozian kind of world-making which is both predicated upon and delimited by the plural aporias engendered by time and space. Chapter III identifies similar strains of temporal and affective surplus in Hanya Yanagihara’s 2015 novel, A Little Life. In this chapter, I suggest that Yanagihara’s fusion of literary naturalism with the fairy tale narrative constitutes a utopic revision of various racial and sexual identitarian positions. I argue that A Little Life’s currents of abjection and self-harm are best understood through the textual construction of optimism, and that this affective positionality refracts along the novel’s ahistoricism and its temporal vacillations. Ultimately, I suggest, Yanagihara’s novel establishes a “reality” that is both hypercontextual and self-reflexive. Art—both the novel itself, and the art narrated within its pages—thus become(s) a metatextual signifier of the perpetual installation of the utopic within the “real”—and the perpetual failures and recurrences of both modalities.
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utopia, *n.*

[...] A real place which is perceived or imagined as perfect.

[...] A written work (now esp. a fictional narrative) about an ideal society, place, or state of existence.

[...] A plan for or vision of an ideal society, place, or state of existence, *esp.* one that is impossible to realize; a fantasy, a dream.

—*from The Oxford English Dictionary*

What can the possibility of an impossibility be? How can we *think* that? How can we *say* it while respecting logic and meaning? How can we approach that, live, or *exist* it? How does one *testify* to it?

—Jacques Derrida

To narrate unhappiness can be affirmative; it can gesture toward another world, even if we are not given a vision of the world as it might exist after the walls of misery are brought down.

—Sara Ahmed

Utopic in its negativity, queer theory curves endlessly towards a realization that its realization remains impossible, that only as a force of derealization, of dissolution into the fluxions of a subjectless desire, can it ever be itself.

—Lee Edelman

Queerness, as I am describing it here, is more than just sexuality. It is this great refusal of a performance principle that allows the human to feel and know not only our work and our pleasure but also our selves and others.

—José Esteban Muñoz

What the fuck are perfect places, anyway?

—Ella Yelich-O’Connor
Introduction

The gay novel is dead. Or, at least, Alan Hollinghurst said as much in his remarks at the 2018 Hay Festival—words he retracted and qualified later that same year, after a wave of critical backlash. “Of course I don’t think it’s really dead,” he said in an interview, explaining:

[G]ay fiction, Gay Lit, had really come into being in the 1970s and ‘80s in response to new freedoms and new challenges. It had novelty and urgency and a political purpose. As time and circumstances changed, those properties were rather diminished. It didn’t have or didn’t need a clear identity any longer…. Now, the whole way in which we talk about sexuality is so much more complex. That ghettoised Gay Lit was once a really valuable, exciting thing. But I think queerness has sort of replaced “gayness” and so have much more complicated explorations of sexuality…. And I think new writers are not emerging as gay writers. They may be emerging as queer writers. One could say that I was almost talking of the gay novel as a genre. I didn’t, of course, mean that gay lives don’t remain of enormous interest. (qtd. in Nair)

Hollinghurst’s comments signal the evolved concerns of contemporary authors whose work concerns queer lives—writers operating in a world marked by temporal and political exigencies far removed from those of the 1970s and 1980s. This novelistic death notice also applies to a very specific vision of “the gay novel as a genre”: namely, one that primarily depicts and espouses white, cisgender gay masculinity as the ultimate signifier of queer sexuality. This closed-off positionality derives in part from the proliferation and canonization of writers such as Christopher Isherwood, Gore Vidal, E.M. Forster, Edmund White, and Armistead Maupin, among others, whose writings deployed the mimetic and imaginative functions of fiction to frame the “new freedoms and new challenges” of which Hollinghurst writes—even as these efforts of representation perpetually centralized white gay masculinity within queer fiction.
In contrast to the then-“ghettoised” position to which Hollinghurst relegates past gay fictions, though, many contemporary writers of queer fiction have achieved incredible mainstream and critical success, winning sought-after literary prizes and garnering international acclaim. Over the past two decades—the nascent years of the twenty-first century—the literary landscape has reflected through fiction a more diverse array of lived realities, those which depict the numerously intersecting matrices of race, class, sexual, and gender positionalities. If the gay novel has died, other modes and genres have sprung up in its wake: autofiction, memoir, and speculative fiction, to name but a few. Along with “traditional” realist novels, these queer texts all work to nuance and expand textually mimetic possibilities to dramatize and explore the contours of contemporary sexuality. The investigation I undertake in this thesis is a rigorous and curious investigation of gay representations in fictions written, published, and read in the present moment, and the inextricability of such texts from contemporaneous debates about the possibilities of the literary and the sexual insofar as they purport to depict, align with, and signify the “real.”

My interventions occur on both aesthetic and theoretical lines, as I wish to suture together the narratological workings of contemporary fiction—specifically, that which has attained the privileged moniker of “literary fiction”—with the oft-inflamatory, oft-contentious ideas about futurity and temporality that have raged in queer theory’s critical debates over the past twenty years. I assess a small subsection of contemporary English and American realist fiction—that which depicts, primarily, the lives of gay men—in order to queer notions of post-postmodern narrative realism. I take as my primary texts three popular and critically-acclaimed novels: Alan Hollinghurst’s 2004 *The Line of Beauty*, André Aciman’s 2007 *Call Me by Your Name*, and Hanya Yanagihara’s 2015 *A
Little Life. Gay possibility, as manifested in these texts, depends upon complex temporal and affective structures, ones which invoke a modality of queer utopia that qualifies and circumscribes questions of literary realism. Rather than totalizing or generalizing about queer fiction of the contemporary Anglophone, I demonstrate how these three novels—with their many thematic, generic, and structural similarities—might be taken together as a means of understanding various shifts in narrative realism in the early part of the twenty-first century, and how such narratological revisions might help us understand the dissolutions and disillusions of the “gay novel,” of literary realism, and of queer theory.

In the remainder of this introduction, I survey the salient debates surrounding literary realism—from its nineteenth-century inception and nearly immediate pluralization into “realisms” throughout the following century, and into and through the crisis of postmodernity—in order to understand how, at present, its narratological practices function. To connect these problems of literary realism to the (at first, perhaps seemingly unrelated) questions of queer theory in recent years, I re-evaluate the so-called “anti-social turn” and its subsequent working-out in theories of the queer utopic. I then suggest that other recent critical turns within queer theory—queer of color critique, queer Marxian analyses—are also vital for understanding the ways in which “realism” relates to larger questions of contextuality and positionality, especially when depicting the lives of minoritarian subjects. Drawing together these narratological and queer perspectives, I argue that contemporary forms of Anglo-American queer realism focused on gay masculinity are consistently attenuated by narrative invocations of this utopic mode, and that each of my selected novel’s backwards-looking temporality problematizes its textual construction of present and future. Consequently, in each novel, (bourgeois, gay) life
itself becomes utopized. The logics of literary realism and queer utopia, then, function inseparably within contemporary novels which narrate gay experience—a commingling which qualifies both modalities through the circumscription of possibility and actuality. The contemporary queer realist novel thus offers a complex portrait of the ways in which the realities of race, gender, class position, and sexuality collide with the whims of utopic fantasy. This collision point relates to the larger narrative possibility of mimesis, which in turn bears upon the responsibilities and, to borrow a term from Hollinghurst, the “exigencies” of queer fiction. These possibilities of queer space, time, and affect, I argue, exist always in relation both to what is, and to what might be.

**Literary Realisms: Origins and Evolutions**

While a wide-ranging genealogy of literary realism remains beyond the scope and purpose of this thesis, a brief survey of the major historical and aesthetic questions which have always attenuated realism’s narratological possibilities will provide salient context for my larger intervention. Rather than being a unified literary phenomenon, literary realism has for over a century and a half, constituted a contested site around which questions of mimetic possibility, social and economic conditions, and aesthetics converge in fraught and dynamic ways. Unsurprisingly, different historians of literature affix divergent chronologies and characteristics to what we generally understand as literary realism in the novel form, but most trace its origins to nineteenth-century France. Erich Auerbach, in his influential *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, argues that literary realism derives from the writings of two prominent French writers in the nineteenth century: Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle), and Honoré de Balzac. Auerbach emphasizes that “the serious realism of modern times cannot represent man
[sic] otherwise than as embedded in a total reality, political, social, and economic, which is constantly evolving”; within this context of a “total reality,” Auerbach argues that Stendhal stages the individual’s “fight for self-assertion” (463, 465-66). Similarly emerging from late romanticism, Balzac “places the human being whose destiny he is seriously relating, in their precisely defined historical and social setting”; according to Auerbach, “to [Balzac] every milieu becomes a moral and physical atmosphere which impregnates the landscape, the dwelling, furniture, implements, clothing, physique, character, surroundings, ideas, activities, and fates of men” (473). Auerbach attributes these early realists’ emphasis on the historical moment to the “entrance of existential and tragic seriousness,” at times verging on “the point of melodrama” (481, 482). However, in the writings of later realists, such as Gustave Flaubert, Auerbach points to “a strong reaction,” a move towards a realism that is “impartial, impersonal, and objective” (482). Across Flaubert’s oeuvre, Auerbach traces the continuities of realism through its two defining features—“real everyday occurrences in a low social stratum, the provincial petty bourgeoisie, are taken very seriously… everyday occurrences are acutely and profoundly set in a definite period of contemporary history”—even as he suggests the alteration of the author’s function: “His [sic] role is limited to selecting the events and translating them into language” (486).¹ Realism’s development out of late romanticism, Auerbach suggests, ultimately gives way to an impartial, language-obsessed realism, which, in turn, reveals its own limitations: “The purely literary, even on the highest level of artistic acumen and amid the greatest wealth of impressions, limits the power of

¹An 1879 letter from Flaubert to J.K. Huymans confirms such sentiment. Flaubert writes: “Art is not reality. Whatever else you do, you must choose from the elements which the latter furnishes” (96). Erich Heller argues that Flaubert was “the late-comer” who “gives away the conspiracy of realism”: “If only the human subject could be reduced to nothing but seeing, understanding, and writing; if only the real subject could be transmuted into nothing but words!” (597).
judgment, reduces the wealth of life, and at times distorts the outlook upon the world of phenomena” (506). Crucial to an understanding of literary realism remains its polyvalence and persistent evolution: a whole array of realisms emerges in the nineteenth century, and continues on in the next.

If the earlier realists focused primarily on the aesthetic, thematic, and linguistic capacities for rendering the quotidian moments of individual lives against the backdrop of history, later realists come to expand the significances of the latter upon the former. For Auerbach, the work of realists such as Emile Zola “serves unpleasant, depressing, desolate truth,” a truth which “is at the same time a summons to action in terms of social reform,” namely, “the struggle between industrial capital and labor” (512). In contrast to a “purely aesthetic realism,” Auerbach finds in Zola and the Goncourt brothers a realism committed to “embrac[ing] the whole of contemporary civilization,” wherein “the common people… had to be taken into the subject matter of serious realism” (497).

These later realisms, foregrounding the role of social classes other than the bourgeoisie, also emerge in connection to then-nascent scientific discourses related to experimental intervention into human life, leading to the development of literary naturalism. Zola, following the model of Claude Bernard’s 1865 Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine, argues that the “naturalistic novel, such as we know it at this time, is a true experiment which the novelist makes on men [sic], with the support of observation” (167). Combining the strategies of observation and experimentation, Zola claims that naturalist writers: “take apart and put together the human machine piece by piece in order to make it function under the influence of environment” (177). This close attention to (historical) environment signals what Zola describes as “the most useful and moral
human work”: “To be master of good and evil, to regulate life, to regulate society, in the long run to resolve all the problems of socialism, above all to bring a solid foundation to justice by experimentally resolving questions of criminality” (177). For Zola, naturalists “disengage the determinism of human and social phenomena so that we may one day control and direct these phenomena” (181). Naturalism dredges up the problematics of temporality and possibility, enlisting a kind of determinism in order to suggest its seams and fault-lines; naturalists exploit determinism to envision the potential existence of other outcomes.

The kinds of questions that naturalism poses for other, stricter realisms can be extended to larger issues of historicity and totality as they mediate between texts and reality. György Lukács, one of the most influential critics of this relationship, examines another major strand of realism: socialist realism. Gordon Graham argues that Lukács identifies three major kinds of literature: modernism, critical realism, and socialist realism—of which only the last offers an “overarching perspective” able to “generate the most powerful literary production.” Lukács writes against the experimental and avant-garde modernism of the early twentieth-century, arguing that while “the surface of capitalism appears to ‘disintegrate’ into a series of elements all driven towards independence,” a parallel aesthetic fragmentation within modernist works of literature fails to recognize totality (32). Rather, Lukács suggests, “only the major realists are capable of forming a genuine avant-garde,” able to “scrutinize[e] all subjective experiences and measuring them against social reality”; such writers should “reveal the relations between appearance and essence” (48, 37, 34). Graham claims that critical realism, for Lukács, “does acknowledge its temporal location,”—that is, it gestures
towards historical and material conditions—but remains “limited by its failure to understand the whole historical process” and its “future direction.” Gordon suggests that for Lukács, critical realism is “crucially incomplete.” Lukács warns that realist accounts must be placed in relation to history, which is “the living dialectical unity of continuity and discontinuity, of evolution and revolution” (55). Kevin Floyd describes how Lukács “introduces a representation of totality” as a “totalizing intention or aspiration to totality,” which is “practical rather than… purely theoretical” (9). This aspiration, Floyd argues, “cannot be separated… from a specific history of collective praxis” (10). Lukács and other critics who follow thus ask questions—questions that linger today—about the various aims and capacities of literary realism to both mimetically render and exist within historical totalities yoked to structural questions of capitalism.

To write monolithically of socialist realism is also outside the parameters of this thesis, and would constitute a reductive critical enterprise, as even within the generic bounds of socialist realism there exists a wide array of perspectives and strategies. Gary Saul Morson argues that socialist realism, emerging from Russia, constitutes an “international… phenomenon” (122). Socialist realism hoped to be “a different kind of art from its Western counterparts,” a “new proletarian literature… ‘qualitatively’ different from its bourgeois predecessors, which, in turn, would come to be seen as representing but one period in the history of culture” (Morson 122). Morson notes that socialist realism “seems to contradict most received definitions of literature—and so it was designed to do!” (123). Socialist realist novels are, to Morson, often critiqued for their characters’ supposed lack of three-dimensional complexity, for having a Marxist-

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2In *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, Floyd “suggest[s] ways of understanding Marxian and queer aspirations to totality as both analogous and irreducibly distinct,” arguing that “a queer aspiration to totality emerges from within the process of reification” (20).
Leninist political orientation which precludes irony and requires an ending that is relatively happy. Morson argues that such readings are problematic and reductive, based on a circular tautology between aesthetics and art, and that we should understand socialist realism as “one kind of novel, in which the aesthetic function is not the dominant” (126). Andris Teikmanis similarly posits that later twentieth-century appraisals of socialist realism construct it as “a historically new type of realism, while avoiding any direct context of style,” (98). For the originators of socialist realism, this mimetic relationship remained contested. Friedrich Engels (who preferred Balzac to Zola) writes that realism “implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances” (484). Maxim Gorky, however, argues the opposite: “It is absolutely necessary that today’s literature begin to embellish life somewhat, and as soon as it does so, life will be embellished, i.e., people will begin to live more swiftly, more brightly” (486). A key—and recurrent—tension of realism thus comes into sharp focus under the magnifications of socialist realism: the relation between (accurate) mimesis and the imaginative capacities of fiction. For Gorky, realism’s task is to “describe man [sic] not as he is today, but as he must be—and will be—tomorrow,” that the socialist realist should “depict the past critically” and “promote the consolidation of revolutionary achievement in the present.” offering a “clearer view of the lofty objectives of the socialist future” (487). Gorky argues that the realist and the romantic “are like two facets of a single being,” collapsing the distinctions between actuality and aggrandizement for the sake of advancing the project of socialism. Socialist realism, while splintered along various lines, contexts, and purposes, thus reveals the temporal, aesthetic, and ideological
fractures that the twentieth century would come to bring against the idea of a fixed singular, or static “realism”—a conversation which still continues in critical circles today.

Given the various realisms that have emerged since the middle of the nineteenth century, it remains unsurprising that contemporary literary realism remains a critically-contested site. Erich Heller writes that “the confused history of man [sic] is largely the history of conflicting senses of reality”—and this conflict has been further exacerbated by the investigations and experiments of postmodernity (592). Although divided upon its current generic boundaries and formal traits, critics generally acknowledge realism’s persistence through and beyond late postmodernism, against which it is frequently pitted in hostile opposition. Several critics have identified a set of concerns specific to the transatlantic Anglo-American context of contemporary literary fiction. Dominic Head traces the roots of these contemporary debates to a “perception of an essentially uninventive literary scene that, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, gave rise to repeated assertions that the English novel was an exhausted form, in a state of terminal decline” (10). Head argues that, in these misleading literary histories, “English fiction is brought back from the brink by the ‘resurgence’ of the contemporary novel from the late 1970s onwards,” a periodization which “hinge[s] on serious blind spots about developments that were already underway in the novel in English, viewed in a more global perspective: African and African-American innovations were already influencing and transforming the novel in Britain and the U.S.” (10). Rachel Greenwald Smith argues for the necessity of understanding how this period—the 1970s and 1980s—also marks the ascent of neoliberalism, a context wherein “recent trends in literary production… are envisioned as compromises between modernist experimentalism and the representation of the feeling
subject, including the emergence of neo-realism and postmodernism in fiction” (4).

Smith’s notion of the neoliberal “feeling subject” finds a counterpart in what Alex Kitnick describes as our contemporary “preoccupation with feeling” (Kitnick 50).

The contested histories of realism in the 1960s and 1970s should also be put into conversation with another kind of writing from the period, specifically concerned with foregrounding queer textuality: namely, New Narrative. Kitnick describes the Bay Area-centric New Narrative as a “group of writers began to explore questions of desire, sexuality, and class in ways that took sustenance from the first-wave feminist mantra ‘The personal is political’” (47). Disidentifying in part with “the modernist strictures of Language poetry,” New Narrative posited a kind of writing wherein “[t]he goal was not so much to record one’s own stories as much as it was to write oneself into existence by exploring one’s connections to others” (Kitnick 47, 48). Rob Halpern writes that New Narrative—some of whose pioneers include Robert Glück, Steve Abbott, Kathy Acker, Bruce Boone, and Dennis Cooper—“offer[s] one response to some unresolved impasses between Gay Liberation, the Avant-Garde, and a New Left that seemed at times unresponsive to the exigencies of sexual politics” (82). Like Kitnick, Halpern stresses the ways in which “New Narrative summons its readers to new forms of community, arousing the potential for new subjectivities,” ultimately “offering the subject as a vehicle of transport into the social scene of its own making” (84, 85). Rather than “represent[ing] the generic gay story,” Halpern contends, New Narrative emphasizes the “performative role in constructing the story-teller self-critically, together with the community to which the storyteller belongs” (88). Kitnick argues that such community—a “catholic way of working”—“proved crucial for future queer cultural production outside its reach,
especially as the AIDS crisis rendered the ‘death of the author’ ever more real” (48). New Narrative offers a useful counterpoint to the realist novel, especially as a mode of writing both subjectively-inflected and communitarian in scope. As Kitnick suggests, such literature from the 1970s “anticipated” many later developments—especially those of postmodernity and poststructuralism.

The advent of postmodernity has provoked wide and varying reactions among literary critics of realism. Matthew Beaumont claims that “roughly since the 1970s, realism has come to seem philosophically compromised” (3). Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, most critics suggest, postmodern techniques—irony, self-reflexivity, pastiche—become hegemonic, and many argue that such narrative strategies “compromise,” to use Beaumont’s word, a strict realism. This supposedly compromised realism perhaps reached its nadir in a polemical 2001 critique from James Wood, who coined the term “hysterical realism” in response to then-recent novels from Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith, among others. According to Wood, these novels of the late postmodern Anglophone engender a realism so bombastic that it becomes un-realistic; they depict characters who “could never actually endure the stories that happen to them” (180). Wood’s critique became a watershed moment in the recent history of realism—garnering a response from Smith herself, in The Guardian, and generating waves of subsequent critical commentary. The most notable targets of Wood’s analysis—those brought to represent the end of realism, in effect—were Smith and Rushdie, writers of color whose works depict the complex dynamics of diaspora, the lives of women, and other populations especially vulnerable to the cruelties of late capitalism, heteronormative patriarchy, and racism. Wood’s deployment of these realisms as
“hysterical” invokes a deep tradition of misogyny, functioning to gate-keep a literary tradition connected to static idealizations of realism that, as the preceding pages have shown, have never truly been hegemonic.

The problematic of “hysterical realism” also catalyzes issues of periodization for the early twenty-first century, and poses larger questions about the capacities, functions, and aesthetics of contemporary fiction. As Julia Breitbach argues, “[c]ritical assessment of contemporary writing can be roughly divided into two fields,” those who “maintain[n] that literature today is still part of the aesthetics of postmodernism,” and those who “attes[t] to a whole new era of writing ‘after’ or ‘beyond’ postmodernism” (5). In his location of a “turncoat realism” at the beginning of this century, Robert Rebein makes a case for discontinuity, citing the shift made by prominent American authors such as Jonathan Franzen, among others, from writing “postmodern” novels to writing realist ones (40). Some critics, such as David Brauner, might be closer to a model of continuity; Brauner argues that postmodernity’s literary influence has been overblown, that “[r]ealism has in fact always been the dominant mode…of American fiction” (12).

Jennifer Hodgson sagely warns against the dangers of “a textbook version of literary history,” a “master narrative in which modernism is succeeded by the post-war reemergence of realism, which is, in turn, superannuated by postmodernism” (19). Pushing for nuanced continuity, Hodgson argues that “British postmodernism has generally sought not to undermine but to extend the realist tradition's liberal humanist project into… new domains” (27). For Hodgson, “the fabulation, self-reflexivity, fantastic narratives, magic, and latterly, hysterical realism… married an ethical commitment to the real with an embrace of the new opportunities offered by formal and
linguistic innovation,” in the process, “offer[ing] a voice to those previously debarred from realist discourse, to re-assimilate forgotten histories, to draw together the traditionally warring factions of critical theory and creative writing and to confront the horrors of contingency that realist convention, by its very nature, denies” (27). Hodgson’s refusal to divide stringently between the postmodern and the realist offers a more recuperative discourse within which recent crises in realism—its purported “hysteria,” for example—ought to be examined carefully in relation to larger systems of cultural, economic, and historical production. Writing of a similarly “uneasy reconciliation,” Rachel Greenwald Smith seems to concur: “If modernism and postmodernism have tipped the scales away from the attempt to accurately render life as it is and toward formal and theoretical play, the fiction of the past decade or so seems to have struck a gentler balance” (31). While Smith critiques contemporary fiction’s over-reliance on affect—arguing that such a focus on individual feeling shores up a neoliberal status quo—the “gentler balance” of which she writes offers a recuperative position from which to understand postmodernity’s aftermath.

Just as many contemporary critics eschew rigid categorizations for contemporary realisms, so too do they attend its formal and narratological strategies with a heightened awareness of fluidity and experimentation that, rather than diverging from the “real,” marks it in new and valid ways. Robert Rebein argues that current realism “exhibits...an unselfconscious mixing of the realist mode” with other modes, “including a few borrowed from postmodernism itself” (30). Similarly, Paul Dawson asserts contemporary fiction “emerges out [of] an encounter with some of the technical experiments of postmodern fiction” (4). Dawson argues that “omniscient narration” functions as “the
exemplary narrative voice of post-postmodern fiction,” that although the “underpinnings of classical realism were challenged by postmodern fiction, the ironic appropriation of formal elements of omniscience… has now been absorbed into mainstream literary fiction” (5). These critics’ nuanced evaluations of the most recent developments in literary history offer up rich perspectives from which we can understand contemporary fiction without feeling the need to binarize or reduce, but such critical reticence also possesses the capacity to engender a kind of definitional vagueness. Patrick O’Donnell nebulously assesses contemporary realism as “an amorphous designation” (36), while Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard describe realism today as “an essential—if slippery as ever” mode, marked also by a twenty-first century “transgression of the boundaries between genres” (6, 7). Julia Breitbach looks not only to the “effects of literary verisimilitude” as key elements of realism’s continued longevity, but also to what postmodern theorist Ihab Hassan has termed a “fiduciary realism” (qtd. in Breitbach 9, 11). Hassan suggests that the post-postmodern world requires the advent of trust, “a quality of attention to others, to the created world, to something not in ourselves” (Hassan 135). “Is that not the premise of realism?” he questions (Hassan 135). For Hassan, realism, “though it may not suffice, remains indispensable”; it “demands faith and empathy and trust precisely because it rests on Nothingness, the nothingness within all our representations, the final authority of the Void” (138). Similarly, Helen Small posits that “the most marked change” in critical appraisals of realism, from the 19990s on, “has been the expansion of the terrain of the debate”: that what feminist critics, as well as cultural and literary critics, ask, “is not just whether the representation of reality in a

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3Dawson argues that the resurgence of omniscient narration constitutes “an overt attempt to parlay the conventional authority of a fictional narrator into cultural authority for the author, or… into cultural authority for narrative fiction itself” (21).
text… rests on an assumption that the world is empirically knowable,” but “whether there are independent standards for judging the correctness of truth claims about the world, about experience, or about morality” (229).

Like Hassan’s disaggregation of authority/actuality, Dominic Head writes of the “limitations of contemporary literary fiction,” wherein “artifice provides a more invigorated—or the best possible—bridge to reflection on the Real: it is the artifice of narrative and memory heightened in fiction, that is the true stuff of experience” (15). Michael Taussig similarly suggests, “[w]ith good reason postmodernism has relentlessly instructed us that reality is artifice,” while also noting drily that “not enough surprise has been expressed as to how we nevertheless get on with living, pretending—thanks to the mimetic faculty—that we live facts, not fictions” (xv). Taussig wants to “estrange writing itself,” pointing to “the capacity of the imagination to be lifted through representational media, such as marks on a page, into other worlds” (16). One such imaginative capacity emerges from Taussig’s revision of Walter Benjamin’s “mimetic faculty,” which Taussig situates in an explicitly postcolonial context. Taussig writes that “[t]oday it is common to lambast mimesis as a naïve form or symptom of Realism,” requiring “forced ideologies of representation” before offering an alternate paradigm (44). Through the processes of contact and copy, mimesis functions as “the nature that culture uses to create second nature… providing the glimpse of the opportunity to dismantle that second nature and reconstruct other worlds” (70-71). Mimesis, Taussig reminds us, is magical insofar as it constitutes “the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power” (xiii). Joining Hassan and Head, then, Taussig locates within postmodernity a site of generative
artificiality—an artificiality which perhaps has always marked realism’s various iterations: the traditional, the naturalist, the “hysterical,” the magical, and so on.

Just as New Narrative offers an alternate textual modality in the 1970s—one in which sexuality and subjectivity remain imbricated within narrative communities—other contemporary literary developments reveal the lingering aftereffects of postmodernity. Alex Kitnick writes that the “convergence” of modes as varied as confession, epistle, autofiction, autobiography, memoir and personal essay all demonstrate “a common impulse” and “poin[t] to a novel conception of the author” (45). Kitnick writes that in today’s “post-Fordist” context, “many view the self as the site where creative work beings,” that “[w]ork and world share close quarters”; in Kitnick’s view, “[i]ntimacy is no longer a revolt against the robotic and the spectacular,” but is instead “part and parcel of the machine” (52, 54). Citing writers such as Chris Kraus, Maggie Nelson, Ben Lerner, and Moyra Davey, Kitnick points to new, autofictive modes wherein the self is “discovered out in the world,” is “never in one place,” and “must be gathered and narrated again” (60). Contemporary texts frequently foreground the hybridized boundaries between self and self-in-text, between self and author, and between literary genres. When put into the larger orbit of contemporary writing, today’s realist novels might appear to constitute a more narratologically conservative mode of literary production—and, indeed, the realist novel remains marked by what it is not, and works, to some degree, within a tradition of convention and preservation. Gordon Graham writes that realism is “distinguished” by the fact that “it is constrained in the sorts of characters and agencies it can employ.” This constraint, however, functions as its own kind of experiment: an authorially self-imposed embarkation into a realm of writing which takes
delimitation as its hallmark. But this, I argue, is precisely what makes contemporary realism such a generative site for the utopic expansivity that queer narratives can offer.

“If it is true that realism as a full representation of the real must fail in any absolute sense,” George Levine writes, “[…] there are ways in which the efforts of realism… continue to matter and to require not passive recording but strenuous art” (14).

For nearly two centuries, various literary realisms have “continue[d] to matter,” spanning not only this massive temporal gulf, but also geographic, ideological, and aesthetic ones, as well. Today’s realisms are unique not only for their aforementioned engagements with the wide-ranging insights of postmodernity, but also for the ways in which the contemporary historical moment has brought forth a wider array of experiences and positionalities whose reality might be recorded and imagined in the mimetic capacities of fiction. If, as the early realists suggested, one of the mode’s most crucial functions is to situate the individual within the milieu of their day, and to see the workings of history through the lens of the ordinary, then we are afforded new possibilities for understanding queer lives in queer realist novels. The realities depicted in the three novels I have selected—*The Line of Beauty*, *Call Me by Your Name*, and *A Little Life*—are specifically queer ones, and the aesthetic questions they pose about contemporary realism necessarily thematize the concerns about the lived experience, possibilities, and futurities of queer lives.⁴

⁴Writing about Hollinghurst specifically, David James argues that through contemporary fiction, it becomes possible to “articulate fresh possibilities for gender critique in the twenty-first century by making it the preferred mode of choice for evoking in a manner at once intimate and interior the historical experience of gay individuals in a climate of emotional disenfranchisement and social exclusion” (497).
Queer Spectrums: Anti-sociality and Affect

At roughly the same time as literary critics were debating the parameters and possibilities of post-postmodern realism, queer theorists were similarly preoccupied with the past and future trajectories of both the queer individual and the discipline, writ large. As the previous discussion of literary realism also attests, the theoretical insights wrought from postmodern analysis have generally confirmed the futility of binary thought. Much—but certainly not all—queer theory from the past two decades, however, has perhaps unwittingly reified new oppositional structures. Specific debates about the affective valences of queer experience in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have constructed these new dichotomies: positivity or negativity? assimilation or anti-assimilation? relation or anti-relation? futurity or presentism? Rather than further binarizing, I situate my own analysis as productively interstitial, roving across these different positions to further nuance questions of affect, temporality, and utopia, without ascribing a static fixity to any of them.

Perhaps no contemporary piece of queer theorizing has been more inflammatory than Lee Edelman’s 2004 No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive. Well-debated since its publication, and considered one of the most important texts to the “anti-social” turn, Edelman’s text continues to influence the contours of queer thought. I return to its premises a decade and a half after publication to understand its relation to and modulation within subsequent queer theory. In No Future, Edelman makes a striking proposition, which he posits as a “truly hopeless wager”: that queer subjectivity should be anti-

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5Robert Caserio argues that the “anti-social turn” begins with Leo Bersani’s interrogative: “Should a homosexual be a good citizen”; for Caserio, “Bersani’s formulation and others like it have inspired a decade of explorations of queer unbelonging” (819). Angela Jones similarly glosses Bersani’s description of “the antisocial turn in queer theory” as “an antiutopian move away from idealism and humanistic notions of community” (4).
reproductive, anti-futurist, and anti-relational. He argues that queers must resist “the constraining mandate of futurism” and “refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation… always the affirmation of an order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane” (No Future 4). Instead of toeing the heteronormative line of reproductive futurism (wherein children figure as “the telos of the social order”), Edelman argues that queerness “is called forth to figure… the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (11, 9). Edelman declaims that this new typology of queer, the sinthomosexual, “forsakes all causes, all social action, all responsibility for a better tomorrow or for the perfection of social forms” (101). Edelman’s totalizing view of queer subjectivity—predicated on resistance to heteronormative ends—necessarily construes (homo)sexuality as a marker of cultural legibility.

Ten years prior, in his 1994 collection of essays, Homographesis, Edelman similarly indicates queerness as a fulcrum point for societal decipherability, describing gay male identity as “the very point of discrimination between sameness and difference as cognitive landmarks governing the discursive field of social symbolic relations” (20). Edelman suggests the double-edged function of this specifically masculine gay positionality, which “must not only be posited, but must be construed simultaneously as lacking a distinctive face and as being susceptible to recognition”; within this mis/recognition, the process of homographesis distinguishes the “gay male body… [as] marked and indeterminate at once” (237). Gay identity, Edelman argues, subtends cultural extremities, seen simultaneously “as too passive and too active at once” (56). Homosexuality, in Edelman’s view, also functions culturally to signify danger, via the
“retrospective act of interpretation that produces meaning from phenomena understood initially to be arbitrary and inconsequential” (20). Edelman thus positions masculine gayness as always-already read, and signified as “the conflictual undoing of one man’s authority by another” (54). In No Future, Edelman expands many of the implications set forth in Homographesis, and the logical core of his argument about the need for queer negativity emerges from a queered reading of the Freudian death drive. The sinthome, “tak[es] the Symbolic’s negativity to the very letter of the law,” and consequently enjoys “an access to the jouissance that at once defines and negates” (5). This jouissance, according to Edelman’s gloss of Lacan, functions as “a movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain,” constituting “a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law” (25). Homosexuality then becomes an identitarian site of un-doing; inscribed as both legible and illegible, this queer positionality opens up capacities for resistance, even as it eschews political ends beyond the present moment.

Numerous critics have addressed and redressed Edelman’s nihilist-adjacent anti-relationality. Jack Halberstam locates these negative conceptualizations of queer time as “emerg[ing] from the AIDS crisis,” but argues that such modalities are “not only about compression and annihilation,” that “[q]ueer subcultures produce alternative temporalities” which envision “logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (In a Queer Time and Place 2). Halberstam’s project—imbricating queer temporality and spatiality within the context of late capitalism—also seeks to “unravel… claims made on the universal from and on behalf of white male subjects,” pointing out the ways in which, for queer subjects
of color and transgender subjects, “time and space are limned by risks” (Queer Time 6, 10). Kara Keeling similarly writes of the capacity of “queer times” to propagate “anti-racist, anti-colonial, de-colonial, post-colonial, and pro-Black” lives and works, noting that such a configuration differs significantly from the “the characteristics and privileges that accrue to those things we recognize as middle- and upper-class white gay men” (85, 89). In Keeling’s critique of Edelman, “[c]alling for ‘no future’ is akin to “a non-politics only for those for whom the future is given, even if undesirably so” (89). Keeling positions queerness as “a generative force that works unpredictably (and therefor sometimes as a simple negation, but even then always restlessly) within the social, shaking loose surplus and investing it in creative modes of sociality that may not be recognized as such” (88). Keeling conjoins this queer “surplus” with affect, arguing that “whatever escapes recognition, whatever escapes meaning and evaluation, exists as an impossible possibility within our shared reality”; this affective poetics-politics constitutes “the content that exceeds its expression” (83). Perhaps similar to the excess of jouissance, Keeling’s model of queer affect nevertheless envisions itself as an “impossible possibility” within a “shared reality,” foregrounding communal solidarity with the imaginative work of bettering conditions for marginalized queer lives.

Like Keeling, other queer theorists turn towards the affective realm in to recuperate queerness’ relation to temporality and feeling. Heather Love examines what she terms the “backward feelings” of “nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, ressentiment, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness,” which

6Similarly, James Penney argues for the inseparability of identitarian politics from capitalism: “Sexual identities, however deconstructed or problematised, are always in a significant sense responses to developments in the relations of capital. This is to say that the discourses of sexuality and sexual identity are necessarily ideological” (4).
are connected both to “the experience of social exclusion” and “the historical ‘impossibility’ of same-sex desire” (4). Love positions herself within the tradition of Bersani and Edelman, even as she clarifies that she is “less interested in accounts of same-sex desire as antisocial or asocial” than in “instances of ruined or failed sociality”; she “share[s] a deep skepticism with Edelman about political appeals to the future,” but remains “more interested in the turn to the past than… the refusal of the future itself” (22, 23). Similarly to Love’s argument that “failed sociality” remains a crucial rubric for queer lives, Sara Ahmed shows how heteronormative “[h]appiness scripts” become “straightening devices, ways of aligning bodies”; for queers, Ahmed argues, deviation from these scripts “is to be threatened with unhappiness,” even as “deviation can involve unhappiness” (The Promise of Happiness 91). Unhappiness figures significantly in Ahmed’s formulation of queerness because its correlative, happiness, “is consistently described as the object of human desire,” as “shap[ing] what coheres as a world,” and, consequently, “direct[ing] us toward certain life objects (Promise 1, 2, 90). In Ahmed’s understanding of (un)happiness—relentlessly structured and strictured by heteronormative teleologies—queerness becomes a site of mediation for different affective valences precisely because of the relationality between people, between subjects and objects. In contrast to the Edelmanian sinthomosexual, preoccupied not with futurity but only with the jouissance-laced possibilities of present pleasure, Ahmed’s vision remains predicated upon the tensions between “the queer struggle for a bearable life and

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In The Cultural Politics of Emotion, Ahmed argues that “emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place,” that “it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made” (10). From these affective nodes, Ahmed suggests, “norms surface as the surface of bodies” (145). Ahmed explicitly derives normativity from “compulsory heterosexuality,” and that “the failure to orient oneself” properly can be read as “a threat to the social ordering of life itself” (145). However, Ahmed warns against using affective frameworks to shore up reductive homogeneity: “A political model of pain cannot gather together all the different pain experiences: this is my point” (31).
aspirational hopes for a good life” (*Promise* 120). For Ahmed, “[p]essimism and optimism are not… simply two ways of looking at the same thing,” but rather “constitute our orientation to the thing itself, whether we take the thing as the cause of happiness or unhappiness,” which “shapes how we apprehend the thing in terms of what it might or might not give us at some future point” (*Promise* 173). “[F]uture oriented,” pessimism and optimism become “evaluations of what we encounter in the present” (*Promise* 173). Through the metrics proffered by Love and Ahmed, queer lives remain connected to negative affect, but this negativity must not necessarily lead to antisociality; rather, affect becomes the mode of relationality which both structures and attenuates queer orientations to the possible and the plausible.

While Love and Ahmed nuance the ways in which negative affect remains pertinent to assessing and understanding queer lives, other critics have more explicitly shifted their focus to the role positive affect—namely, optimism—plays for queerness. Michael Snediker, while noting wryly that optimism is often seen as having a fraught relationship to knowledge, nevertheless posits the need for a “queer optimism” (2). Snediker argues that queer optimism “doesn’t ask that some future time make good on its own hopes,” but instead “asks that optimism, embedded in its own immanent present, might be interesting” (2). Similarly to Ahmed and Love, Snediker argues that queerness can nuance understandings of happiness as teleologically-directed, arguing that “[q]ueer optimism doesn’t aspire towards happiness, but instead finds happiness interesting” (3). Like Love and Ahmed, Snediker centralizes the present functions of affect. Qualified as a “form of meta-optimism,” Snediker’s conception of queer optimism also suggests that “even if queer theory positions normativity as heterosexual fantasy… why does it follow
that heterosexuality... necessarily monopolizes optimism?” (8). In effect, Snediker dislocates sexual orientation from affective valence, arguing that queers are just as capable and deserving of optimism as heterosexuals. Unsurprisingly, Snediker also critiques the “pernicious logic of ‘reproductive futurism,’” arguing that Edelman’s “reduction of optimism to a diachronic, futurally bound axis is itself the outcome of a machinery that spits out optimism as junk and renders suspicious any form of ‘enjoyment’ that isn’t a (mis)translation of jouissance” (23). Snediker wonders, “What if happiness could outlast fleeting moments without that persistence attenuating the quality of happiness?” (30). If Snediker, breaking radically from those on the side of the anti-social thesis, argues for the significance of queer optimism, other affect theorists have qualified our understandings of optimism.

Most notably, Lauren Berlant’s formulation of “cruel optimism” exposes the ways in which the purportedly positive remains tethered to the negative. Berlant defines cruel optimism as a “relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic” (24). The cruelties of optimism emerge, Berlant argues, in the “condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (24). Berlant’s “significantly problematic object” might be read analogously to Ahmed’s notion of “queer moments,” which “fail[] to reproduce norms,” and “pledge their allegiance to the very forms they cannot inhabit” (Cultural Politics 146, 150). The “affectively stunning double bind” of cruel optimism, for Berlant, signals both “a binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent” (51). Snediker refocuses the affective valences of queer
life away from antifuturity and antisociality, but Berlant’s reading of optimism also participates in a comparably relational way: that is, in both formulations, positive and negative remain inextricably yoked, and past and future get sorted out in the shifting present. These questions also all hinge upon the fine line between reality and fantasy, a line of inquiry that Tyler Bradway takes up, explicitly in relation to queer experimental literature. Bradway argues for what he terms “bad reading,” or “[r]eading with feeling,” as a way to “elaborate alternative, embodied modes of social agency” (xxxii). Although writing specifically about experimental, and not realist literature, Bradway’s points are well-taken; he argues that such experimental queer texts “do not arrest the relations between fantasy and reality, between the virtual and the actual, because to do so would falsely close the gap between what exists, and what could exist, and what is not allowed to exist” (xlvii). Bradway gestures to “the oscillation between these temporal states” and the “aesthetic performance of that oscillation and our affective contract with it,” as means of engendering the experimental and the queer coterminously (xlvii). The questions that Bradway raises about possibility, fantasy, and reality are productive ones, and constitute a recent wave of queer theorizing to with which I engage in order to orient it towards the literary real and its flirtations with the queer utopic.

Queering Utopia: Modulating the Possible, Critiquing the Actual

An especially generative synthesis of queer life, affect. and temporality emerges in what might be described as the “utopian turn,” stemming in large part from José Esteban Muñoz’s 2009 Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.

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8Glossing Heather Love, Bradway argues that “the affective relations of reading are necessarily aligned with humanism,” but that queer writers can disrupt this paradigm, because “all queer experimental literature rejects the humanist paradigm of reading because it buttresses a heteronormative social imaginary” (xxxi-xxxii).
Glossing Ernst Bloch’s 1954 *The Principle of Hope*, Muñoz analyzes the temporal nature of utopia, as applied to theorizations of the queer. Citing Bloch’s “unorthodox and messianic Marxism,” Muñoz claims that “the past, even a willfully idealized one… tells us something about the present. It tells us that something is missing, or something is not yet here” (86). According to Muñoz, Bloch makes the past “performative”; in Bloch’s schema, “the past does things” (28). This flexibility allows Muñoz to articulate queerness as “a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility,” and “as a utopian formation based on an economy of desire and desiring” (16, 26). Consequently, Muñoz conceptualizes queer identity as a “horizon,” as an anticipated arrival, “always directed at that thing that is not yet here” (26). Because Muñoz anticipates queerness—a looking forward to—he categorizes queer identity within the utopic field, which “lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity. It permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably constrained by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and institutionalized state homophobia… utopia offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*” (35). Muñoz carefully notes that his project is not meant to “attack… what many people routinely name as lesbian or gay,” but to indicate how “queerness is still forming, or in many crucial ways still formless” (29). The fundamental temporal structuring of Muñoz’s argument is the critical backwards glance, positioned as a way of looking forwards. Muñoz writes that “a turn to what Bloch calls the no-longer-conscious is an essential route for the purpose of arriving

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9Bloch distinguishes between abstract utopias—ideological, and largely un-enacted—and concrete utopias, which are historically contingent and focused on and through the quotidian. In the concrete utopia, Muñoz suggests, it is possible to discern a distinctly “queer feeling of hope” (28).

10In an analysis of the seemingly-opposed rhetorics of “No Future” and “It Gets Better,” Jesse Matz suggests that Muñoz “opts against ‘no future’ in favor of a ‘not yet’ where queer youths of color actually get to grow up” (234). Matz groups Muñoz with “other optimists—Eve Sedgwick, Michael Snediker—in allowing for practices through which queer people make a difference not just to their future but to time itself” (247).
at the not-yet-here. This maneuver, a turn to the past for the purpose of critiquing the present, is propelled by a desire for futurity” (30). Muñoz turns to different spaces—such as stages and public toilets—to indicate the ways in which a looking-back and a looking-forward offer up fleeting instances of a queer utopia. This temporal flexibility is a double-edged sword, though; such critical nuance creates the possibilities that he seeks to evidence, even as it remains perpetually inchoate and, sometimes, unspecific. Although Muñoz claims that “[u]topia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here,” utopia must always be prescriptive to exist. Muñoz writes that it is “productive to think of utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there that could and indeed should be” (97). Muñoz dwells in between possibility and enactment, between past and future; he stages the present not as a definitive all-we-have, but, rather, as a site perpetually mediated by what has been and what we can envision. Unsurprisingly, then, he indicates hope as “the emotional modality that permits us to access futurity, par excellence” (98).

Other critics and theorists have extended and nuanced the tenets of Muñoz’s utopian analytic for understanding queerness. Writing three years after the publication of Muñoz’s Cruising Utopia, Nishant Shahani also frames the past as a site of perpetual engagement for queer identity in Queer Retrosexualities: The Politics of Reparative Return. Shahani extends and clarifies points of Muñoz’s (and Edelman’s) analysis, and assigns a reparative function to queer looking-back. Shahani argues that retrospective, reparative conceptualizations of the past “enable the… reader to be more open to democratic possibilities in the future,” even as this mode “troubles the conventional implications of impotence and detachment” so frequently connected with prior
temporalities (11). However, Shahani warns that this reparative praxis “cannot be condensed into a simple politics of fulfillment or prescriptive program of agency”; instead, Shahani asserts that “the very act of turning back refuses any sense of futurity without a consideration of the constraints of the past” (15). Shahani also expands upon Edelmannian thought, suggesting that “the negative becom[es] a resource for the reparative process of assembling collective memory as the base materials for imagining a different future” (22). Shahani notes that “queer retrosexualities are committed to the future horizon of politics even in returning to a past moment of debasement and exile” (22). In other words, Shahani’s premise is like Muñoz’s: one of looking back in order to look forward. Claudia Breger emphasizes the generativity of “enact[ing…] new worlds,” but argues that “theorizing these worlds through the concept of narrative reconfiguration” should “attac[h] ‘hope’ not only to the realm of utopia but also to the messy and variously compromised, but changing, spaces of actual collective and individual lives” (346). Similarly, Angela Jones “expand[s] Muñoz’s idea of ‘queer world-making,’” through the “performance of queer utopian memory, that is, a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated—a utopia in the present” (11). Jones also glosses Berlant and Ahmed, suggesting that “we must imagine how we might reconstitute the present by examining the… events of ordinary life” (2). For Jones, these moments of “ordinary life” emerge across a wide array of spaces and practices: “in the theater, in political activism, in sexual subcultures such as Barebacking and BDSM, in schools, in queer communities, and in queer families” (11). Following Ahmed’s notion of queer “aspiration,” Jones stresses that “[f]or far too long, utopias have been understood as ideal or perfect places or
societies—a telos,” but because “happiness is a normative and regulatory construct, it
seems fitting… that the construction of queer utopian spaces does not hinge upon
happiness but rather simply autonomous spaces in which to “breathe” (3). While
qualifying queer utopia, Jones nevertheless posits that there is “reason to hope for a better
future, a future not constructed by the dictates of… neoliberalism, but by the needs and
desires of queer people” (12).

Within the strictures of neoliberalism and late capitalism, these “needs and desires
of queer people” are necessarily refracted across various lines of identity and social
positionality; indeed, Muñoz argues that for queer theory to be effective “it must be able
to calculate multiple antagonisms that index issues of class, gender, and race, as well as
sexuality” (Disidentifications 22). Across his writings, Muñoz evidences the ways that
race and affect emerge through the matrices of performativity. Muñoz describes his
desire to “enable a project that imagines a position or narrative of being and becoming
that can resist the pull of identitarian modes of relationality,” laying bare the divisions
between majoritarian/minoritarian and whiteness/non-whiteness (“Feeling Brown,
Feeling Down” 414). Muñoz points to the polyvalent oppressions that non-white, non-
straight subjects must confront, that, for “[q]ueers of color… white normativity is as
much a site of antagonism as is heteronormativity” (22). For Muñoz, whiteness functions
as “a cultural logic that prescribes and regulates national feelings and comportment,”
functioning as “an affective gauge that helps us understand some modes of emotional
countenance and comportment as good or bad” (“Feeling Brown” 415). Within this
context, Muñoz describes the affective position of “feeling brown” as “a mode of racial

11Muñoz specifically describes affect as “descriptive of the receptors we use to hear each other and the
frequencies on which certain subalterns speak and are heard or, more importantly, felt” (“Feeling Brown,
Feeling Down” 414).
performativity, a doing within the social that surpasses limitations of epistemological renderings of race” (“Feeling Brown” 420). This affective and performative position reveals “the ways in which minoritarian affect is always, no matter what its register, partially illegible in relation to the normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects,” even as it offers a way to “resist the disrepair within the social world that would lead to a breakdown in one’s ability to see and know the other” (“Feeling Brown” 415, 416). Muñoz further elaborates on the ways in which minoritarian subjects might not only survive and sustain themselves, but also “imagine an expansive queer life-world” (Disidentifications 34). These life-worlds “require an active kernel of utopian possibility,” and emerge through what Muñoz terms “disidentificatory performances” (25). Disidentification gets defined variously as “descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices” (4); “not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects” (5); “a strategy that resists a conception of power as being a fixed discourse” (19); “a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production” (25); “an ambivalent modality that cannot be conceptualized as a restrictive or ‘masterfully’ fixed mode of identification” (28). Consequently, Muñoz argues, “[t]o disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject,” a process which entails “reworking… those energies that do not elide the ‘harmful’ or contradictory components of any identity” (12). Even as Muñoz espouses a largely utopic vision of queer desire, he also points to the many real strictures that minoritarian subjects must navigate in their quotidian lives.
Numerous other critics deploy queer of color and Marxian critiques to both interrogate imbricated systems of identity and oppression. Kevin Floyd articulates Muñoz’s queer worldmaking as “refer[ring] to the production of historically and socially situated, bounded totalities of queer praxis inherently critical of the ultimately global horizon of neoliberalized capital itself” (199). Floyd emphasizes the ways in which “a framing of queer worldmaking practices in terms of Marxian discourses of totality has been increasingly central to Muñoz’s work, which articulates a queer aspiration to totality in terms of performative gestures” (211). Floyd’s attention to the Marxian underpinnings of queer utopia also should remind us of similar issues of totality that, through Lukács and other critics, situate the realist novel within larger discourses of historical materialism. Other queer theorists have also productively engaged with Marxian theory and critical race studies to further nuance the conditions which structure contemporary lives. Roderick A. Ferguson argues that queer of color critique “opts for an understanding of nation and capital as the outcome of manifold intersections that contradict the idea of the liberal nation-state and capital as sites of resolution, perfection, progress, and confirmation,” making apparent “the intersecting saliency of race, gender, sexuality, an class in forming social practices” (121). Consequently, Ferguson notes, queer of color critique must “challenge ideologies of discreteness” which aim to “occlude” the ways in which “intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital” (121-22).

Rosemary Hennessy and E. Patrick Johnson also bridge queer theory with the concerns of historical materialism. Like Ferguson’s argument for understanding

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12Ferguson derives his analysis from women of color feminism (122). Similarly, the notion of “identities-in-difference” which underpins Muñoz’s departure from both essentialist and social constructivist understandings of identity stems from Third World feminists and Chicana feminists (Disidentifications 6).
queerness in relation to the demands of late capitalism and the liberal nation state, Hennessy points to the “relationship between social differences (of sexuality, race, and gender) and capital’s need for surplus labor” (139). Hennessy argues that “[c]laiming a queer identity is an effort to speak from and to the differences that have been suppressed both by heteronorms and by the homo-hetero binary,” but also that “[q]ueer theory is an ensemble of knowledges, many of them contesting knowledges” (135). Consequently, queer theory emerges for Hennessy as “a site of struggle” requiring “a materialist approach to the sexual identity that reclaims the attention to social totalities that constitutes the radical tradition of the Gay Left,” a kind of queer materialism which might “resist the pressure to separate sexuality off from capitalism and class relations off from sexuality and desire” (148). Johnson similarly redresses queer theory for its frequent “fail[ure] to address the material realities of gays and lesbians of color,” for often “elid[ing] issues of race and class” (99, 100). Like Hennessy and Ferguson, Johnson points to the ways in which queer theory’s deconstructive ends have created a disciplinary “state of quietism” that glosses over the material realities and lived experiences of queer people of color (104). Johnson advocates instead for what he terms quare studies, a “theory in the flesh,” which “emphasize[s] the diversity within and among gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgende[r] people of color while simultaneously accounting for how racism and classism affect how we experience and theorize the world” (98). Quare theory “not only critique[s] the concept of ‘race’ as historically contingent and socially and culturally constructed and performed,” but also “address[es]
the material effects of race in a white supremacist society” (103). Quare theory’s potential, Johnson emphasizes, lies partially in an awareness how “disidentificatory performances serve material ends” in multiple contexts: “Streets, social service lines, picket lines, loan offices, and emergency rooms, among others, may also serve as useful staging grounds for disidentificatory performances” (107). Cumulatively, these queer of color critiques not only render the most recent and pressing disciplinary concerns, but they also centralize how queer “reality” depends upon a wide array of factors, perspectives, and positions within the current and many oppressions within the conditions of white heteropatriarchy, late capitalism, and white gay assimilationist discourse.

**Queer Realities, Utopic Fictions**

I began this introduction by way of Alan Hollinghurst’s proclamation—and tepid clarification—that a certain kind of gay novel, one largely predicated upon the privileged identity politics of a white gay masculinity, has perished. The contemporary queer realist novel offers an entry point for understanding many—and, I argue, connected—kinds of deaths and resurrections: realism after postmodernism, queer theories refusing the totalizing dictates of an anti-futurity, and the (im)possibilities of queer utopia. Given these various crises, the “accurate” representation of contemporary queer lives in fiction has become perhaps an even more vital concern for scholars focusing on subjects who exist under the broad umbrella of minoritarian identities. If it remains possible to depict supposedly “normative” reality within the boundaries of realist fiction, then how might queerness be configured as variously (im)possible within these discourses? When read against the multiple histories of realist fiction, the genre’s mimetic capacities become amplified. On the one hand, realist literature can function conservatively—to depict
mostly white, mostly bourgeois lives. Realism can centralize their interiority, and pretend that totalizing narrative omniscience can be impartial, and suggest that such an authorial evacuation has no ethical or political import, and, perhaps most centrally after postmodernism, realism can shore up the idea that language can accurately reflect what is possible. And yet realism can also resist these functions: it can critique the present; it can use affect effectively; it can glance backwards and forwards, orienting itself in relation to history, and to the many injustices which persecute minoritarian subjects. George Levine writes that “[r]ealism is in its very nature a paradoxical form,” that “realism has always tended to contain (in both senses of the word) idealism of some form or other” (15). Levine fuses realism with idealism—an idea one could easily extend into the realm of queer utopia—but notes the fundamental paradox of such a relation: realism contains, and it constrains. Any modality which purports its fundamental power to be mimetic can, to a certain degree, only work with what is put before it. Mimesis may be constraining, but this restriction offers a vantage point from which it becomes possible to imagine, to reveal artifice and work within and against it. At the local level of text, mimesis flashes these opportunities before us. In *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst’s narrator describes how, “[i]n the tilting mirror, Nick saw them all, as if from a privileged angle, like actors on a set” (185). Realism offers us all a “privileged angle,” and shows us all—readers, characters, authors, critics—to be “like actors on a set.” The *like* is crucial here; realism’s privileged angle often veers into the simile, the metaphor, the figurative, relating things to others things, moving beyond the strictly “real,” from surface to essence and back again. Above all, what I wish to suggest is a simultaneous (dis)identification with both literary realism and with the notion of queer utopia. Both are technically impossible, constrained
to text and limited by imagination, but both are consequently accessible and perpetual, and both have much to still offer us. A dynamic movement across the real(ist), the queer, the utopic: this is the process through which much contemporary fiction renders itself.

A note about my use of terminology seems an appropriate way to preface the argument which gets worked out in the following pages. The novels with which I am engaging mostly purport to describe the lives of fictional gay men in the relatively recent past and present moments. Consequently, my analysis might be applied to suggest the workings and parameters of a kind of post-2000 “gay realism,” one which is largely centered around bourgeois experiences located in adjacency to metropolitan and/or cosmopolitan sites of culture and financial capital. I believe that critical productivity requires specificity of language, and, in many ways, my project does attempt to chart a genealogical understanding of gay realism over the past two decades: how this genre’s death and resuscitation functions along aesthetic and theoretical lines. But, more broadly, I also deploy the terminology of the “queer utopia” that Muñoz and many other critics invoke.14 For this reason, I write not only of the tendencies of a gay realism which narrates experiences specific to certain gendered positions and geospatial contexts, but also how these narrative procedures exist at the more structural level of “queer realism.” I follow Jack Halberstam’s broad definition of “queer” as describing “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (In a Queer Time 6). Indeed, many of the characters in A Little Life and Call Me by

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14 Annamarie Jagose parses the distinctions between “gay” and “queer,” noting that in the 1960s the former “was mobilised as a specifically political counter to that binarised and hierarchised sexual categorization which classifies homosexuality as a deviation from a privileged heterosexuality” (72). Jagose notes that “there is no agreement on the exact definition of ‘queer,’ but that the term/concept ‘stretch[es] the boundaries of identity categories,’” and consequently “has produced exuberance in some quarters but anxiety and outrage in others” (101).
Your Name and The Line of Beauty themselves avoid, qualify, or nuance the labels of sexual orientation that they use in their processes of self-definition. Further, the narrative arcs of these novels also participate in a larger “queering” of reality: thwarting, subverting, veiling, and nuancing that which might be staid and static within the “real.” The language of queer utopia also dredges up an entire sub-history and subgenre of literary analysis: utopian studies, incipient from Thomas More’s 1516 eponymous satire. I use and interpret “utopia” broadly, following in the vein of More’s imaginative configuration of utopia as both perfect place and no-place, and following Muñoz’s queering of the term. I am interested in the definitional boundary points of utopia insofar as they just up against those of reality, and, consequently, of literary realism. For this reason, I generally prefer to analyze the “utopic” mode, which I define as the specifically queer moment that crosses the line of possibility. The utopic moments of realist fiction divest reality and divest from reality, even as they sometimes constitute reality. Utopic realism is queer, and queer realism is utopic. At this moment of cultural and political history, I express my sincerest doubts of any “realism” that does not, in some form or fashion, depart from the parameters of “reality.”

Sara Ahmed writes that “[t]o name one's archive is a perilous matter; it can suggest that these texts ‘belong’ together, and that the belonging is a mark of one’s own presence” (Cultural Politics 14). Following Ahmed, I submit the following “archive” fully cognizant of the artificial trappings that structure the “belonging” of these three novels together. I selected this trio of novels for many reasons, which should become clear over the course of the next three chapters. I wanted, in part, to examine the archival aftermath of the “death” of the gay novel, and to do so as a means of explicitly critiquing
the delimited, bourgeois white metropolitan masculinity that pervades so much of the queer literary canon. By bringing together Hollinghurst’s, Aciman’s, and Yanagihara’s novels, I hope to engender a “contact zone” which functions as a critical point of coalescence for understanding the boundaries of literary realism in relation to the boundaries of utopia, and how both remain fundamentally queer enterprises. In their dates of publication, these novels signify the period from 2004 to 2015, a time of rapid political, economic, and cultural transition in the places of these novels’ reception. The increasing but precarious rights and civil liberties gained by queer individuals in the past two decades necessitate that any post-Obergefell v. Hodges reading of these novels grapples with questions of “reality” and possibility, with questions of assimilation, normativity, and privilege. Set in the wide temporal zone from the early 1980s to the near-present, the events that unfold within these novels also constitute a kind of utopic aporia, offering up myriad chances to look back and to look forward. I selected these novels in part because I enjoy them, because they have moved me, because they are culturally significant, but also because I believe they keenly offer up visions of the strictures and possibilities of the lives of gay men in the contemporary zeitgeist. What follows is a critical appraisal of realist textual strategies, a deliberate interrogation and de-privileging of white gay masculinity, an excavation of layered temporalities, and a persistent detailing of the fleeting, interrupted, and affective possibilities of the queer utopic.

Chapter I argues that Alan Hollinghurst’s 2004, Man Booker-prize winning novel, *The Line of Beauty*, is fundamentally a narrative of fantasy. By starting with the novel’s invocation of Henry James and its own meta-realist emphasis, I suggest the text’s status
as a rejoinder to the supposedly “hysterical” realisms from which it emerges. I then suggest that the novel’s strategies of narrative focalization construct homophobic conservatism as an object of satire, but that these strategies fail to recognize their reinscription of white gay masculinity as the primary arbiter of queerness. The novel’s relegation of queers of color to secondary characters, expendable, sacrificed to AIDS, also generates numerous points for my critical examination of the lessons of queer of color critique, and how sexuality, class, gender, and race become imbricated in ways that nuance and expand Hollinghurst’s realist protocols. Consequently, the queer utopic emerges in relation to but in distinction from the novel’s fantasies of realism.

Chapter II examines two iterations of the same narrative: André Aciman’s 2007 novel, *Call Me by Your Name*, and Luca Guadagnino’s 2017 film adaptation of the same name. In this chapter, I claim that both novel and film deploy numerous and contradictory frameworks for the temporality of queer desire, and that these fluctuating movements across time and space challenge the realist protocols of the early 1980s in northern Italy. I argue that issues of class and privilege serve to blur the boundaries between possibility and impossibility, creating a fantasized zone of permissibility and anti-homophobia, which nevertheless acquiesces to the strictures of straight time and space, and which foregrounds a false nostalgia marked by the melodramatic mode. Within novel and film, clear apprehension of a single gay reality becomes extremely difficult; consequently, the coextant and interlaced structures of temporality and affect participate in a Muñozian kind of queer world-making which is both predicated upon and delimited by the aporias engendered by time and space.
Chapter III identifies similar strains of temporal and affective surplus in Hanya Yanagihara’s 2015 novel, *A Little Life*. In this chapter, I suggest that Yanagihara’s fusion of literary naturalism with the fairy tale narrative constitutes a utopic revision both of queer possibility and literary realism. I argue that *A Little Life*’s currents of abjection and self-harm are best understood through the textual construction of optimism, and how this affective positionality refracts along the novel’s ahistoricism and its temporal vacillations. Oscillation—between the real and the utopic, the tragic and the euphoric, the possible and the strictured—come to bear upon questions of gay masculinity, the homoerotics of homosociality, and racial and class positions within contemporary urban spaces. Ultimately, I suggest, Yanagihara’s novel represents the most recent trends of contemporary queer literature in terms of establishing a “reality” that is hypercontextual, melodramatic, and self-reflexive. Reality fails, and turns to art: both the novel itself, and the art narrated within its pages, thus come to signify the perpetual installation of the utopic within the “real.”

These arguments can only ever be partial, incomplete, and fractional, but it is my sincerest hope that they narrate compellingly the ways in which contemporary queer realities are fictionalized through matrices of sexual, gender, social, racial, and class positionalities. I wish to evince how gay and queer identities offer points of resistance and possibility through the utopic mode, and that this mode’s polyvalence in part constitutes its pervasiveness. Realism persists, as do many kinds of queer lives. Realist fiction is the site that purports to describe how things are in the here-and-now, for its readers who exist beyond the pages of novels. But fiction itself is one mode through which we can describe how things might be, how things could be. To borrow a
conceptual term from Ahmed, different orientations to these fictions bring us closer and further to the real, to the utopic, at various times and places. I suggest that the reality which underscores, subtends, and structures literary realism is contingent; it is always apprehended through unreality, through fantasy, through utopia—through that which is queer and not here and (im)possible.
CHAPTER I

“[I]ncessant Imagining”: *The Line of Beauty’s Fantasies of Realism*

*The Line of Beauty*, Alan Hollinghurst’s Man Booker Prize-winning novel, is fundamentally a narrative of fantasy. Depicting Thatcher’s England from 1983 to 1987, the novel relays the social and interpersonal experiences of a young gay man, Nicholas Guest, as he becomes increasingly embedded within the lives of the Feddens: Tory MP Gerald Fedden, husband to Rachel, and their children—Nick’s friends—Toby and Catherine. Formally and thematically, Henry James functions as the novel’s metatextual north star, and also as the subject of Nick Guest’s own graduate thesis at University College London. In a particularly tongue-in-cheek exchange with Lord Kessler, a friend of the Feddens, Nick declares that he wants to examine “style at the turn of the century—Conrad, and Meredith, and Henry James, of course” (Hollinghurst 50). Lord Kessler rejoins that Nick must be thinking about “style as an obstacle” (50). Nick agrees, but qualifies Lord Kessler’s characterization of style-as-impediment: “Or perhaps style that hides things and reveals things at the same time” (50). Lord Kessler asks if Nick is a “James man,” and Nick “grinned with pleasure and defiance, it was a kind of coming out” (50). This exchange renders, in miniature, the aesthetic and thematic concerns of Hollinghurst’s novel: literary style—particularly, a certain kind of Jamesian realism—and its subsequent implication within processes of display and concealment. Indeed, as Julie Rivkin notes, “[t]he impossibility of aesthetic detachment might well be the most

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15Dominic Head offers an extraordinarily comprehensive reading of the Booker Prize’s role in “constructing our concept of serious fiction” (54). Head notes that “the Booker began to become a media event in the Thatcher era” (62). Head ironizes the Booker’s “association with the promotion of postcolonial writing” because of its origins in the “colonial past” of “Booker plc, formerly the Booker McConnell company” (62). Consequently, Head notes how the prize has become associated with “an aesthetic veneer that conceals a form of ideological bad faith” and which “fosters self-deception in a reader with any kind of investment, conscious or unconscious, in the hegemonic centre” (62).
Jamesian thing about the novel” (289). That this literary nexus of style and form constitutes a “coming out” signifies the novel’s investments in a delimited and circumscribed imagining of white, cisgender, and bourgeois male experience as constitutive of the gay “real.”

Unsurprisingly, then, critical appraisals of *The Line of Beauty* mostly emphasize the novel’s form, its prioritization of aesthetics, and the intersecting lines of identity against the backdrop of the novel’s historical setting. For Rivkin, the novel’s Jamesian references, allusions, and callbacks offer a way to “make legible,” and even to elegize the “[b]eauty and ugliness, desire, avarice, and mortality” of Thatcher’s 80s (291).

Hollinghurst’s textual strategies also situate him within multiply-imbricated literary movements and genealogies. Denis Flannery suggests that “Hollinghurst’s deft allusions to Thatcherism—including “the rights of feral capitalism,” Section 28, and AIDS—“give a dazzling and depressing palette of causes for the mournful subjectivity of Hollinghurst’s protagonist and his text” (302). Flannery also contextualizes Hollinghurst’s writing in the early twenty-first century, “a time when mourning has been… spectacularly reanimated through violent questioning of its parameters,” and a time in which Flannery locates a “wave of recent fiction preoccupied with Henry James” (303, 294). Flannery argues that Jamesian apostrophe, as seen in *The Line of Beauty*, has the power to “animate, to confer life and presence,” as well as to “articulate and direct grief” (295). Rivkin and Flannery thus both suggest that Hollinghurst’s formal

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16 Regarding Section 28, Dion Kagan argues that “[p]erhaps the most barbaric contemporary effect of the Act was its stipulation that no public activity could be taken to positively value or ‘promote’ homosexuality significantly, which stifled the matter-of-fact discussions of sex required in urgent community efforts at AIDS education, stigma reduction and prevention” (166).

17 Soo Yeon Kim wryly notes that “The instances of James’s influence on *The Line of Beauty* are too many to be fully excavated,” and foregrounds the ways in which much of the scholarship focused on “tracing the Master’s steps in Hollinghurst’s novel” is “more intent on identifying Jamesian elements… than on thinking about the innovative ways the novel uses James” (177).
machinations offer up a way to view both the historical and political elements of its 1980s narrative, and also imbue the text with certain affective structures. Strangely, neither Flannery nor Rivkin discuss Hollinghurst’s novel as an overtly realist project, nor do they situate it within part of the then-burgeoning corpus of literary novels hemming in what had become, in the words of James Wood, an “hysterical” realism characteristic of postmodernity’s end. Published just a few years into the twenty-first century, *The Line of Beauty* takes up the same setting as other acclaimed literary novels which preceded it—such as *The Satanic Verses* (1988), *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), and *White Teeth* (2001)—a multicultural, multi-classed, and pluralistic London of the late twentieth century. Hollinghurst’s vision, however, remains predicated upon what Soo Yeon Kim terms “the ‘great divide’ of class, culture, and taste that saturates the supposedly liberatory postmodern and postcolonial London delineated” within the novel (169).

Unlike the works of Smith, Rushdie, DeLillo, and other writers of the late 1990s and early 2000s, Hollinghurst’s novel reads as starkly realist. Indeed, David James argues that *The Line of Beauty* “illuminates a broader set of issues to do with the strategies by which contemporary writers attempt to make formal integrity viable again” (494). For James, such strategies of narrative integrity include “evoking interpersonal relations in an often-oblique and internalized fashion,” and a reprisal of Impressionist aesthetics “disloyal to the mimetic aims of pastiche” (499, 501). Positioned within this early 2000s return to a

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18Dominic Head writes that *White Teeth* “seemed to march forward under Salman Rushdie’s carnivalesque banner,” but that 2005’s *On Beauty* (a re-writing of *Howards End*) “announced the liberal sentiments that, in some shape or form, continue to govern the possibilities of the novel’ (28). Head’s comments signal Hollinghurst’s position within the post-hysterical realism, post-postmodern context of contemporary fiction.

19One formal maneuver deployed to suggest these Impressionist aesthetics is, according to David James, an iterative “flicker,” which “exemplif[ies] the fragility of inner peace… against a background of conservative propriety and heterosexist prejudice” (503).
traditionally bourgeois realism, the critical consensus avers that The Line of Beauty depicts the strictures of the 1980s through its own formal devices.

Hollinghurst’s return to a specific kind of formal literary realism also remains intertwined within its treatments of sexuality. Georges Letissier characterizes Hollinghurst’s “literary enterprise” as “a wilful, deliberate decision to impose a homocentric perspective on the novel genre,” although he suggests that “this bid for novelty is, paradoxically, what qualifies Hollinghurst as a writer of the Tradition, even if it is a tradition on the margin of the mainstream” (199). Letissier’s connection of Hollinghurst’s formal strategies to those of a specifically gay sexuality constructs the novel as a site of multiple ambivalences. For Letissier, the novel’s titular “line of beauty” comes to “epitomiz[e] both the relation to tradition and the swerve from the heterosexual norm” (199). Whereas other critics pointed to the novel’s somber Jamesian techniques, Letissier suggests that in The Line of Beauty, “[s]ociety is filtered through the lens of what might be called camp slapstick, an odd mixture of shame and self-derision, combined with a deep awareness of… sham and hypocrisy” (202). In particular, Letissier indicates camp (“the frivolous expression of a fundamentally serious purpose”) as Hollinghurst’s primary tool for sketching figures such as Margaret Thatcher, a formal technique which “reduce[s] everything down to mimicry” (202, 203). Although Letissier does not suggest the larger literary contextualizations of such camp, it becomes possible to read these hyperbolic moments in Hollinghurst’s novel as echoes of the aforementioned “hysterical realism,” lambasted precisely for the frivolities and caricatures which Letissier identifies in The Line of Beauty. Instead of tracing such

20Paralleling Letissier’s categorization of Hollinghurst as working with a literary “tradition” is Kim’s assertion that the novel’s “canonicity” is “consecrated by, among other indicators of aestheticism, the Man Booker prize” (167). Similarly, Dion Kagan asserts that “Alan Hollinghurst is… canonical” (168).
cultural and literary residues—those of late postmodernity—as qualifying and nuancing Hollinghurst’s formal strategies, Letissier argues that in *The Line of Beauty*, the “repeated claim for a homosexual centre of consciousness seems more artificially conventional than truly innovative,” that “Hollinghurst’s own attempt to ‘homosexualize the novel’ consists largely in an enterprise of literary restoration,” only conceding that “his angle is pretty unusual” (210). Similarly, David James argues that Hollinghurst’s realist aesthetics allow him to “normalize the position of the homosexual man as the emotional center and the leading focalizer of his fiction” (504-5). It is thus along these lines that I wish to nuance and critique Hollinghurst’s project: to name it as a specifically early twenty-first century realist novel, and one which establishes the disjunctions and disidentifications of the queer utopic mode.

Although Hollinghurst’s methods are realist—lush description, precisely-rendered subjectivity through narrative omniscience, subtly self-reflexive prose, a relentless focus on the bourgeoisie, and a deep entrenchment within the historical moment of Thatcher’s rule—a novelistic tension emerges between form and the “reality” which it purports to both mimic and evince, and the realities of race, class, and gender positionalities. By framing Nick as a fundamentally liminal figure—the gay, middle-class guest of Tory aristocracy—the text suggests his presence as critique; David James describes Nick as “the novel’s focalizing consciousness” (499). Within the novel’s realist protocols, Nick becomes a characterological site of both transgression and acquiescence; as Soo Yeon Kim indicates, Nick’s “‘guest’ status is manifest throughout the novel,” as he is “literally a lodger-guest of the Fedden house, a middle-class gay man who is occasionally invited to join the ‘looking glass world’ of upper class heterosexuals” (174). For Kim, Nick’s
“guest position felicitously embodies an ethical deconstruction of... masculine
subjectivity,” a process which constitutes a kind of queered bildungsroman (178).
Certainly and undoubtedly, Hollinghurst’s novel uses Nick’s adjacency to the Tory
centers of power to satirize the banal and perpetual constructions of harm within
Thatcher’s regime. But disjunction persists, and Hollinghurst’s extreme delimitation of
the perspectives which might be said to textually constitute the literary “real” occludes
and excludes the scope of the narrative’s formal efficacy. Within the novel, realism, like
its Jamesian predecessors, “hides things and reveals things at the same time.” Perhaps
inadvertently, Hollinghurst’s realism establishes itself through the construction of various
textual fantasies: those of unrequited love being requited, of there being social mobility,
class equity, and racial equality in Thatcherite England, and, perhaps most centrally, that
Nick’s white gay masculinity uncritically constitutes the centrality of queer experience,
or offers a somehow unmediated perspective from which to view gay possibility.21

Also at work in Hollinghurst’s novel—however fleeting—is the elicitation of
imaginative possibilities which points to the (dis)identificatory and utopic capacities
unique to queer experience, as theorized by José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz describes
disidentification as “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to
negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere,” and as a way of navigating and resisting
“the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny,” all of which
“work to undergird state power” (Disidentifications 4, 5). Muñoz considers identity as the

21Dion Kagan’s gloss of Daniel Hannah demonstrates how “The Line of Beauty is a case study in ‘torn
hospitality’: ‘the gay observer is retained as the perfect guest, the refined observer, in the heteronormative
house of capitalist acquisition so long as evidence of his sexuality is reduced to pure aesthetic taste, so long
as bodily signs of his gayness remain private, invisible” (191). Hannah and Kagan reveal the limits of
Nick’s liminally queer position.
“point of collision,” a point which “is precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation,” when “the queer and colored come into perception” (*Disidentifications* 6). Through the “ambivalent modality” of disidentification, Muñoz suggests, we “need to hold onto and even risk utopianism if we are to engage in the labor of making a queerworld” (25). In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz contrasts the “muted striving of the practical and normalcy-desiring homosexual”—a typology which emerges in Hollinghurst’s novel—with those who “live inside straight time” but continue to strive for “another time and place… [for] a desire that is both utopian and queer” (26). It is within this matrix—of utopia, of (dis)identification—that I wish to engage with Hollinghurst’s novel, to demonstrate the ways in which the text frequently mistakes its fantasies for realities, and its realities for fantasies. Queer utopia thus emerges in tenuous relation to Hollinghurst’s realism, and can be read as latent critique—even as the novel attempts to contain its instances of utopia within the realm of unattainable, untenable (realist) fantasy. My reading of *The Line of Beauty* consequently aims to establish and analyze these sites of tension between a severely delimited gay male “reality” and fantasy, and to suggest that Hollinghurst’s text most actualizes queer reality in its productive (if misconstrued and self-contained) generation of the utopic. By tracing the text’s various moments of (dis)identification—with Tory power, with heteronormativity, with whiteness—I wish to suggest the nuances of its realism, the presence of the queer utopic, and the ways in which the commingling of these modes marks gay fictions of the early twenty-first century as irrevocably focused on the realities and fantasies of the possible.
From its beginning, the novel presents an almost-magical vision of Nick’s life as a guest at the Feddens’ “big white Notting Hill house” (Hollinghurst 4), a site that for Myron Yeager “objectifies Nick’s social, sexual, and personal uncertainties” between “the public and private selves he has yet to navigate” (312). The novel frames Nick’s position within the Feddens’ home as fundamentally ambivalent; as if by the magics of a fairy tale, Nick becomes a “lost middle child,” the recuperated (and recuperative) object at the center of things. Although the Feddens are aware of Nick’s sexual orientation (“He had only come out fully in his last year at Oxford”), Nick’s sexuality remains easily glossed over (24). This gulf between reality and its subtended possibilities complicates the novel’s vision of queer realism, as Nick both recognizes and (dis)allows fantasy:

His heart was given to Toby, with whom flirting would have been inappropriate, almost sacrilegious. He wasn’t quite ready to accept that if he was going to have a lover, it wouldn’t be Toby, or any other drunk straight boy hopping the fence, it would be a gay lover — that compromised thing that he himself would then become. Proper queens, whom he applauded and feared and hesitantly imitated, seemed often to find something wrong with him, pretty and clever though he was. At any rate they didn’t want to go to bed with him and he was free to wander back, in inseparable relief and encouragement, to his inner theatre of sexual make-believe. There the show never ended and the actors never tired and a certain staleness of repetition was the only hazard. (Hollinghurst 24)

The structures at work in this passage (and, indeed, throughout the novel) remain preoccupied with circumscription and delimitation, with the illusory but perpetual possibilities of a fantasy whose reality is derived from its never actually occurring. Nick’s heart “was given to Toby”—a passive phrasing which strips away agency and choice; desire for an impossible love object constitutes the “reality” of Nick’s early life, and the problematic convergence of impossibility and possibility sets forth boundaries.22

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22Toby’s constitution as an impossible, problematic love object for Nick also signals the machinations of Lauren Berlant’s conceptualization of cruel optimism as a desire for that which thwarts success.
Effectively, Nick’s fantasy of identification with the Feddens finds its limit—the point of disidentification—in Toby’s heterosexuality. While Nick refuses to actualize the impossibility of union with Toby, he propagates the fantasy of Toby through a queer gaze: “Nick would see him from the balcony and go down to join him, slightly breathless, knowing Toby quite liked his rower’s body to be looked at. It was the easy charity of beauty” (5-6). Toby knows he is being looked at, even “quite liked it,” but this fantasy, while sufficient to sustain Nick’s larger phantasmic desires, remains insufficient, a failed realism. In effect, then, the affective structures which govern the novel’s conceptions of gay possibility remain conditioned by impossibility. For Nick, gayness functions as a site of compromise, as an incomplete or corroded mode of desire precisely because it forecloses possibilities that are actually impossibilities. The “[p]roper queens”—gay men open about their sexual identities, who inhabit certain cultural positionalities—thus become for Nick objects of emulation and fear, of disidentification. Within Nick’s affective and psychic imagining of gay desire, possibility and impossibility exhaust one another; the gay men he wishes to become like “didn’t want to go to bed with him,” just as Toby does not know or reciprocate Nick’s desires for him. Funneled through the free indirect discourse of Nick’s imaginings, the novel’s production of gay possibility exists always in tandem with its delimited impossibility, as “inseparable relief and encouragement” signal to Nick that the best, most real context for his desires is an “inner theatre of sexual make-believe.” This centralization of Nick’s interior subjectivity foregrounds his white, bourgeois sensibility and subjectivity, and does so in accordance with realist protocols that are tested by the boundaries of possibility.
“[T]he Rush of Reciprocity”: Race, Class, and Actualized Desire

Through the character of Leo Charles, Nick’s first gay lover, the novel renders its conditions of possibility as they relate to racial and class positionalities. On their first date at a pub, Nick orders drinks at the bar and, on returning to Leo, “[h]is mind held the floating image of the man he had longed to meet, whom he had touched for a moment and left outside in all his disconcerting reality. He was too sexy, he was too much of what he wanted, in his falling-down jeans and his tight blue shirt” (26). Nick attempts to reconcile the “floating image of the man he had longed to meet” with the man himself, construing Leo’s physical presence (an actuality, a realized possibility) as “too sexy,” as “too much of what he wanted” (26). Hollinghurst’s novel thus presents the coalescence of reality as a kind of excess, representing Leo in relation to Nick’s fetishization of him and the possibilities he represents as a “disconcerting reality.” Soo Yeon Kim describes the novel’s “veneration of black male bodies,” but also the ways in which such veneration veers into a fetishization of the “alterity” of Leo’s physicality (170, 180-81). Letissier similarly argues that Hollinghurst’s descriptions of West Indian bodies “calls to mind Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black male models,” and “re-enact[s] the colonial fantasy of an exotic beauty” (204-5).23 When Leo asks about Nick’s address—the Feddens’ house—Nick “must deny the social identity to which he has also aspired through the house” (Yeager 312). Nick distances himself from Kensington Gardens:

23Kobena Mercer’s analysis of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black male models offers a helpful rubric for understanding how Mapplethorpe “used his homosexuality as a creative resource with which to explore and open up a politics of marginality across the multiform relations of class, race, gender, and sexuality in which it is actually lived” (193). Mercer identifies the ways in which Mapplethorpe’s work is “powerful and disturbing,” rooted in “the ambivalence of identity and identification,” troubling because it “stages the return of the repressed in the ethnocentric unconscious” (191-92). Mercer’s centralization of the spectator—who must mediate the “disruptive ‘shock effect’” of such work is also a generative site for understanding how to “undermine commonplace racist stereotypes” seen in the production of works such as Mapplethorpe’s (189).
“God, I don’t come from that sort of background. No, I just live there,” he tells Leo, who replies, “Still, your friends must be rich” (28, 29). Nick’s statement—“No, I just live there”—is intended to separate him from the Feddens, but it belies Nick’s access and adjacency to their privilege, and the ease with which he performs aristocracy when it suits him. Class and wealth offer a matrix through which Nick, as the novel’s protagonist and primarily point of focalization, misapprehends reality: “[Leo] had a certain caustic preoccupation with money, Nick could see; and when he told Leo that his father was an antiques dealer the two words, with the patina of old money and the flash of business, seemed to combine in a dull glare of privilege” (30). Nick relegates a “caustic” emphasis on money and class to Leo, even as he references his own participation in performative class mobility: “Among his smart Oxford friends Nick managed to finesse his elbow-patched old man” into “a scholar and friend of the local aristocracy” (30). Whereas Leo’s curiosity about Nick’s address is labeled as “caustic,” Nick “finesse[s]” his own lower-middle-class upbringing into a narrative of positive association to “the local aristocracy.” Nick neglects Leo’s actuality in favor of imaginative associations, and Nick also neglects the ways in which his own fanciful constructions remain performatively and contextually-situated. On his date with Leo, Nick feels the need to “humble” his father, to offer a different vision than that which he told his Oxford friends, but, “[Nick] was wrong, because Leo’s long-time boyfriend, Pete, had been an antiques dealer, on the Portobello Road” (30). Nick assumes, because of Leo’s race and class position, that he will be more receptive to a certain narrative of Nick’s upbringing. “Reality,” especially when it comes to the differing realities of racial and class difference, thus remains the
most fraught and problematic (and, indeed, “disconcerting”) aspect of Hollinghurst’s realist novel.

Possibility and actuality—refracted along the lines of identitarian positionality—mark the ways in which The Line of Beauty stages gay desire. On their date at the pub, Nick and Leo both ask the other about the possibility of going to his house. Nick “winced and waited—the truth was he didn’t dare, he just couldn’t do that to Rachel and Gerald, it was vulgar and unsafe, the consequences unspooled ahead of him, their happy routines of chortling would wither forever” (31). Once again, desire becomes stranded between reality and possibility; Nick “couldn’t do that to Rachel and Gerald,” whose home has become (performatively) his, whose privilege ensconces him (provisionally). Before Nick’s date, the Feddens were discussing a junior minister who was “caught with a rent boy in his Jaguar,” and Rachel, “in one of her sudden hard formulations,” describes this gay union as “vulgar and unsafe” (23). Homophobia emerges as a “hard formulation,” one which Nick has internalized to the extent that he refuses to bring Leo back to Kensington. He imagines a no-future wherein “consequences unspool[1],” a time in which “happy routines of chortling” perish. Nick’s temporal configuration foregrounds the ways in which, as Lee Edelman suggests, “queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it... accept[s] its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure” (No Future 3).

Rather than ascribing to the “ethical” capacities of queerness as a form of social resistance, Nick remains subservient to the social conventions which shore up his own bourgeois notions of white gay identity: the points of identification, rather than disidentification. Leo offers his own rejoinder to Nick’s excuse: “My old lady’s at
home.’ This first hint of shyness and shame, and the irony that tried to cover it, cockneyfied and West Indian too, made Nick want to jump on him and kiss him. ‘She’s dead religious’” (32). Nick is attracted to Leo’s “first hint of shyness and shame,” to his “cockneyfied and West Indian” sense of irony, even as he refuses to bring Leo home. The actuality of Nick and Leo’s placelessness, their lack of a place to be together, comes into view—“So there they were, two men on a summer night, with nowhere to call their own”—even as the novel imbues this reality with utopic possibilities: “There was a kind of romance to that” (32).

From the negated possibilities of home that Nick and Leo each offer up—each presenting a vision of futurity complicated by the other’s presence—emerges a utopic compromise: they will go to the gardens in Kensington Park, to which the Feddens are “keyholders.” This zone—a natural space, fenced-in, with exclusive access only to those who can afford it—critiques Tory insulation by reinscribing it with the tropes of gay cruising, which is itself queered because Leo and Nick enter the gardens with each other, already coupled. For Dion Kagan, Leo and Nick’s “scene of public sex” the garden constitutes “a very literal queering of aristocratic, heritage space” (184). In a similar vein, Myron Yeager notes that in this episode, “the private sexual act becomes public… similarly, the public space, the garden… becomes for Nick and Leo a projection of the kind of private space they can ‘call their own’” (313). For Yeager, this transgressive slippage between public and private effectively “displace[s] Nick from his family, the house and its family,” and places him “outside the order modes of class and sexuality” (313). Rather than entirely displacing Nick from the realms of “class and sexuality” (a feat which seems truly impossible within the strictures of Thatcherite England, and
within the novelistic structures at work), Nick and Leo’s garden encounter centralizes class and sexuality. These features which, under the workings of capitalism, social policy, and homophobic pressure, separate, oppress, and disjoint, function as the site of realized possibility.

The garden encounter remains predicated upon the affective associations of larger strictures: class, sexuality, and race. Nick “was gasping from the rush of reciprocity, the fact of being made love to. Nothing at the pub, in their aimless conversation, had even hinted at it. He’d never seen it described in a book. He was achingly ready and completely unprepared” (35). Reeling from “the rush of reciprocity,” the realization of what had previously constituted Nick’s inner fantasy, in the moment of sexual union Nick “had a vision of himself, as if the trees and bushes had rolled away and all the lights of London shone in on him: little Nick Guest from Barwick, Don and Dot Guest’s boy, fucking a stranger in a Notting Hill garden at night. Leo was right, it was so bad, and it was so much the best thing he’d ever done” (36). Fear of voyeurism intrudes and interrupts the moment of queer utopia, however; Nick’s observations upon entering the garden that “there was more show-through from the street lights, voices on the pavement were unnervingly close,” and that “there were keyholders still at large” become realized when one of these other keyholders, Geoffrey Titchfield, discovers Nick and Leo together (33).24 Leo becomes, through Nick’s narration, “obviously the cause” for an “edgy exchange” with Titchfield, which “for Nick was another of the commonplace revelations of the evening, of being out with a black man” (37). Titchfield’s racist suspicion—casting

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24 Dianne Chisolm argues that “queer spaces” work “[a]gainst the domination of space by abstract constructs of urban planning and the implantation of technologies of social surveillance,” creating “an appropriation of space for bodily, especially sexual, pleasure” (10). For Chisolm, “queer spatial practices, including cruising and parading,” remain delimited by the larger social forces of power, capitalism, and heteronormativity (10).
doubt on Leo’s presence in the garden—is recognized but recoded through Nick’s narrative focalization; the focus shifts from an acknowledgment of the strictures placed on gay men of color to Nick’s perception of these strictures as a form of “commonplace revelation.” A moment of shared pleasure between two men of different race and class positions in Thatcher’s London becomes reinscribed, within the confines of a misconstrued realism, as a moment of uncrirical education for Nick, who “felt like he’d got one past [Titchfield], he’d fucked Leo in the keyholders’ garden, it was a secret victory” (38).25 Thus, even in such moments where queer utopia glimmers, offering a more comprehensive vision of different points for apprehending reality (and, therefore, for a more robust and mimetically vibrant literary realism), Hollinghurst problematically recenters and equates bourgeois white masculinity with the queer “real.” Such narrow visions of reality/realism constitute a force which absorbs the moment of prejudice against queers of color as a “secret victory,” a personal discourse of purported subversion which reinforces racist and classist structures of oppression.

The garden moment—thus inflected both with utopic potentiality and realist circumscription—becomes retrospectively enmeshed within structures of unreality and queer temporality, and points to the ways in which Hollinghurst acknowledges but doesn’t engage with consequent structures of racial and class identity. Two days after Nick’s tryst with Leo, as he prepares to depart London for Toby’s upcoming birthday

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25 Moments of bildung mark Nick’s framing of his relationship with Leo throughout the novel: “As they dawdled through the crowd Nick saw himself rushing ahead through neglected years of his moral education. This was what it was like!” (100). Leo, within this configuration of “moral education,” becomes the instructive force, a fetishized object who imparts sexual experience. Multiple critics indicate the ways in which The Line of Beauty presents a queered or failed form of the bildungsroman, resulting not in development, but in death and ambivalence.
party at the family estate, Hawkeswood, Nick reflectively utopizes his first sexual experience with a man, with Leo:

Toby’s party was on the last Sunday in August, when the Notting Hill Carnival would be pounding to its climax, and when many local residents shuttered and locked their houses and left for their second homes with their fingers crossed: since the race riots of two summers earlier the carnival had been a site of heightened hopes and fears. Nick had lain in bed the night before and heard the long-legged beat of reggae from down the hill, mixed in, like the pulse of pleasure with the sighing of the garden trees. It was his second night without Leo. He lay wide-eyed, dwelling on him in a state beyond mere thought, a kind of dazzled grief, in which everything they’d done was vivid to him, and the strain of loss was as keen as the thrill of success. (41)

This passage accomplishes two things in simultaneity: the narration emphasizes Nick’s own affective recapitulation of a moment of queer utopia, and it does so by according such a moment within the geographical, racial, and classed context(s) that surround it. Metaphorized physicality permeates the narration: the Notting Hill Carnival, Nick imagines, “would be pounding to its climax”; reggae music becomes personified as “long-legged”; a “pulse of pleasure” is commingled with “the sighing of the garden trees.” Within this hyperbolized physicality, the carnival is perceived as a carnal threat to the (mostly white, aristocratic) Notting Hill residents who “shuttered and locked their houses and left for their second homes with fingers crossed.” The moment of Nick and Leo’s consummated pleasure—the interrupted and qualified moment of queer utopia—becomes further imbricated within the structures of racist discourse which precipitated the 1976 “race riots,” when racist over-policing targeted the West Indian diasporic community who put on the Notting Hill Carnival.26 That this community’s history—one

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26 Leyla Keough writes that the Notting Hill Carnival emerges in the 1950s as a celebration of and for Trinidadian immigrants, later expanded to include other West Indian groups. Keough notes that in 1958, the Notting Hill neighborhood “was the site of the first widely publicized white-on-black violence in Great Britain,” with other riots following in 1976, 1979, and 1989. Despite “heavy-handed and sometimes brutal
of resisting racism—functions as a backdrop for Nick’s erotic musings signals the vacuum of bourgeois realism, which acknowledges the historical moment but allows quotidian concerns to eclipse larger material ones.

Retrospection, racial prejudice, and the slippage between the “real” and the utopic occurs when Nick, Gerald, Rachel, and Elena, the Feddens’ housekeeper, travel to Toby’s birthday party at Hawkeswood. They drive easily through “blocked-off streets” where “[e]verywhere there were groups of policemen” (42). Nick, “sitting in the back with Elena, felt foolish and conceited at once. He dreaded seeing Leo, on his bike, and dreaded being seen by Leo. He imagined him cruising the carnival, and yearned to belong there in the same way that Leo did” (42). Leo thus comprises the site of Nick’s ambivalence regarding queer desire and the possibilities afforded by the utopic and communal vision of the carnival. Sitting in a Range Rover, being driven from one location of Tory privilege to another, Nick feels “foolish and conceited”; he “dread[s]” being seen by his lover for the collision it would force regarding the disparately classed and racialized elements of their realities. Nick eschews the actualities of his privilege and instead “imagine[s]” Leo searching for other men, “cruising the carnival.” Leo’s imagined cruising functions not only as a locus of explicitly gay desire, but also as a site of communitarian unity: Nick “yearn[s] to belong there in the same way that Leo did” (42).

Ensconced within the privileged, precarious reality-fantasy of the Feddens’ life, Nick turns toward the queer utopic (specifically, the black queer utopic) as a nexus of belonging to which he cannot be part. Nick’s privileged fetishization—wishing to enact a union with Leo, to become part of the diasporic community, even as he dreads seeing and

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efforts by police to assert control,” Keough details that “the Carnival carried special significance as an effort to reclaim the streets of the neighborhood for a peaceful black celebration.”
being seen by Leo—evinces the textual strain between realism and utopia. In the slippage between different nodes of identification and “reality,” different visions of (im)possibility and (dis)identification emerge. These confrontations between the real and the utopic signal the limitations of each, and where each becomes stranded along lines of plausibility.

Sameness and difference, possibility and actuality: these remain threaded throughout the quotidian moments of Hollinghurst’s novel, and propagate moments which suspend and complicate the “real.” In the Range Rover, Nick calls attention to a parade float on the street, where they see:

- a team of young black men with high yellow wings and tails like birds of paradise were preparing for the parade. ‘It’s marvellous what they do,’ said Rachel. ‘Not very nice music,’ said Elena, with a cheerful shiver. Nick didn’t reply—and found himself in one of those unforeseen moments of inner transition, when an old prejudice dissolves into a new desire. The music shocked him with its clear repetitive statement of what he wanted. Then one vast sound system warred happily with the next, so that there were different things he wanted, beautiful jarring futures for him—all this in forty or fifty seconds as the car slipped out and away into the ordinary activity of the weekend streets. Still, if he couldn’t be with Leo it was best to be somewhere quite different. (42)

Young black men, costumed in “high yellow wings and tails like birds of paradise,” signal the utopic and carnivalesque possibilities of the festival, a kind of performative iteration which interrupts and defamiliarizes the real, and which, in this disruption, registers in accordance with the queer. Marked for their elaborate costuming, the parade performers come under the scrutiny of Elena’s racism, when she remarks: “Not very nice music.” With a “cheerful shiver,” a confused display of affect which underpins her
voyeuristic positionality, Elena condemns the music accompanying the performers.27 For
Nick, however, the “music shocked him with its clear repetitive statement of what he
wanted. Then one vast sound system warred happily with the next, so that there were
different things he wanted, beautiful jarring futures for him” (42). The unspecified music
and lyrics provide for Nick a “clear repetitive statement of what he wanted,” an
articulation of desire which affectively resonates with him, a temporary and fleeting
moment of adjacency, interrupted by one “sound system war[ing] happily with the next.”
Desire becomes fragmented in the moment in which it is apprehended; the revelation
refracts into “different things he wanted,” things which come in only “forty or fifty
seconds as the car slipped out and away into the ordinary activity of the weekend streets.”
This moment of utopic adjacency, although temporally brief, opens up for Nick a vast
expanse of “beautiful jarring futures,” a formulation notable not only for its evocation of
one of the novel’s titular thematics—beauty—but also, for framing the static aesthetic
with its interruption. The queer futurities afforded to Nick by virtue of his whiteness and
economic positioning are both “beautiful” and “jarring,” and, crucially, this temporal and
affective revelation only emerges through “old prejudices,” prejudices which don’t fade
away, despite Hollinghurst’s various narrative strategies to position them within the
protocols of satire. Nick thinks to himself that “if he couldn’t be with Leo it was best to
be somewhere quite different” (42). Filtered through Nick’s subjectivity, black bodies—
those of the parade performers, Leo’s—are scrutinized and made secondary to the
bourgeois fantasies which Nick mistakes for being constitutive of the only reality. The
rigid formalities of Hollinghurst’s narrowly-construed realism thus paper over its utopic

27Keough notes the centrality of music to the Notting Hill Carnival, which consists of “five official
‘disciplines’… the steel drum bands, Calypso performers, mas (masquerade) bands, mobile sound systems,
and static sound systems.”
possibilities. In the strictures of a Torified straight time, Nick glimpses and desires queer utopia, but refuses to realize it.

The final scene in which Leo figures as a living, breathing character is both quotidien and utopian: a bedroom scene between Nick and Leo at the Feddens’ empty house (although the fear of their return does infringe, psychically, on Nick). Realization of desire once again invokes the utopic:

There was a kind of magic in this—to be lying in bed, a single bed, with all that implied, and playing gently with himself and waiting for his lover to appear. It was the posture of a lifelong singleness; incessant imagining, the boy’s supremacy in a world of dreams, where men kept turning up to do his bidding; and now, that rattle of the bathroom door, snap of the light chord, squeak of the landing floor, were the signals of an actual arrival, and within three seconds the door would open and Leo would come in—. (155)

Nick locates “a kind of magic” in the everyday repose of waiting for Leo, a byproduct of his “incessant imagining.” Such imaginative work, that of “the boy’s supremacy in a world of dreams” constitutes not only Nick’s characterological formation, his legibility as a subjective site for Hollinghurst’s narration, but also the dovetailing of form with content. “Imagining” functions as the driving force which both props up The Line of Beauty’s realism (“that rattle of the bathroom door, snap of the light chord, squeak of the landing floor”), and that which relentlessly adjudicates it, staging the “actual arrival” of a utopized desire. Nick apprehends his lover, in totality: “It was the first time he had seen Leo naked, and the first time he had seen the masking shadow of his face, lazily watchful, easily cynical, clever and obtuse by turns, melt into naked feeling. Leo breathed through his mouth, and his look was a wince of lust and also, it seemed to Nick, of self-accusation—that he had been so slow, so vain, so blind” (155). Leo’s body— rendered in the adverb-qualified “lazily watchful, easily cynical”—“melt[s] into naked feeling,” pure
affect. Nick sees, in a moment of extraordinary clarity, how he has been “so blind.” Nick’s revelation prefigures Leo’s subsequent erasure (except through secondhand mention) from the rest of the novel, when he dies after contracting HIV/AIDS. This moment, offering a glimpse of intimate and utopic gay union, nevertheless remains subtended and implicated within the silencing and scrutinizing strategies of a bourgeois, white-centric realism, a delimited perspective from which the past futurities of gay desire remain underexplored and unrealized.

“[B]eing Both English and Exotic”: Lines of Utopic Reality

Having textually erased Leo as an active narrative participant, the subsequent sections of *The Line of Beauty*—“To Whom Do You Beautifully Belong” (1986) and “The End of the Street” (1987)—detail Nick’s romantic relationship (at first, a secret affair) and business partnership with his former fellow Oxford peer, Wani Ouradi, the son of a Lebanese business magnate. Born in Beirut, and having attended British schools since the age of ten, Wani faces certain kinds of racial and ethnic prejudice at the hands of other characters, but his family’s arc of class mobility—immigrating to the United Kingdom and opening a wildly successful chain of supermarkets—complicates the ways in which queerness, the “real,” and the utopic mode converge and diverge throughout the text. According to Julie Rivkin, Wani “conveys the inseparability of business and aesthetic (and sexual) pleasure” within the text (290), while for reviewer Thomas Jones, Wani functions as the “rawest embodiment of Thatcherism… brutally rich, peerlessly selfish, with a rapacious appetite—for cocaine, sex, pornography, power, money” (qtd. in Kim 171). Once again, the novel’s “aestheticization of Leo’s and Wani’s bodies” shows how “the novel commodifies and thingifies the male body,” specifically, the body of the
queer of color. By the novel’s end, Leo and Wani both succumb to AIDS, and Nick has been expelled from the Feddens’ home as a queer scapegoat to deflect from Gerald’s financial misdeeds and his extramarital affair with his assistant, Penny. The novel’s slow descent into increasingly tragic affect amplifies the aforementioned recurrent tensions between its commitments to literary realism and its invocations of the queer utopic mode, suggesting their further inextricability.28

What Myron Yeager describes as textual “topographies” connected to gay male experience emerge clearly in relation the utopic mode in the latter sections of Hollinghurst’s novel. Men’s only swimming pools, public toilets, secret gardens, and gymnasiums, among other locales, become the homosocial, homoerotic sites of utopic potentiality in Thatcherite England. Nick’s preference, identified early in the novel, for “aesthetically radiant images of gay activity, gathering in a golden future for him, like swimmers on a sunlit bank” (Hollinghurst 23) becomes literalized in the swimming hole where he and Wani go together. Realist description firmly locates this gendered, homosocial space within the nondescript, as “a small compound, a concrete yard,” even as this space evokes “the classical world” of homoerotic possibility, marked by “protracted nakedness” (159). English homoeroticism becomes coded as “school-like and comfortless,” providing the conditions of unguarded and unsurveilled erotic exchange between men, even as such conditions are strictured. In the pond’s center there is “the old wooden raft, the site of endless easy contacts, and the floating platform of some of Nick’s steadiest fantasies” (160). Floating, bathing in the water, “each figure… had the gleam of a new possibility,” so that “when Nick cruised past he had a view of dangling legs,

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28 Denis Flannery stresses that *The Line of Beauty* shifts from “the models of love story, satire, and novel of manners into the most relentlessly brutal, sensational, and repeated tragedy” (297), and Julie Rivkin concurs that “death dominates the final section of the novel” (291).
pinched dicks at funny angles, streaked hair and glistening skin, a floating tableau of men
against the sky” (162). Nick contrasts this fluid, easy-going arrangement with his visits
the previous year: “the raft mad with clutching and jumping, the toilets crowded and
intent, the queens on the grass outside packed like a city in a dozen rivalrous districts”
(162). Past and present coalesce in Nick’s affective perception of this queer utopia, a
feeling which takes the form of “something fleeting and harmonic, longed for and
repeated—it was the circling trees, perhaps, and the silver water, the embrace of a
solitary childhood, and the need to be pulled up into a waiting circle of men” (163).
Embedded within the reality-turned-utopic-realization of the swimming hole remain the
dredges of loss and isolation, a “solitary childhood,” and the knowledge that “to be pulled
up into a waiting circle of men” is an act of erotic communion both “harmonic” and
“fleeting.” Nick and Wani quite literally “cruise utopia,” to borrow Muñoz’s terminology.

Although certainly qualified by the realities of larger stricture, sites such as the
swimming pool nevertheless represent Hollinghurst’s most overt overtures towards queer
utopia; by and large, Nick’s relationship with Wani remains structured by the class-
imbricated dictates of heteronormative propriety. Whereas his relationship with Leo had
been public and open, acknowledged by the Feddens, Nick’s affair with Wani remains
insulated within the closet: “Everything they did was clandestine, and therefore daring
and therefore childlike, since it wasn’t really daring at all” (190). In this syntactical
equation, “clandestine” romantic and sexual relations become “daring” in their
circumscribed resistance, but then qualified as “childlike” for not fully flouting the

29Public toilets figure for Muñoz as a site of queer utopia, as they do within Hollinghurst’s novel. In his
hometown of Barwick, however, Nick “had never made contact in the Gents, never acted on the graffiti,
but whenever he passed it on a walk with his mother and heard the busy unattended flush of the urinal, his
look became tense and tactful, he felt the kinship of an unknown crowd” (235).
boundaries set against them. Nick “didn’t know how long it could go on — he didn’t
dream of it stopping, but it was silly and degrading at twenty-three to be sneaking sex
like this” (190). Nick questions the future endurance of his relationship of his closeted
relationship with Wani, evincing the “silly and degrading” realities of homophobia, even
as he, “moronic with lust… saw a beauty in the slyness of it” (190). If, as Nick suggests,
literary realism both conceals and reveals, then so too do the workings of the queer utopic
in Hollinghurst’s novel, straddled perpetually along the temporal and affective lines
which structure their oscillating (im)possibility. Nick, watching Wani at a party, feels that
“The pursuit of love seemed to need the cultivation of indifference,” that “[t]he deep
connection between them was so secret that at times it was hard to believe it existed”
(212). Privacy and secrecy—while avowing spaces such as the swimming hole—
nevertheless also constitute the conditions of the closet, and suggest the difficulties of
realizing queer possibility.

The boundaries between the “real” and the “utopic” emerge in relation to Nick’s
perception of the highly-privileged, highly-homophobic world of the upper classes in
which he and Wani circulate. At the party:

Nick focused on him, so that everything else swam and Wani alone, or the bit of
him he could see, throbbed minutely against the glossy double curve of the piano
lid. He felt he floated forwards into another place, beautiful, speculative, even
dangerous, a place created by the music, but separate from it. It had the mood of a
troubling dream, where nothing could be known for certain or offer a solid
foothold to memory after one had woken. (211)

Queer desire—even when conditioned and strictured by homophobic reality—offers the
capacity to transport its subject to “another place, beautiful, speculative, even dangerous”
(211). Just as when hears “the love-chord” and experiences a utopic vision of Leo, so too
does his desire for Wani construct an alternate reality within the privileged confines of an
exclusive party at the Feddens. But utopia destabilizes—time, space, self, and knowledge—and it can have “the mood of a troubling dream” wherein “nothing could be known for certain or offer a solid foothold to memory after one had woken.” Such realist narration—constituted by free indirect discourse, peering into and through Nick’s focalized subjectivity—thus both affords and qualifies the possible and plausible, the real and the utopic. Nick watches Wani, who, in turn, watches others: “It was almost a decoy of Wani’s to let his gaze rest emptily, but seductively on a woman” (218). The (queer) realities of upper-crust life remain enmeshed within capitalist heteronormativity, and so Wani’s performance of heterosexuality juts against Nick’s interior, affective revelations. Engaged to a French woman named Martine, who “in her long engagement must have become a fixture, a passive poor relation, who was waiting and waiting to turn into a millionairess,” Wani exists at the threshold of divergent sets of realities (186).

Wani’s class position, ethnicity, and sexuality evince the disidentificatory structure between the realist and the utopic within Hollinghurst’s novel. The aforementioned heteronormative pressures imposed upon Wani—to marry a woman and ensure the successful continuation of the family line, in terms of both reproductive futurism and capitalist wealth reproduction—thus remain firmly ensconced within the machinations of class and national identity. Bertrand Ouradi, Wani’s overbearing father, distances himself from his Lebanense origins and frames his narrative as one of both assimilation into and ascent within English society:

“You know, I had a fruit shop, up in Finchley, to start off with.” He waved his other arm fondly at that distant place and time. “Bought it up, flew in the fresh citrus, which was our own product by the way, we grew all that, we didn’t have to buy it off bloody nobody. Lebanon, a great place for growing fruit. You know, all that’s come out of Lebanon in the last twenty years? Fruit and brains, fruit and
talent. No one with any brains or any talent wants to stay in the bloody place.” (197)

Wani’s father frames Lebanon in terms of its production value; his country of origin becomes a site of exportation for people, for goods: “Fruit and brains, fruit and talent.” Nick wonders about Bertrand’s tendency towards narrative reduction—“if its simplicity reflected his own vision of affairs”—at the same time as he, Nick, remains ignorant of larger currents of global political history (199). Nick “had meant to mug up a bit on the past twenty years of Lebanese history, but Wani grew pained and evasive when he mentioned it” (197). Nick’s privileged sphere of willful ignorance and Bertrand’s enchantment with his own capitalist ascension jut against reality when Monique, wife to Bertrand and mother to Wani, quietly discloses the scope of the Lebanese Civil War: “Our house was knocked down, you know, by a bomb,” she says, “as though not expecting to be heard” (198). The Ouradis thus remain situated along the lines of reality and possibility, demarcating a specific kind of narrative which, through class ascension and wealth accumulation, centers a similar ideological Thatcherism to which pervades the rest of the novel. Like the Feddens, the Ouradis exist under satirical scrutiny for their presence and adjacency to oppressive systems of class and political oppression, even as they remain differentiated from the textually un-marked Feddens.

Positions of identity mark the circumscriptions of the kind of realism centered in Hollinghurst’s novel, which remains predicated on the privileged perspectives of white, English masculine identity. Nick and Wani establish a firm called Ogee, taking on various film and creative endeavors (a film adaptation of The Spoils of Poynton, an art magazine called Ogee). The name—which Wani’s family mistakenly hears as “Orgy”—functions as a formal and thematic locus for the larger thesis of Hollinghurst’s novel:
The ogee curve was repeated in the mirrors and pelmets and in the wardrobes, which looked like Gothic confessionals; but its grandest statement was in the canopy of the bed, made of two transecting ogees crowned by a boss like a huge wooden cabbage. It was as he lay beneath it, in uneasy post-coital vacancy, that the idea of calling Wani's outfit Ogee had come to him; it had a rightness to it, being both English and exotic, like so many things he loved. The ogee curve was pure expression, decorative not structural; a structure could be made from it, but it supported nothing more than a boss or the cross that topped an onion dome.... The double curve was Hogarth's 'line of beauty,' the snakelike flicker of an instinct, of two compulsions held in one unfolding movement. He ran his hand down Wani's back. He didn't think Hogarth had illustrated this best example of it, the dip and swell—he had chosen harps and branches, bones rather than flesh. Really it was time for a new _Analysis of Beauty_" (176)

The ogee curve, the titular “line of beauty,” constitutes the confluence of the novel’s thematics: a vision of gay sexuality inflected by a long tradition of English aesthetics (Hogarth, James), dependent upon capitalist commodification, fetishization of people of color, and circumscriptions of its own conceptions of the (literary) real. That is to say, the novel’s central preoccupation is one simultaneously “English and exotic”: the relationships between Tory privilege as the crystallized _fait accompli_ of late-twentieth-century English identity, and its dissolution through various matrices of race, class, and sexuality. Even as Hollinghurst’s project attempts to unveil the unrealities of the Tory “real,” however, it remains problematically committed to the “rightness” of its narrow vision, one which satirically critiques but ultimately reifies privileged notions of that which constitutes reality. Nick describes how the ogee “originates in… well, in the Middle East, in fact, and then you see it in English architecture from about the fourteenth century onwards. It’s like Hogarth’s line of beauty… except that there are two of them, of course… I suppose the line of beauty’s a sort of animating principle” (196-97). These “lines” of beauty might thus be read in terms of their obliqueness, derived from Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology. Ahmed describes the ways in which a “mixed
orientation,” the “gap between reception and possession,” might “offe[r] a queer angle on the reproduction of whiteness,” how “the presence of bodies of color in white spaces” can disorient (*Queer Phenomenology* 161). Obliqueness and queer duality: these are imbricated within the realism of *The Line of Beauty*, but they offer points of potential divergence, potential utopia. When read against the grain of a strict and stricturing realism, the lines of queer beauty avow a more expansive mode of perception—the utopic—which emerges as more fundamentally “real.”

Within Hollinghurst’s novel, the eponymous lines of beauty are not confined to the ogee curve, however. Lines take many forms in the novel, and Julie Rivkin suggests “the most telling referent for the title might well be the line of cocaine, the money-drug fueling the highs of the ‘80s” (289). Wani and Nick become frequent consumers:

[Nick] didn't really want to go down to lunch in reckless unaccountable high spirits and make a different kind of fool of himself. But a line wasn't feasibly resisted. He loved the etiquette of the thing, the chopping with a credit card, the passing of the tightly rolled note, the procedure courteous and dry, 'all done with money,' as Wani said—it was part of the larger beguilement, and once it had begun it squeezed him with its charm and promise.  (189)

Novelistically, cocaine functions not only as a symbolic motif that exemplifies the novel’s thematic focus on affective euphoria—coded within the queer utopic—as departure from the “real.” A line of cocaine imbricates “etiquette” (a “procedure courteous and dry”) with capital (“all done with money”) and affective expansion (“the larger beguilement”; “its charm and promise”). Consequently, drug usage within the novel conveys both the specificities of economic reality—a process of buying, selling, and consuming—as ensconced within scenes of queer intimacy. At the party the Feddens host for Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Nick and Wani imbibe: “Nick loved

30Incisively, Rivkin notes that “everything about the drug’s preparation—the roll of cash to procure it, the credit card to cut it, the rolled up bill to inhale it—involves money” (289).
the way the coke took off the blur of champagne, claret, Sauternes, and more champagne. It totted up the points and carried them over as credit in a new account of pleasure. It brought clarity, like a cure — almost, at first, like sobriety. He put an arm round Wani’s shoulders” (330). Cocaine becomes a clarifying force, taking “the blur off champagne,” an amplification of reality “almost, at first, like sobriety,” even as it remains inseparable from systems of capital and affect (“credit in a new account of pleasure”). In “the high heartbeat of coke,” in its “short sprint of panic,” “[i]t was hard to know what mattered. There was certainly no point in thinking about it now” (330). While it is unoriginal to suggest that cocaine offers a false sense of clarity, within Hollinghurst’s novel, the drug becomes a signifier of the meta-real, a symbolic convergence of the ways in which reality might be altered and expanded and revised: Nick “felt he could act himself all night. He felt fabulous, he loved these nights, and whilst it would have been good to top the thing off with sex it hardly seemed to matter if he didn’t. It made the absolute best of not having sex” (331).31 Cocaine becomes a dissolution of “what matters,” an affective dissuasion from the limits of the real. It unites Nick and Wani—they sell, they deal, they snort—in secrecy and pleasure, offering only the present moment. Sex, death, and futurity: all are at bay, as are the things that structure what matters, what signifies.

“[I]ts Message of Terror and Exhaustion”: The Realities of the AIDS Crisis

Within these textual devices—wherein people of color are marked as other, especially in relation to lower socioeconomic status—does The Line of Beauty narrativize the AIDS Crisis. Joshua Guzmán writes that “all queer brown and black deaths, despite

31 Although he describes the euphoria and comedown of ecstasy specifically, Joshua Guzmán’s commentary about reality and states of alterity is helpful here. Guzmán conceives of the ecstatic (which might be applied to Nick and Wani’s cocaine highs) as “moments and invitations to displace oneself outside of normative temporality,” even as he notes that “this temporal unity is never readily available to us” (61).
their particularities and unevenness, are tragic, violent, and untimely,” an apt and moving description for the ways in which Hollinghurst’s novel centralizes queer of color suffering (59). Leo dies from pneumonia-related complications of AIDS, Wani becomes increasingly ill and is textually removed, near-death, by novel’s end, while Nick waits for test results, an ambivalent cipher in relation to his own futurity. Hollinghurst’s novel thus emphasizes AIDS in relation to queers of color, who come to signify its devastation most acutely. Soo Yeon Kim argues that “Nick’s indulgence in Wani’s beauty… runs the risk of turning Wani into the passive object of Nick’s gaze,” but that ultimately, “Nick’s fascination with Wani’s beauty means less a thingification of the body than a ‘fleshing out’ of the site of beauty, inviting aesthetic consideration for the beautiful and dark-skinned, homosexual, and dying body” (171). Separated by their class positions and ethnicities, Leo and Wani both come to figure similarly under the sign of AIDS for Nick; they become embodied sites of that which might—and might not—affect and alter the duration of his own life. Earlier in the novel, Nick reprimands Wani for his performative heterosexuality, asserting his own identity: “I’ve never pretended not to be gay, it’s you that’s doing that, my dear. This is 1986. Things have changed,” to which Wani replies, “Yes. All the poofs are dropping like flies” (224). Nick necessarily survives the novel, while Leo does not, and Wani gets textually erased in a manner similar to that of Leo after the end of the first section.32 Dion Kagan writes specifically about the BBC’s 2006 miniseries adaptation of The Line of Beauty, suggesting that the production deploys the

32 Denis Flannery argues that Thatcherism “fantasize[d] about the annihilation of communities and individuals,” and that so too does the novel “derives a certain energy from the annihilation of persons and communities,” in that, “[o]f the three foregrounded characters who are taken away by AIDS…one is designated as working-class and ‘old’ (Pete) and another is Middle Eastern (Wani). If Leo ‘bounces’ Nick into life through writing, then both Nick and Hollinghurst’s novel troublingly owe their futurity to the sacrifice of a black man” (302).
“generic style of Anglophilic heritage cinema, a genre that has often been accused of colluding with reactionary, nostalgic, nationalist conservative agendas,” but that the adaptation does so “to present a critical history of the socially conservative Tory elite of Thatcher’s Britain, offering a revisionist queer British national history of AIDS that confronts the legal ideology of crisis discourse and its implicatedness in the birth of neoliberal economic and social life” (24). Drawing on Heather Love’s notion of “backward feelings,” Kagan argues that the BBC’s adaptation evinces how “AIDS memory becomes a site of mourning and painful loss, but also a site of restorative nostalgia and utopian longing” (199). Hollinghurst’s vision of gay realism, however, remains one which is fundamentally connected to a white bourgeois sensibility—which might be spared from AIDS—and which ensnares queers of color within objectifying discourses of illness and death which erase their subjectivities.

Leo’s death emphasizes the temporal delimitations of gay reality and possibility in the Thatcherite 1980s. Rosemary—Leo’s sister—and her friend, Gemma, come to the Ogee offices to inform Nick of the news that Leo died three weeks previously. Upon hearing the news, “Nick listened to the words, and heard how the West Indian colour and exactness in her tone claimed it as a private thing. It had been one of Leo’s tones too: the cockney for defence, the Jamaican crackle and burn for pleasure, just sometimes, rare and beautiful like his black blush” (348). Even in his textual absence—the announcement of his death—Leo becomes eroticized within the parameters of Nick’s focalized

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33 Although a discussion of the BBC’s adaptation is well outside the scope of my analysis, Kagan’s comments are particularly helpful for establishing how “the rearward gaze of AIDS heritage… reaches backwards to the homophobic past not only to acknowledge that past but to acknowledge what is still of that past in the present… Hollinghurst’s merciless critique of the birth of neoconservative neoliberalism hints more than strongly at a critique of the neoliberal present, and therefore, perhaps, helps us to re-imagine the future” (175). Kagan also frames HBO’s 2003 Angels in America in a similar fashion.
subjectivity, reduced to the body (“his black blush”), the socially-classed dialect (“the cockney for defence”), and nationality (“the Jamaican crackle and burn for pleasure”). Gemma tells Nick that they are contacting all of Leo’s “friends,” but Rosemary corrects her: his “lovers,” as “she was, or had been, a doctor’s receptionist; she was used to the facts” (348). Their visit becomes not only a memorialization of Leo—a belated textual acknowledgment of his disappearance—but also of the ways in which his death constitutes a temporal unraveling of past, present, and future. Nick receives from Rosemary the letters he had sent to Leo in response to Leo’s newspaper advertisement, and feels “it was like learning a new game and having to be a good sport as he lost” (348). Learning of Leo’s death provokes the re-examination of his life, the ways in which a past futurity—now foreclosed by death—once opened up into potentiality.

After learning of Leo’s death, Nick returns to the Feddens,’ pours himself a drink of Scotch, and recalls the past:

He remembered the one time Leo had come to this room, surprised him, moved him, and slightly rattled him by playing Mozart on the piano. They’d both had a glass of whisky then, the only time he’d known Leo to drink. He caught the beautiful rawness of those days again, the life of instinct opening in front of him, the pleasure of the streets and London itself unfolding in the autumn chill; everything tingling with newness and risk, glitter of frost and glow of body heat, the shock of finding and holding what he wanted among millions of strangers. His sense of the scandalous originality of making love to a man had faded week by week into the commonplace triumph of a love affair. He saw Leo crossing this room, the scene brilliant and dwindling, as if watched in a convex mirror. It was the night he had stepped warily, with many ironic looks, into Nick’s deeper fantasy of perception: his lover in his house, Nick owning them both by right of taste and longing. (361-62).

Past and present become layered over one another: Nick drinks whisky and remembers when he and Leo had done so in the same place, at a different time. The affective experiences of the past—“the beautiful rawness of those days”—once more unfurl into
the present, their future. “Newness and risk” might still be felt long after they have
“faded,” after they have been transformed into “the commonplace triumph of a love
affair.” The past becomes a site of expansive mimesis, a “convex mirror,” which purports
a wider field of vision, a reflection of reality both “brilliant and dwindling.” Only by
virtue of “taste and longing,” those utopian structures of queer desire, does “Nick’s
deeper fantasy of perception” come into view. Hollinghurst’s realism is a fantasy, but at
points such as these, it is the utopic which qualifies an clarifies and absconds, which
becomes the real.

Whereas Leo is first narratively absented and then re-figured as a signifier of
AIDS, Wani is slowly erased from view in the novel’s closing chapters. Textual
description foregrounds his dwindling physicality at a business lunch with Nick and
others: “He took his stick again, which was an elegant black one with a silver handle, and
tapped across the marble floor with it. He still wasn’t quite convincing with the stick; he
was like a student actor playing an old man. The stick itself both seemed to focus and
repel attention. People looked and looked away” (374). This description of simultaneous
focusing and repulsion of attention is a kind of metonymy, for so too does the larger
novelistic apparatus amplify and absent Wani from its domain. Wani “commanded
attention now by pity and respect as he once had by beauty and charm”; although his
“claim to attention was constant… it had turned fiercer and quieter” (376). Wani’s body
also remains imbricated within the structures of wealth, as his diagnosis translates into
material loss: “One of my bloody companies lost two-thirds of its value between
lunchtime and teatime,” he says of the disclosure of his illness (377). Such a connection
between Wani’s individual body and “Fifty billion wiped off the London stock exchange
in one day” signifies the scope and parameters of “reality”; AIDS is not only a matter of personal diagnosis, but an economic and social force. The slippage between individual and structural reality comes into clearer focus when Wani, describing Wall Street forecasts’ longevity, suggests, “it bounces back. It has already. It always recovers. It always recovers.... We’ll all be absolutely fine” (377). Recovery, bouncing back, being “absolutely fine”: these could refer both to individual and economic health, but in the context of Wani’s diagnosis, refer to his abandonment within the context of capitalist enterprise. Class and wealth signify the illusive fantasies of privilege, made unreal by Wani’s inability to participate: “He ate very little and a sense of his disgust at the expensive food, and at himself for being unable to eat it, seeped into the conversation. He looked at the slivers of chicken and translucent courgettes as pitiful tokens of the world of pleasure, and clutched the table as though to resist a slow tug at the cloth that would sweep the whole vision away” (378). Wani’s reality is altered and truncated by his diagnosis, becoming a “whole vision” swept away by new material and medical conditions. After becoming sick, Nick and Wani retreat to the bathroom, where Nick “thought with bleak hilarity that this was their most intimate moment for many months. He looked at the streaky black walls and found himself thinking of nights here the year before, both cubicles sometimes carelessly busy with the crackle of paper and patter of credit card” (380-81). The gulf between past reality and present comes to constitute, for Nick, a “bleak hilarity,” as gay intimacy moves from pleasure to illness.

Wani’s textual retreat occurs in conjunction with the exposure of Gerald and Penny’s affair, with Nick’s evacuation of the Fedden household, and with the publication
of the first—and only—issue of Ogee, the art magazine. This simultaneity of narrative events—the “blowing up” of “[u]nexpected intimacies” —reveals not only the narrative seams working to suture together plot and closure, but also the ways in which Hollinghurst’s project depends upon the converge of the real and unreal, the possible and the plausible. Gerald, faced with the potential implosion of his own marriage, asks Nick, “I mean, didn’t it strike you as rather odd, a bit queer, attaching yourself to a family like this?” (420). Queerness thus comes to take a multiplicity of forms, and to subsume Nick’s relation to his adopted family. Nick “thought it was unusual—that was the beauty of it, or had been,” fusing together the temporal and affective components of his “queer” relationship to the Feddens, watching his reality dissolve in real time (420). As established much earlier in Hollinghurst’s novel, realism once again figures as a sign of concealment and revelation in simultaneity, a formal rendering and occlusion of possibility: “He hadn’t told Wani, but he was having another HIV test in the afternoon: it was another solemn thing, and even more frightening than it need have been for not being talked about” (424). Anti-futurity unfolds as Nick says goodbye to Wani in his car: “Nick had the feeling he would never see him again, fading from view in the middle of the day. Such premonitions came to him often now” (425). Another such premonition for Nick emerges in relation to his HIV test: “The week ahead was already shadowed by the wait for his test results. The boost, the premature relief of taking charge and agreeing to learn the worst, waned steeply in the following days… It was the third test he’d had, and that

34Describing Nick’s “eviction” from the Feddens,’ Dion Kagan writes that “[t]he gay bachelor is left homeless, turned out into what Agamben calls ‘the state of abandonment,’ the non-space of bare life” (193-94). Such a homelessness is contrasted with what Kagan describes as “[w]elcomeness,” which constitutes “an indication of status and access, an allegory for entitlement and inclusion in the house of the nation—citizenship in the national family” (183).
fact, and the mysterious number three, seemed by moments to shrink and swell the chance of a positive result” (432). Nick’s fate remains unknown to him, and thus also to the reader.

The novel’s final paragraph actualizes the fine line between possibility and actuality, between reality and utopia. As Nick leaves the Feddens’ house for the last time, the novel reiterates its realist project by rendering (anti-)futurity:

He found himself yearning to know of their affairs, their successes, the novels and the new ideas that the few who remembered him might say he never knew, he never lived to find out. It was the morning’s vision of the empty street, but projected far forward, into afternoons like this one decades hence, in the absent hum of their own business. The emotion was startling. It was a sort of terror, made up of emotions from every stage of his short life, weaning, homesickness, envy and self-pity; but he felt that the self-pity belonged to a larger pity. It was a love of the world that was shockingly unconditional. He stared back at the house, and then turned and drifted on. He looked in bewilderment at number 24, the final house with its regalia of stucco swags and bows. It wasn’t just this street corner but the fact of a street corner at all that seemed, in the light of the moment, so beautiful. (438)

In imagining the end of his own future, Nick forecasts “far forward” into “decades hence,” perhaps even into the early 2000s, the time of the novel’s writing and reception. Such imagining consists of “startling” emotion, a “terror” constituted by a coalescence of affect: “weaning, homesickness, envy and self-pity.” Grimly cynical and viciously self-aware, Nick’s subjectivity nevertheless points beyond itself, fusing “self-pity” with a larger structure of feeling. Within “a love of the world that was shockingly unconditional,” Nick glances at the house from which he has been banished. Exclusion gets the final act, but not the final word, because “it wasn’t just *this* street corner”—*this* meaning the site of Nick’s own personal joy and tragedy, the site of his life for the past four years—but the fact of “a street corner at all” which constitutes beauty.
Given all its problematics, Hollinghurst’s narrative at once reifies and challenges ideas of subjectivity and privilege; it depicts and satirizes the narrow cruelties of a world filled with power and money and drugs, and shows how the people who inhabit such a realm can skirt the consequences of their own actions. The novel depicts a fundamentally queer relation: a young gay man who becomes infatuated and banished by a seductive life that turns out to be fantasy. The novel also centers whiteness and privilege and class power, making peripheral other kinds of realities: those of Leo, and black Londoners, and those of immigrants from a wider globe. Circumscription, delimitation, demarcation: these are the strategies of an early-aughts return to realist form, marking not a hyperbolic or aggrandized vision of a world steeped in postmodernity, but a world running on the fantasies of its purported reality. And so it comes to be that a novel charting reality instead charts fantasy, and consequently, in this chiasmic undoing, configures the idea of reality as fundamentally beautiful, as fundamentally textual, and as fundamentally utopic. A queer move, to be sure, but one obsessed with its own delimitation. Where utopia emerges—at swimming ponds, in musical performances, in lines of cocaine—it also dissolves. Both within and beyond the recognizably real in Thatcherite England, queer utopia offers only the circumscribed moments of its own impossibility. It hides and conceals things simultaneously—just like James’s realism, and Hollinghurst’s.
CHAPTER II

“[O]n Borrowed Time”: Call Me by Your Name and Utopic Aporia

“Time makes us sentimental. Perhaps, in the end, it is because of time that we suffer,” declares Elio Perlman, the narrator of André Aciman’s 2007 novel, Call Me by Your Name (232). Sentimentality and suffering: these are the dueling, intertwined affects that structure Aciman’s retrospective narrative of queer desire’s realization and slow dissolution across time and space. The novel—written by an ostensibly heterosexual author during the early-2000s, and set in the 1980s—has proven to be one of the most popularly influential gay novels of the twenty-first century thus far; its narrative has continued on in Luca Guadagnino’s 2017 film adaptation of the same name, and, more recently, in Aciman’s 2019 sequel, Find Me. Both the novelistic and filmic versions of Call Me by Your Name narrate the story of the Perlmans, an expatriate Jewish-American family who reside in the north of Italy. A scholar of the classics, Professor Perlman (Michael Stuhlbarg), his wife Annella (Amira Casar), and their seventeen-year-old son, Elio (Timothée Chalamet), invite a graduate student to spend the summer at their villa each year. Film and novel commence with the arrival of Oliver (Armie Hammer), a Jewish-American graduate student whose tenuous friendship with Elio eventually blossoms into a romance. Although the narrative focuses on the events of this summer spent together, both novel and film remain fundamentally preoccupied with time—as a sentimental, ravaging, and expansive force—and about the subsequent possibilities that stem from a temporally-specific queer imaginary.

35 Temporal and geographical differences mark Aciman’s and Guadagnino’s versions. Aciman’s novel begins in but moves beyond 1987, while Guadagnino contains his film to the summer and winter of 1983. While both versions are set vaguely in northern Italy, Aciman situates the Perlmans’ villa on the coast, in a town referred to only as B.—, while Guadagnino, a native Italian, shifts the events to the region of Lombardy, and specifically to Crema, his town of residence.
Both versions of Call Me by Your Name exemplify what José Muñoz describes as “[q]ueer world-making,” a process that “hinges on the possibility to map a world where one is allowed to cast pictures of utopia” (Cruising Utopia 40). Queer utopia, for Muñoz, “offers a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what can and perhaps will be” (Cruising 35). As a “space outside of heteronormativity,” utopia “permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably constrained by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and institutionalized state homophobia” (Cruising 35). These two elements that Muñoz ascribes to a queer utopia—the complete erasure of HIV/AIDS and the absence of external homophobia—both surface in Call Me by Your Name, and constituted much of the negative critique surrounding Guadagnino’s film after its release. Richard Kaye describes the film as a “Mediterranean vacation from plausibility, politics, and history,” suggesting that Guadagnino’s vision is not “set in any kind of recognizable world,” but instead constitutes a “fantasy universe where homosexuality represents no social transgression or existential crisis.” Justin Hudak notes that the film “picks up in the same year in which Brokeback Mountain leaves off, and ends in the same year in which two separate labs published their findings about the novel retrovirus infecting people with AIDS” (158). Consequently, Hudak claims that Guadagnino’s film “exists in an oasis between a tragic cinematic past (which it replays in a happier key) and a far more tragic future reality (which it appears to avoid altogether” (158). These disparate approaches point to a larger textual rupture in Aciman’s and Guadagnino’s projects: the boundaries between, and the aims of, the realist and the utopic, and the consequent implications for retrospective fictionalizations of queer life.

36Miguel Malagreca notes that the “[AIDS] pandemic affected Italy later than the United States,” and that “between the end of 1983 and the beginning of 1984, there was intense activity in gay groups, which tried to learn as much as possible about the disease and the means of infection” (132-33).
The Italy that emerges in *Call Me by Your Name* relies upon a carefully scaffolded kind of realism, although both novel and film give way to utopic strategies which both stretch and reify narrative plausibility in relation to historical reality. From its opening pages, Aciman’s novel establishes Italy as a site of the past, rendering it to the reader as a zone inaccessible except through Elio’s first-person, backward-looking narrative memory: “I shut my eyes, say the word, and I’m back in Italy, so many years ago, walking down the tree-lined driveway, watching him step out of the cab, billowy blue shirt, wide-open collar, sunglasses, straw hat, skin everywhere” (3). Aciman’s novel features many such lyrical descriptions of daily life at the Perlmans’ villa, the surrounding coast, and the small pleasures (culinary, sensory) of their expatriate life in Italy. Guadagnino’s film opens with a montage that nods to the past, rife with Roman statues, postcards, books, and bourgeois cultural paraphernalia.37 Text scrawled over the opening scene informs the viewer that it is “Summer 1983,” “Somewhere in Northern Italy.” These signifiers—utopically vague—offer the bare minimum necessary to establish a realist vision, even as they slyly allude to the inaccessibility and unlocatability (temporally and geographically) of the narrative. The film and novel’s valorizations of gay romance also offer depart radically from historical realities such as the November 1980 suicide of a fifteen-year-old and his twenty-five-year-old Sicilian lover, who “[took] their own lives rather than face the impossibility of continuing their relationship” (Malagreca 127). This horrifyingly tragic episode from the annals of Italian

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37 Both Guadagnino’s opening montage and Aciman’s novel acknowledge the utopic conceptualization of Italy within the Anglo-American imagination. As Jeremy Black argues, Italy has been viewed as a “focus of artistic, and more generally cultural, education” becoming effectively a “peninsula of pleasure” (532). Other scholars, such as Sirpa Salenius, emphasize the importance of the “Grand Tour” in Italy’s codification as a nineteenth-century cultural destination (11). *Call Me by Your Name* evokes the romantic, picturesque “cult of mountains [and] seaside,” and explicitly references famous nineteenth-century visitors such as Percy Bysshe Shelley (Black 534).
history reveals the gulf between Aciman’s retrospective literary imagining, and
Guadagnino’s filmic smoothing-out of certain Italian realities in the 1980s.

Beyond homophobia, Italy faced other social woes during the decade. Following
its tenure in the 1970s as having “the worst ‘misery index’—as the combination of
inflation and unemployment rates came to be called,” the 1980s presented the country
with widespread economic irritation and political fragmentation (Golden 15). Spending,
interest, and tax rates all increased (Bull and Gilbert 15, 19) as Italy was governed “by an
uneasy coalition based upon the traditional party of government, Christian Democracy,
and the Partito socialista italiano (Socialist Party), which from 1976 had been led by
Bettino Craxi, an opportunistic Milanese politician with big ambitions” (Bull and Gilbert
14).38 In addition to this quibbling between the dominant Italian political parties, regional
divisions surfaced; tensions in the northern region of Lombardy culminated in the
generation of a new, hyper-conservative party, the Lega Nord, primarily concerned with
protecting northern interests and pushing against migration. In Guadagnino’s film,
Lombardy replaces Rome as the location of Elio and Oliver’s end-of-the-summer
goodbye trip; they stay in the town of Bergamo and visit the Cascate del Serio, Italy’s
tallest waterfalls—but the film eschews depiction of the region’s political and economic
turmoil. When read against the historically-specific context of northern Italy in the 1980s,
the Perlmans do indeed attain “privileges [that] constitute their placid and closed-off
worldview,” living in a villa with an entire roster of domestic service workers who cook,
clean, and maintain the grounds (Kaye). This bourgeois fantasy is partially what sustains

38Guadagnino’s film acknowledges the presence of Italian politics intermittently. In one scene, when Elio
stands in the town square, waiting for Oliver to pick up pages of his manuscript from a local translator, he
gazes up at an imposing church steeple, the camera panning to its cross. Below, on an adjacent building,
posters appear to encourage votes for the Partito socialista and the Partito repubblicano italiano in the 1983
general election.
the novel’s lack of homophobic antagonism; for Justin Hudak, in the film’s “lush Italian landscape… Oliver and Elio are free” (157). Call Me by Your Name most certainly draws from a very narrow—nearly impossible—strand of reality in order to proffer its temporally-bounded vision of Italy. This sticking point between what was and what might have been becomes narratively centralized, and functions as a kind of problematic nostalgia as the novel both stages utopia and the impossibility of its achievement. Utopia undoes and amplifies realism; in turn, literary realism’s impossibility reifies the utopic project. What results is a novel of nostalgia, which, while realist in its overarching projects, neglects the historical and material conditions of its moment. Call Me by Your Name locates queer identity ambivalently in relation to past and future, reality and unreality, sentimentality and suffering, and, in so doing, reconsiders the boundaries of imagination and possibility in the twenty-first century novel.

Another narrative mode that emerges from Call Me by Your Name’s oscillations between the realist and the utopic is the melodramatic. While some critics discuss melodrama in terms of genre, Jane M. Gaines, glossing Christine Gledhill, asserts that melodrama is “larger than one genre,” and is, in Gledhill’s terms, “an overarching culture-based ‘mode’ that ‘generates’ genres” (96). Similarly, Linda Williams describes melodrama as “a broad mode, not a genre” (167). Emerging initially in the late eighteenth century as a descriptor for dramas performed with musical accompaniment, melodrama becomes a much more expansive—and contested—mode over the following two centuries (Loren and Metelmann 12). Peter Brooks’s oft-cited definition construes melodrama as “a mode of heightened dramatization inextricably bound up with the modern novel’s effort to signify”—an influential if only partial description (qtd. in
Glossing Brooks’s readings of Balzac and Henry James, Santovetti details the ways in which melodrama collapses “novel” and “romance” into one another (528). This tension between novelistic realism and romanticism has continued to structure many of the critical conversations regarding melodrama. E. Ann Kaplan traces melodrama’s novelistic trajectory through the twentieth century in order to refute misogynist notions that “the American (male) realist novel is so-called because in its historical moment was defining itself against the fantasy-laden and heavily escapist qualities of women’s popular novels” (50). Pushing against these kinds of claims—made by Paul Willemen and Alfred Habegger—Kaplan argues that “all dominant popular and high culture forms… have melodramatic and realist elements,” and that “the balance of these varies” (50). Consequently, Kaplan argues, both modes possess “possibilities for exposing or commenting upon existing gender positions,” and these conversations remain “full of import for women” (51, 50). Other feminist scholars have similarly revised understandings of melodrama: Jane Gaines suggests that melodramas which depict “the fallen woman” rely upon “the principle of irreversibility (there is no undoing)”—a gendered trope which, in Gaines’s analysis, is put into a larger conversation about melodrama’s persistent “longing for what once was and will never be again” (101). Gaines glosses Pam Cook’s assertion that “melodrama begins and wants to end all in a ‘space of innocence,’” that, in effect, “[m]elodrama wants the impossible” (97). Positioned by many critics in a somewhat adjacent relationship to realism, melodrama’s desire for the “impossible” also signifies its relation to the utopic. Thomas Elsaesser

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39 Much feminist criticism has focused on melodrama through the lens of film—specifically, classic Hollywood cinema. Laura Mulvey has argued that “although female transgression is punished in melodrama, female protagonists’ subjectivity produces an excess that narrative cannot contain” (qtd. in Lutz 189).
understands melodrama as a “placeholder for all the asymmetries and imbalances, for all the excesses seeking appeasement”; Elsaesser also views melodrama as “failed tragedy” whose “value lies in performing this failure” (37). Elsaesser argues that such failure allows melodrama to constitute “the appropriate worldview or anti-metaphysics for an age that has lost faith in utopias, but has given up on solutions,” and that, ultimately, melodrama renders visible the “gap… of political action” (38). Mediating between discourses of reality and possibility, melodrama thus emerges as a fluid and agile mode within which complicated depictions of affect and gender get played out.

Other critical approaches to melodrama have focused on the ways in which it queers or subverts gendered expectations of masculinity. John Champagne locates a long history of Italian melodrama specifically related to queerness. Champagne notes that Italian masculinity is often seen as a “corollary” to “the portrayal of Italy as a place of sexual licentiousness,” and that Italian depictions of masculinity are unique for their “polymorphous linkings of sex and gender,” that “the excesses ascribed to Italian men crisscrossing masculine and feminine, homosexual and heterosexual, allo[w] for promiscuous pairings” (4-5). While Oliver is American, and Elio is an American expatriate, their situation within this context of queered Italian melodrama manifests throughout both novel and film. For Champagne, melodrama “[o]ften overtly thematiz[es] melancholy,” and “is fundamentally about loss”; Champagne also describes the ways in which melodrama can “protest against present conditions and suggests the potential to use the aesthetic to rearrange our present affective attachments” (12). These protests against the present, and this rearrangement of affect dovetails, to varying degrees, with both the realist and the utopic projects. Champagne clarifies that while
English melodrama is “typically understood to be in tension with (if not the antithesis of) realism,” Italian melodrama is considered “veristic,” that “[m]elodrama is more productively considered as allegory in that it is not chiefly an imitation of reality but rather the deployment of certain reality-effects in the effort to signify a ‘something’ else that cannot be reconciled in the symbol” (22). If melodrama consists in the production of “reality effects” which allegorize reality, it might also be said, in Call Me by Your Name, to dramatize the melancholic movement between the real and the fleetingly utopic, a kind of aesthetic seam which becomes visible between the two. Tommaso Mozzati similarly claims that Guadagnino’s adaptation “keep[s] in mind the rules of the melodramatic genre,” marked formally through mise-en-scène and through the film’s depictions of queer desire. Mozzati also emphasizes the function of Stendhal’s 1827 novel Armance in both novel and film; the realist novel “is transformed into a bond between the two lovers, and anticipates their future separation.” Aciman’s novel and Guadagnino’s film thus implicate themselves in a hybridized plurality of genres: the realist, the utopic, the melodramatic—all of which derive from the novel’s centralization of a queer romance.

“[B]orrowed Time” and Utopian Flux

Against these complex formal and thematic strategies at work in Call Me by Your Name, Aciman’s novel constructs its sense of time through narrative unreliability. As a retrospective narrator of his own youthful experiences, Elio becomes obsessed with reading and reconstructing the temporal and affective structures of his summer with Oliver. He narrates:

When I think back to that summer, I can never sort the sequence of events. There are a few key scenes. Otherwise, all I remember are the ‘repeat’ moments. The morning ritual before and after breakfast: Oliver lying on the grass, or by the pool, I sitting at my table. Then the swim or the jog. Then his grabbing a bicycle and
riding to see the translator in town. Lunch at the large, shaded dining table in the other garden, or lunch indoors, always a guest or two for lunch drudgery. The afternoon hours, splendid and lush with abundant sun and silence. (Aciman 57)

Elio’s narration centralizes many of the strategies that surface throughout the novel: reflection and investigation of the past; repetition and the accumulative and accretive processes of time; the small daily acts of “real” life. Muñoz, glossing Barthes, suggests that “utopia exists in the quotidian,” and the novel’s retrospective narrative foregrounds the uncovering of such queer utopia (Cruising 22). While unable to “sort the sequence of events” of this pivotal summer, Elio nevertheless constructs a temporal record attempting to discern the origins and conclusions of his desire. He narrates the past from a future vantage point, stranding the reader in a textual present riddled with the problematics of repetition. Elio’s use of quotidian gerunds—eating, swimming, jogging, biking, lying—become, in their repetition, acts of romantic grandeur, “splendid and lush with abundant sun and silence.” Other, similar scenes populate the novel: “the postprandial silence—some of us napping some working, others reading, the whole world basking away in hushed semitones. Heavenly hours when voices from the world beyond our house would filter in so softly that I was sure I had drifted off” (58). Full of leisure and sensual pleasure, these hours come to constitute a “[h]eavenly” cross-section of time, a utopia only gently tethered to reality by “voices from the world beyond,” and followed again by the mundane routines of summer: “Then afternoon tennis. Shower and cocktails. Waiting for dinner. Guests again. Dinner” (58). These repeat moments overpower Elio, and he desires to unfetter daily life from the strictures of temporality. Elio wishes “for… time to stop. Let summer never end, let him never go away, let the music on perpetual replay play forever” (30). In his futile wish to stop time, Elio inflects the past with the future and
the future with the past. This ambivalence manifests syntactically in the clunky assonance of “perpetual replay play forever,” which sandwiches two versions of the same word (“replay” and “play”) between two similarly yoked ideas of futurity (“perpetual” and “forever”). Utopia unspools from the future, into the past, into the habits and acts of everyday life—but so too does realism unfurl from the past into the future, rendering utopia recognizable through the stuff of life: drinking, eating, and living, over and over.

But despite—or, perhaps, precisely because of—the accumulative day-to-day narration which Elio offers the reader, he remains unable to locate the temporal origins of his desire. Unable to be pinned down, floating throughout the text, desire functions as utopian: it remains marked but unfixed by affect and time. Elio and Oliver frequently narrate their romance in distanced and detached ways, offering a meta-fictional and temporally fluid version of reality. On the novel’s first page, Elio declares of his first sight of Oliver, “It might have started right there and then: the shirt, the rolled-up sleeves, the rounded balls of his heels slipping in and out of his frayed espadrilles, eager to test the hot gravel path that led to our house (3). A few pages later, he qualifies: “But it all might have started way later than I think without my noticing anything at all” (8). This is the trick of Aciman’s novel: through syntax, sentence structure, and the iterative repetition of similar episodes of daily life and desire, utopia comes into view—but only through realist description and interior subjective focalization. Elio struggles to narrate the memory of his summer with Oliver, evincing Muñoz’s notion that “desire is always directed at the thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise” (Cruising 26). Queer futurity becomes, in Aciman’s novel, an affective and utopian “horizon,” a “modality of ecstatic time” (Cruising 32). Retrospection formalizes
the affective difficulties of desire, and events seen through a realist lens quickly spotlight the impossibilities lurking at their fringes.

The utopic resonances of *Call Me by Your Name* rely upon the perceived boundaries of actuality and possibility. Describing Oliver’s intimacy with a local woman, Elio once again attempts to concretely pin down the temporal implications of sexual desire: “When he and Chiara danced I saw her slip her thigh between his legs. And I’d seen them mock-wrestle on the sand. When had it started? And how was it that I hadn’t been there when it started? And why wasn’t I told? Why wasn’t I able to reconstruct the moment when they progressed from \( x \) to \( y \)? Surely the signs were all around them. Why didn’t I see them?” (44). Elio foregrounds the powers and limits of his own perception, narrating what he witnessed: instances of Oliver and Chiara’s physical intimacy. From these moments, Elio suggests a layer of subtextual meaning to which he is not privy. This distinction—between what happened and what it signifies—points to a Lukácsian slippage between surface and essence, refracted into temporal dislocation. Elio wonders “when” this moment started, “how” he hadn’t been present to witness it, and “why” he wasn’t informed. Unable to plot his desire along a cohesive timeline, he self-reflexively critiques the strategies of realist narration through a series of interrogative questions which focus on his inability “to reconstruct the moment” (emphasis added, 44).

Reconstruction becomes the focal point of Elio’s narration, but this reconstructive (and, therefore, realist) process elides him. He resorts to a process of abstraction which flattens life into “signs,” into “\( x \)” and “\( y \).” Here, the aporia of utopia comes into focus, as Elio finds himself subjectively and narratively stranded on the boundary between reality and
unreality, attempting to discern the future resonances of Oliver and Chiara’s relationship.\footnote{I derive the conceptualization of aporia from Jacques Derrida’s definition: “the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible, passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage, which can in fact be something else, the event of a coming or of a future advent” (8). Derrida also describes the aporia as “a single duty that recurrently duplicates itself interminably, fissures itself, and contradicts itself without remaining the same” (16).}

Paranoid fixation continues as Elio’s and Oliver’s friendship opens into a romance, and bestows Aciman’s text with a melodramatic veneer. After a coded but mutually reciprocal declaration of desire in the town piazzetta, Elio moves beyond the narrative present to envision a queer futurity:

A thought raced through my mind: Would my descendants know what was spoken on this very piazzetta today? Would anyone? Or would it dissolve into thin air, as I found part of me wishing it would? Would they know how close to the brink their fate stood on this day on this piazzetta? The thought amused me and gave me the necessary distance to face the remainder of this day….In thirty, forty years, I’ll come back here and think back on a conversation I knew I’d never forget, much as I might want to someday. I’d come here with my wife, my children…. Then I’d stand here and ask the statue and the straw-backed chairs and shaky wooden tables to remind me of someone called Oliver. (Aciman 74)

In the textual present moment (the historical past, narrated from a time beyond the reader), Elio imagines a future several decades down the line, one preoccupied with fate and possibility. In Elio’s imagined future, he has “descendants,” and he is firmly ensconced within the heteronormative family (“with my wife, my children”). He imagines reflecting on his current moment, attempting to discern how he will, in the future, reconstruct through the quotidian—“the statue and the straw-backed chairs and shaky wooden tables”—his decidedly queer relationship with Oliver. Once again, Elio poses a barrage of questions aimed at both rendering and answering temporal questions about the relationship between past and future, between reality and fantasy. Establishing his present moment as something he would “never forget,” Elio participates in a process
of futurity which he later describes as leaving mental and affective “breadcrumbs” for himself, for the future act of remembering (162). The novel thus centralizes a future appraisal of the past, and this anticipated nostalgia emphasizes the exigencies of possibility.

Within the novel’s affective parameters, temporality comes to be commodified, the delimiting factor of both realist and utopic enterprises. Elio participates in this commodification when he “suddenly realized we were on borrowed time, that time is always borrowed, and that the lending agency exacts its premium precisely when we are least prepared to borrow more,” (162). Elio evacuates the present moment of its affective valences in anticipation of a future mourning; the present thus becomes subject to both past and future, inscribed and re-inscribed along the lines of desire. The reality of his fantasy—the fact that Elio does engage in what he deems impossible, a relationship with Oliver—comes to fruition, but this transformation signals the losses, truncations, and dissolutions into impossibility that must accompany any account of the utopic, queer or not. The present must always serve another time, whether in the past or future: “I began, reluctantly, to steal from the present to pay off debts I knew I’d incur in the future” (162-63). Elio’s language of accounting emphasizes the metaphorical and symbolic price of the utopic fantasy: affective pain and the tragedy of separation, both of which come to interrupt utopia with an acknowledgment of the “real.” Retrospection allows for both a reconstruction of the past and a reconstruction of the process of looking forward to itself; time folds back in both possibility and delimitation. Temporal commodification—the idea that time is always, under any circumstance, “borrowed”—signals the boundary point of realism. The utopic thus sustains the real, and vice versa.
Bisected by these yoked-but-differing temporal vantage points, *Call Me by Your Name* signals the complexities of possibility as they relate to the present and the future. Muñoz argues that “it is productive to think of utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a *then* and a *there* that could be and indeed should be” (97). What “could be” and “should be” come to a fraught convergence in *Call Me by Your Name*’s rendering of desire. When Elio describes his attempted tryst with a local young woman, Marzia (portrayed by Esther Garrel in Guadagnino’s film), he asserts that he lacked the courage to follow through:

“Try again later,” said Oliver. This was what people who were okay with themselves did. But I could also sense he was onto something and wasn’t coming out with it, perhaps because there was something mildly disquieting behind his fatuous though well-intentioned *try again later*. He was criticizing me. Or making fun of me. Or seeing through me. It stung me when he finally came out with it. Only someone who had completely figured me out would have said it. “If not later, when?” My father liked it. “If not later, when?” It echoed Rabbi Hillel’s famous injunction, “If not now, when?” (Aciman 51).

In Oliver’s critique, “later” becomes the slippage point between what Muñoz distinguishes as two related but separate processes of futurity—possibility and potentiality. For Muñoz, possibilities “exist within a logical real, the possible, which is within the present,” while potentialities, “although they are present… do not exist in present things,” but instead “have a temporality that is not in the present, but, more nearly, in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity” (*Cruising* 99). In the present moment of *possibility*—Elio’s failed attempt at union with Marzia, and his avowal to succeed in the future—Oliver points to *potentiality*, to the future horizon of “later.” The word “later” is associated with Oliver throughout novel and film; he uses it as a sign-off, a good bye. “Later” is, in fact, the very first word of Aciman’s narrative:
“Later!” The word, the voice, the attitude. I’d never heard anyone use ‘later’ to say goodbye before. It sounded harsh, curt, and dismissive, spoken with the veiled indifference of people who may not care to see or hear from you again. It is the first thing I remember about him, and I can hear it still today. Later! (Aciman 3).

“Later” thus comes to designate a confluence of temporalities: the past, the “first thing [Elio] remember[s],” and the potentiality of the future, glimpsed, as Muñoz writes, in the utopic horizon of queer desire. “Later” also signifies similarity and union; while Elio initially finds Oliver’s use of the word “harsh, curt, and dismissive,” he later views the word as central to his memory of Oliver, and, indeed, to a larger system of homosocial relation and cultural and religious identification. By invoking his father, and Rabbi Hillel the Elder, Elio frames temporal potentiality through its relation to the homosocial Judaism which he shares with Oliver.41

As a signifier of potentiality, “Later” also reveals the temporal limits of futurity and its processes of codification within the present, and within retrospective narration. Once again, Elio parses the “real” world around him—objects, speech, actions, sensations—for their subtextual significances; he concludes that Oliver has drawn a “veil” over his true critique: “If not later, when?” (51). Futurity, while signaling the potential to achieve union, to consummate desire, also becomes a self-reflexive mode marked by its own kind of retrospection, as the nebulous “not later” comes under the scrutiny of “when,” the same question which Elio repeatedly poses about the origins of desire. Elio:

41Elio notes that, “With the exception of my family, [Oliver] was probably the only other Jew who had ever set foot in B. But unlike us he let you see it from the start. We were not conspicuous Jews. We wore our Judaism as people do almost everywhere in the world: under the shirt, not hidden, but tucked away. ‘Jews of discretion,’ to use my mother's words” (19). The possibility of anti-Semitism thus emerges as something which further connects Elio and Oliver: “It's not that he [Oliver] never thought about being Jewish or about the life of Jews in a Catholic country... He had lived long enough in small towns in New England to know what it felt like to be the odd Jew out” (20).
repeated his phrase as if it were a prophetic mantra meant to reflect how he lived his life and how I was attempting to live mine. By repeating this mantra that had come straight from his mouth, I might trip on a secret passageway to some nether truth that had hitherto eluded me, about me, about life, about others, about me with others. (Aciman 51)

As evidenced earlier, in the slow accumulation that constitutes the routine of Elio’s and Oliver’s leisurely summer days, repetition functions as a device of the present, inscribed though it is with inflections of and from the future. “Try again later”—an imperative directive of future potentiality—becomes for Elio a “prophetic mantra… come straight from [Oliver’s] mouth”; the discursive coalesces with the bodily before its expansive metaphorical abstraction into “a secret passageway to some nether truth.” The potential to “try again later” offers Elio the opportunity to access a truth “about me, about life, about others, about me with others”—an individual and communitarian point of utopian futurity wherein the self and the other seamlessly blend.

And yet, even as “try again later” functions utopically, as a signifier of future success and wholeness of union, its subtextual realities impinge upon its facility:

*Try again later* meant, I haven’t the courage now. Things weren’t ready *just yet*. Where I’d find the will and the courage to *try again later* I didn’t know. But resolving to do something rather than sit passively made feel I was already doing something, like reaping a profit on money I hadn’t invested, much less earned yet. But I also knew that I was circling wagons around my life with *try again laters*, and that months, seasons, entire years, a lifetime could go by with nothing but Saint Try-again-later stamped on every day. *Try again later* worked for people like Oliver. *If not later, when?* was my shibboleth.

*If not later, when?* What if he had found me out and uncovered each and every one of my secrets with those four cutting words? I had to let him know I was totally indifferent to him. (51-52)

In this model, Elio equates a resolve to action with action itself; intention functions as a signifier of *possibility*, rather than *potentiality*. Affective possibility—the feelings embedded in the present—functions as utopic fantasy, the imaginings of what might be;
this differs, however, from the potentiality of its actual enactment in some future time. Elio feels as if he has “reap[ed] a profit” on money not “invested, much less earned,” but this accounting of affective experience points to lack, to negation. When never transformed into future potentiality, present possibility becomes “months, seasons, entire years, a lifetime” marked by “nothing but Saint Try-again-later stamped on every day.” Elio points to the present delimitation of the future, of present inaction encroaching forever into what otherwise might be; he critiques his present (the project of queer utopia), but, in so doing, reaches the boundary points of the utopic, finding his “shibboleth” in the complicated futurity of “If not later, when?” (52). In contrast to the imperative “Try again later,” this question metaphorically wounds Elio with its “four cutting words”; Elio fears that Oliver will “find [him] out” and “uncove[r] each and every one of [his] secrets” (52). This narrated conversation about Elio’s muted but continued heterosexual strivings in turn occasions the expansion and qualification of queer possibility, pointing to the vulnerabilities inherent in desire, always-already marked by competing currents of past, present, and future.

“[M]y Foreverland of Ambiguities”: Queering Queer Union

The temporal dimensions of Call Me by Your Name have much to do with its constructions of queerness in relation to the twinned and often competing projects of realism and utopia. Critical and popular coverage, especially of Guadagnino’s film, never established a consensus regarding Elio’s and Oliver’s respective sexualities; their union is clearly a gay one, but throughout novel and film, each maintains heterosexual relationships with women, and Oliver is married to a woman at the conclusion of each narrative; consequently, bisexuality emerges as the most accurate way to describe Oliver
and Elio’s orientations. Aciman’s 2019 sequel, further depicts the bisexuality of both Elio and Oliver. Midway through the novel, Michel, Elio’s primary romantic interest, asks him about his suitors after Oliver, to which Elio replies that there were “[n]ot many. All short-lived. Men and women” (Find Me 141). The collective narrative of Elio and Oliver—across Aciman’s two novels, and in Guadagnino’s film—thus constitutes a nuanced portrait of the ways in which bisexuality, gay masculinity, and heterosexuality each find voice and differing degrees of analysis in these texts’ critical receptions. Tommaso Mozzati writes that “much discussion of Call Me by Your Name has centered around if it is in fact a gay film”—and while the utility of such conversations remains significant, it becomes more analytically generative to think of the ways in which Elio and Oliver’s gay relationship with one another juts against their heterosexual relationships with Marzia and Chiara, respectively. Homoerotic homosociality, as it enables Oliver and Elio to be together, nevertheless remains predicated on their callous desertions of their heterosexual love interests. Queerness and heterosexuality remain unfixed and, often, unnamed, in all versions of Call Me by Your Name, and their oscillations intersect with the narratological ones of the realist, the utopic, and the melodramatic.

Elio’s physical desire for Oliver becomes the launchpad for the novel’s interrogation of the boundary between self and other, between past and future, between the real and the fantasy:

How I wished I had shoulders like his. Maybe I wouldn’t long for them if I had them…. Did I want to be like him? Did I want to be him? Or did I just want to have him? Or are ‘being’ and ‘having’ thoroughly inaccurate verbs in twisted skein of desire, where having someone’s body to touch and being that someone we’re longing to touch are one and the same, just opposite banks on a river that passes from us to them, back to us and over to them, again in this perpetual circuit
where the chambers of the heart, like the trapdoors of desire, and the wormholes of time, and the false-bottomed drawer we call identity share a beguiling logic according to which the shortest distance between real life and the life unlived, between who we are and what we want, is a twisted staircase designed with the impish cruelty of M.C. Escher. When had they separated us, you and me, Oliver? And why did I know it and why didn’t you?... You in me, me in you…” (Aciman 68)

Elio deploys a classic trope of male homosexuality: both desiring to be the other and desiring to be with the other; however, this cliched formulation finds new complexity as it becomes a “twisted skein of desire,” a “twisted staircase designed with… impish cruelty.” Twisting—interlacing and connecting two-into-one—becomes a way to investigate the novel’s plaiting of the realistic and the utopic. Elio’s distinction between “being” and “having” indicates a porous boundary between self and other, constructing “someone’s body to touch” and “being that someone” as “one and the same.” By conceptualizing queer desire as a “perpetual circuit,” Elio meta-narrates the novelistic structures at work throughout Call Me by Your Name: exposing the “trapdoors of desire” as they relate to the “false-bottomed drawer we call identity,” and how the “wormholes of time” warp and shape these subjective identitarian and communitarian experiences. The language in this passage—hyperbolic, surreal—pulls away from the tempered realism of exterior description and aggrandizes the space “between real life and the life unlived,” the gulf between reality and its narrations in literary realism. The “life unlived” is unreality, a fantastical, utopic might-have-been, and Elio depicts the difficulties of bridging the gap between “who we are and what we want.” Elio relates identity and desire along a matrix of time and space; what at first appears a description of bodily desire focused on Oliver’s shoulders becomes a meditative reflection on gay masculinity, and the nuanced ways in which queer relationality blurs all kinds of boundaries: “You in me, me in you.” In an
**SENSE** review of Guadagnino’s film, Durga Chew-Bose locates the tenuous border between self and other in the very spelling of the two lovers’ names: “Oliver, Elio. Elio, Oliver. The round, continuous sequence of their names, like the sound—were it to have one—of an infinity loop.” For Chew-Bose, the film is “preoccupied with what separates us,” but, more significantly, “what draws us near, and how despite the near-promise of heartbreak, we inch close and hold our breaths.” The passage retrospectively prefigures parting (“When had they separated us, you and me, Oliver?”), establishing selfhood and desire as perpetually queerable structures of queerness.

Just as Elio attempts to discern the temporal origins and future longevity of his relationship with Oliver, so too does he investigate the identitarian nodes of their union. “Perhaps we were friends first and lovers second,” he writes, before qualifying, “But then perhaps this is what lovers are” (157). Elio depicts the early stages of their relationship, after Oliver’s arrival, as fraught with social missteps, long silences, cold glances, and casual disinterest. Only “later” does he come to realize those amorous encodings for the queer missives they were: “All these times when I thought I was slighting him by showing him how easy it was to ignore him in the garden, on the balcony at the beach, he had been seeing right through me and had taken my move for the peevish, textbook gambit it was” (79). Their intimacy deepens in a literalized utopic idyll, a berm where Monet painted, through physical connection. After the berm, Elio ambiguously assesses the moment: “I was not sure our kiss had convinced me of anything about myself. I was not even sure I had enjoyed it as much as I’d expected and needed to test it again, so that even in the act itself, I needed to test the test… *So much denial?* A two-bit disciple of Freud would have observed” (81). Elio retrospectively attempts to categorize his kiss
with Oliver in relation to larger structures of sexual and psychoanalytic identity (“anything about myself”; “a two-bit disciple of Freud”). His “test[ing] of the test” functions as a queering device, subjecting queer desire to processes of meta-scrutiny: “I did not want passion, I did not want pleasure. Perhaps I didn’t even want proof. And I did not want words, small talk, big talk, bike talk, book talk, any of it. Just the sun, the grass, the occasional sea breeze and the smell of his body fresh from his chest, from his neck and his armpits” (81). What Elio wants is the alliterative trifecta of “passion,” “pleasure,” or “proof,” and not the endless stream of mundane discourse “talk… talk… talk… talk…”), but rather, disembodied sensual perceptions: “the sun, the grass, the occasional sea breeze and the smell of his body.” Elio deploys realist strategies—observing and recording the external world—even as these strategies dissolve into a utopic matrix of (im)possibility. Reality becomes mythic: “Just take me and molt me and turn me inside out, till, like a character in Ovid, I become one with your lust, that’s what I wanted. Give me a blindfold, hold my hand, and don’t ask me to think—will you do that for me?” (81). Elio utilizes two of the forms most prominent throughout Aciman’s novel—the imperative “Just take me and molt me” and the interrogative “will you do that for me?”—and, in the gulf between these modes, the boundary of potentiality emerges, imbuing what is real with what is utopic. Elio turns to the Classical past—a temporal aporia, a utopic zone inaccessible except through myth—“till, like a character in Ovid”—in order to evince the possibility of a total commingling: “I become one with your lust.”

Elio’s desire for physical consummation becomes temporally fractured between past and future, coming to affectively bear upon his present. After arranging a midnight

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42 Justin Hudak describes Call Me by Your Name in relation to another Classical ideal: the Platonic, famously homoerotic Phaedrus (157).
tryst with Oliver, Elio wonders: “[H]ow do you go back to sleep no longer a virgin? There was no coming back from that! What had been in my head for so long would now be out in the real world, no longer afloat in my foreverland of ambiguities. I felt like someone entering a tattoo parlor and taking a last, long look at his bare left shoulder” (126). These lines provoke two lines of inquiry: first, the temporal dimensions (pre- and post-) which reify the constructed notion of virginity, and its relation to personal and sexual identity. For Elio, moving from virgin to non-virgin constitutes a cataclysm: “There was no coming back from that!” in part because he views sexual union as transitioning from imagination to actuality, from possibility to enactment. The shift from “what had been in [his] head so long,” amidst the “foreverland of ambiguities,” into the “real world” renders a meta-commentary about the formal maneuvers of Aciman’s novel. Through the imminent potentiality of gay sex, Elio discerns the slippage of boundaries between fantasy and reality, between ambiguous imaginary utopias never to be realized, and their soon-to-be occurrence. His metaphor for losing his virginity—that it is akin to looking at one’s shoulder before the inscription of a permanent tattoo—localizes his body as the site of another kind of marker, suggesting that he will be, in some way, rendered lastingly visible through this first sexual encounter. Not having had sex, he strategizes for a futurity in which he has, collapsing the past and the future into his present moment: “From this moment on, I thought, from this moment on—I had, as I’d never before in my life, the distinct feeling of arriving somewhere very dear, of wanting this forever, of being me, me, me, me, and no one else, just me” (133). Whereas queer desire functions in Elio’s interior subjectivity as “foreverland of ambiguities,” a dreamscape of endless ambivalence, he envisions desire’s enactment as being wanted “forever,” a distillation
and realization of selfhood (“me, me, me, me,”), as a temporal and spatial moment of
“arriving.” This process of self-actualization, however, remains yoked to the queer other:
Elio finds “in each shiver that ran down my arms something totally alien and yet by no
means unfamiliar, as if all of this had been part of me all my life and I’d misplaced it and
he had helped me find it” (133). Physical markers of desire—shivers—signal a much
more intrinsic notion of one’s person and body, re-found and regained through gay
desire.

The titular scene of both film and novel—wherein Elio and Oliver have sex for
the first time—reifies the slippages between self and other, between the real and the
imagined utopic. Elio narrates the sexual episode in terms of its extremity—of
physicality, of affect, of identitarian exchange. He thinks:

You’ll kill me if you stop, you’ll kill me if you stop, because it was also my way
of bringing full circle the dream and the fantasy, me and him, the longed-for
words from his mouth to my mouth back into his mouth, swapping words from
mouth to mouth, which was when I must have begun using obscenities that he
repeated after me, softly at first, till he said “Call me by your name and I’ll call
you by mine,” which I’d never done in my life before and which, as soon as I said
my own name as though it were his, took me to a realm I never shared with
anyone in my life before, or since. (Aciman 134)

The cessation of sex, for Elio, signals the cessation of life; “you’ll kill me if you stop”
functions both as an imperative and as an expression of vulnerability, as life and death
come to depend on the other. Sexual encounter bridges the gap between “the dream and
the fantasy,” Elio in effect identifies what Lee Edelman describes as “the critical force of
homosexuality... the very point of discrimination between sameness and difference”
(Homographesis 20). Sex—which existed in Elio’s past as an imagined futurity, caught
up in the mental “foreverland of ambiguities”—ushers the utopic into the present
There is no antagonist, no conflict—only the intimate connections of queer desire and their pleasures. Elio and Oliver’s exchange is bodily and physical, but also discursive; language becomes the register both for Elio’s narration and, meta-narratively, as the signifier of shared identity: “the longed-for words from his mouth to my mouth back into his mouth, swapping words from mouth to mouth.” Repetition—already seen as both a formal and thematic device in *Call Me by Your Name*—accrues an intensified meaning. These movements, from self to the other and back again evince, in the present moment of a midnight meeting, the utopic glimmers of desire’s expansivity.

This discursive and physical exchange culminates in Oliver’s directive—“Call me by your name and I’ll call you by mine.” Whereas Lee Edelman has argued that homosexuality (in the heterosexual imagination) signifies the “conflictual undoing of one man’s authority by another,” as a kind of “failed, debased, or inadequate masculinity,” Aciman’s novel proposes the inverse (*Homographesis* 54). The phrase “Call me by your name,” as an imperative command, begins with the absent but implied (You), the subject from which else all stems. Oliver asks Elio to call him, Oliver, by his, Elio’s name, and, in so doing both erases his own identity (glossing over “Oliver”) and reflects back to Elio his own self. Oliver becomes Elio for Elio to see, and, in the phrase’s corresponding equivalent, “and I’ll call you by mine,” Elio becomes Oliver for Oliver to see. The “twisted skeins” of “being” and “having” connect; in this moment, Elio and Oliver both suspend and magnify their selves in relation to one another. Elio registers the

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43 Elio’s “foreverland of ambiguities” recalls Nick’s “inner theatre of sexual make-believe,” in that both exist as a mediation between a specifically gay masculine desire—housed within the confines of mental and erotic subjectivity and fantasy—even as they point the dramas and pleasures of actualization (Hollinghurst 24).
implications of this process of reverse-naming: “as soon as I said my name as though it were his, [it] took me to a realm I never shared with anyone in my life before, or since” (134). This scene, the identitarian crux of both novel and film, proposes a total reciprocity of recognition in the moment of gay intimacy. Totally stripped of the hetero- and bio-imperatives of reproductive procreation, this naming—embedded in the moment of gay sexual encounter—becomes the utopizing and defining moment of both individual identity and union with another.

“[T]otally Unreal”: The San Clemente Syndrome and Utopic Multiplicity

Near the novel’s end, Oliver and Elio travel to Rome as a way of saying goodbye—a parting trip. In Rome, they encounter a poet who relays an extended anecdote about his own travels to Thailand. This poet coins a term for affective, spatial, and temporal experiences, felt in simultaneity:

I called it the San Clemente Syndrome. Today’s Basilica of San Clemente is built on the site of what once was a refuge for persecuted Christians. The home of the Roman consul Titus Flavius Clemens, it was burnt down during Emperor Nero’s reign. Next to its charred remains, in what must have been a large, cavernous vault, the Romans built an underground pagan temple…. And the digging could go on and on. Like the subconscious, like love, like memory, like time itself, like every single one of us, the church is built on the ruins of subsequent restorations, there is no rock bottom, there is no first anything, no last anything, just layers and secret passageways and interlocking chambers. (Aciman 192)

The San Clemente Syndrome—fundamentally about the inextricability of one thing from another—both excavates and expands the ideas of time, space, and possibility which surface throughout Call Me by Your Name. The process is perpetual: “the digging could go on and on,” as it is “like the subconscious, like love, like memory, like time itself, like every single one of us.” This extended, anaphoric, multi-part simile constructs disparate structures and modes of existence—time, the mind, love, people—as equivalent, all
flattened onto the same plane of layered accumulation. When viewed through the “clementizing” lens, life becomes a veritable eternity freed from the strictures of time (and especially from straight time); there is no “rock bottom.” In its excavation and evacuation of past and present, the poet disposes of any neat rendition of reality that might be compartmentalized and sealed off. Everything depends upon everything else. An extended application of the San Clemente Syndrome to the very protocols of Aciman’s novel quickly reveals the limitations of literary realism. If “there is no first anything, no last anything, just layers and secret passageways and interlocking chambers,” only a complex and convoluted mass of time and history and space, then rendering the “real” through language becomes a problem of actualizing and delimiting. Something must always be excluded; apprehension comes in glimmers, in things that look like and recall their forebears. Literary realism might then be described as a queer enterprise, for, as Muñoz writes, “to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer” (Cruising 26). Given the coalescence that takes place during the San Clemente Syndrome, straight time and queer time collapse in one another, and become inseparable. These temporal movements—back forth into the past and the future—happen for the reader of a novel such as Aciman’s, and signal the capacities of the realist novel to both reify and stretch the formal limits of fictionally rendering time and space along “real” lines.

Elio narrates a utopian desire as when he retrospectively reflects upon the end of his relationship with Oliver as it is ending, as the present becomes the past:

As we ambled own an emptied labyrinth of sparely lit streets, I began to wonder what all this talk of San Clemente had to do with us—how we move through time,
how time moves through us, how we change and keep changing and come back to the same. One could even grow old and not learn a thing but this…. In a month or so from now, when I’d revisit Rome, being here tonight with Oliver would seem totally unreal, as though it had happened to an entirely different me. And the wish born three years ago here when an errand boy offered to take me to a cheap movie theater known for what went on there would seem no less unfulfilled to me three months from now than it was three years ago. He came. He left. Nothing else had changed. I had not changed. The world hadn’t changed. Yet nothing would be the same. All that remains is dreammaking and strange remembrance (Aciman 199).

This moment of reckoning envelops time, space, and possibility within its purview; as such, it constitutes an aporia: an impasse, a zone of ambivalence about the possibility of moving forward. In the empty and nocturnal Roman streets, Elio wrestles with the “Clementizing” nature of his own affective experiences and their imminent end. He recognizes the reciprocal, dual-facing movement of such a process: “how we move through time, how time moves through us.” Cognizant of his position as both subject and object of time, Elio reveals a temporal cyclicality: “we change and keep changing and come back to the same.” Apprehending the aporic quality of his present moment, Elio once more casts his vision towards the future so that he might more accurately look back. He forecasts into the near future and shows how time bears upon the construction and representation of reality: “In a month or so from now, when I’d revisit Rome, being here tonight with Oliver would seem totally unreal, as though it had happened to an entirely different me.” Elio locates realism—the structural apprehension and representation of life—as always subjectively bound, pressed by time and space into a perpetually shifting present. This present moment, when set against other, future “present” moments, fades into the unreal. Faced with the collision of different affective experiences of the same place, at different points in time, Elio multiplies his selfhood; he anticipates that his future experience of Rome will retrospectively alter his perception of “being here tonight
with Oliver” so greatly that it will be as if “it had happened to an entirely different me.”

Stability—whether subjective, affective, or temporal—becomes in Aciman’s novel a process of negotiation between the real and the possible; the utopic emerges as both problem and solution, a kind of structural aporia which is both impossible to avoid and impossible to exist in permanently. These moments of utopic aporia remain fundamentally queer: both predicated upon Elio’s desire for Oliver and the inevitable dissolution (temporally and affectively) of their union.

Just as Elio looks to the future as a means of more thoroughly apprehending and containing his present, so too does he reflect on the past’s lingering influence. He remembers that on a prior visit to Rome, an errand boy offered to have a tryst with him in a movie theater. Having previously spurned this boy, Elio imagines the aftereffects of his relationship with Oliver. Syntactically, his narration truncates, moving from long, sprawling sentences to short, abrupt declarations: “He came. He left. Nothing else had changed. I had not changed. The world hadn’t changed.” Stripped of any identifying language, these sentences offer a miniaturized narrative of love and loss and the imagined delimitations of possibility. “Nothing” changes, but “nothing would be the same” (199). Perhaps this is the most utopian dream of them all: stasis and transformation, through harmony and inaction. Elio recognizes in the present moment its past and future resonances; he localizes temporal experience, connecting it with the affective and the subjective, suggesting an ultimately utopian idea of multiplicity which comes to serve as the synthesizing force of Call Me by Your Name.

Confined temporally to the events of one summer in the 1980s, Call Me by Your Name may skirt the historical realities of its Italian setting, but, in its grander eschewal of
this narrow realism, both novel and film purport a more utopically-possible vision. This utopic realism rests fundamentally on the multiple within the singular—a convergence which recognizes but transgresses temporal and affective boundaries. Earlier in the novel, after their mutual confession of desire in the town square, Elio conceptualizes the shifting possibilities of his newfound connection with Oliver:

But that moment of what seemed like bliss now when we’d walked our bikes on the piazzetta both before and after our talk belonged to another time segment, as though it had happened to another me in some other life that was not too different from my own, but removed enough to make the few seconds that kept us apart seem like light-years away. If I put my foot on the floor and pretend that his is just behind the leg of the table, like a starship that has turned on its cloaking device, like a ghost summoned by the living, suddenly materialize from its dimple in space and say, I know you’ve beckoned. Reach and you’ll find me? (Aciman 93-94)

As the present “moment of what seemed like bliss” becomes “another time segment,” Elio once again assigns and identifies different “selves”: “as though it had happened to another me in some other life.” The accumulative effect of these multiple selves works to expand and stretch the boundaries of the “real.” Affective perception of time becomes a utopizing force which modulates the narration of reality; the “few seconds that kept us apart seem like light-years away.” The real turns to the un-real for an explanation, in the form of simile: “like a starship that has turned on its cloaking device, like a ghost summoned by the living, suddenly materialize from its dimple in space and say, I know you’ve beckoned. Reach and you’ll find me?” (93-94). In Aciman’s sequel, Find Me, once again the eponymous imperative emerges as Oliver, middle-aged, imagines Elio to be instructing him: “Find me, he says. I will, Oliver, I will,” Oliver mentally replies, calling Elio by his (Oliver’s) name (243). Elio’s piazzetta moment with Oliver finds its equivalent in the sci-fi starship and the gothic spectral—but, crucially, these far-reaching
The “distance of years” allows Elio to narrate the past and the future in a simultaneity, through the present. Layers of time and meaning signify the San Clementesque protocols of the novel’s fusion of the utopic and the real; Elio “can… still think I’m hearing the voices of two young men,” even though neither man recognizes “that this was the last night they would ever make love again.” More than mere dramatic irony, Elio’s retrospection means that the only portal to the reality of his summer with Oliver comes through the past, in a never-neat coalescence of different times and selves. “Tomorrow” becomes “today,” and time stretches.

“[T]he Permanent Past, My Pluperfect Lover”: Utopic Perpetuity

Near the end of Aciman’s novel, and in the final moments of Guadagnino’s film, affect and temporality converge in the exploration of—and perpetuation of—queer desire. Upon returning from his Roman trip, and having said goodbye to Oliver, Elio and his father have an at-first veiled but increasingly-transparent discussion about Elio’s relationship with Oliver. Professor Perlman advises to Elio that:
How you live your life is your business. But remember, our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once. Most of us can’t help but live as though we’ve got two lives to live, one is the mockup, the other the finished version, and then there are all those versions in between. But there’s only one, and before you know it, your heart is worn out, and, as for your body, there comes a point when no one looks at it, much less wants to come near it. Right now there’s sorrow. I don’t envy the pain. But I envy you the pain. (Aciman 225)

Delivered by Michael Stuhlbarg in Guadagnino’s film, the monologue was widely praised by critics for its generous ethos, and offered up as paradigmatic: the proper response of a father to his son’s relationship with another man. Even so, Mr. Perlman’s monologue remains predicated upon the affective and temporal delimitations of queer desire. He winnows down the multiplicity (of selves, of times, of possibilities) which surfaces at other points in both versions of Call Me by Your Name: “our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once,” he emphasizes. Instead of celebrating multiplicity, Professor Perlman offers an anxious reading of the ways in which such plurality might foreground the peripheral and tertiary elements of life: “Most of us can’t help but live as though we’ve got two lives to live.” In contrast to this vision of life—fragmented into the temporally disparate “mockup” and “finished” and “all those versions in between”—Mr. Perlman reminds Elio of the constraints of straight time: “But there’s only one, and before you know it, your heart is worn out, and, as for your body, there comes a point when no one looks at it, much less wants to come near it.”

Professor Perlman’s monologue exemplifies both fatherly acceptance and a kind of near-fatalistic (perhaps extraordinarily realist) caution to his son, whose pain he envies. He directs Elio to remain cognizant of the end of desire, desirability, and life, and to embrace the affective conditions of sorrow and pain as inevitable. Such instruction functions as a realist

44Professor Perlman’s assertion of a strictured temporality parallels Muñoz’s explanation that “[s]traight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life” (Cruising 22).
*memento mori* which both acknowledges and even privileges queer suffering—while foregrounding the inescapability of (straight) time.

It is along this axis—the delimitation of queer desire, time, and affect—where Aciman’s and Guadagnino’s visions diverge in both structure and theme. Perhaps ironically, Aciman’s novel—written in 2007, before the legalization of gay marriage in the United States and the much more widespread acceptance and normalization of LGBTQ+ lives in popular culture—concludes in a hopefully utopic manner, while Guadagnino’s more recent, 2017 film concludes in tragedy. In the last scene of the film—which takes place in the winter, at Hanukkah—Oliver calls Elio to inform him of his upcoming marriage to a woman. After the phone call, Elio wanders into the kitchen and sits in front of the fireplace. Positioned on the right side of the screen, Elio stares into the fireplace, a wide range of emotions playing across his face in subtle gradations; the credits roll on the left side of the screen. In the background, Elio’s parents and Mafalda set the table, and the noise of their work—footsteps, clinking silverware—juts up against the scene’s score (“Visions of Gideon” by Sufjan Stevens). Elio’s mother, Annella, calls his name twice; he turns away from the camera, and the film cuts to black. This final scene—replete with the sounds and sights of domestic life—extends organically from the utopic permissiveness and beauty of the preceding two hours, even as it offers a visual and thematic rebuke. Saturated with shades of gray, white, and blue, the scene feels tonally dissimilar from the rest of the film, but functions logically as the ending point for Guadagnino’s narrative, which frames Elio and Oliver’s relationship as bounded by time and space. Bereft of Oliver, and with the information that he will marry someone else, what Elio retains is a surplus of affect; the tragedy of ending and parting comes to bear
upon his present. The scene is both melodramatic—in the sense of its extremely heightened display of melancholy affect, in its outpouring of tears—even as it hews closely to a kind of vérité realism: Elio does not scream or yell or draw attention to his affective performance, but instead sits quietly, introspectively.45 Devoid of dialogue or narration, the viewer must sit with and interpret Elio’s emotive stare in real time. The film ends with Elio’s name being called—by his mother—a moment of recognition, a moment of return to the normality of daily life. Affective extravagance in the form of deep tragedy: this is the final note of Guadagnino’s wildly popular film. While both Aciman and Guadagnino are complicit in producing nostalgic and historically-whitewashed visions of gay experience in the 1980s, perhaps Guadagnino’s ending—the melancholic—constitutes a slightly wider aperture, invoking a point of view which leaves the film’s audience contemplating impossibility.

The original source narrative—Aciman’s novel—includes Elio’s telephone call with Oliver, but concludes much later. In its final section (titled “Ghost Spots”), the novel leaps forward to the future multiple times, tracking the sporadic visits and communications between its protagonists. Fifteen years after the summer they met, Elio visits Oliver—a professor—at his (unnamed) university in New England. “I remember good things only,” Elio tells Oliver, remarking only to himself, “I had heard people say this in the movies. They seemed to believe it” (233). Put next to Guadagnino’s film,

45 Although he write specifically of mid-twentieth century films, Tom Lutz suggests that “the flashpoint for tears in melodramatic films is always an image of role fulfillment,” that tears signify “the character’s recovery of his or her proper social role after an exciting foray into social disruption” (186). Such a reading argues that masculinist melodrama is fundamentally conservative genre, but that this conservatism also performs a kind of social critique: “male roles sometimes demand contradictory behaviors and are always in flux… social disruption is consistently rearticulated as recovery, [which] normalizes social disruption even as it encourages social discipline” (189).
which remembers the good things, but not the good things only, Aciman’s narrative nostalgia becomes evident.

The final pages of the novel further enact the text’s oft-contradictory and frequently pluralizing ideas of time and space; retrospection and futurity jut against one another in the (shifting) present moment, accumulating over each other in an affective barrage. Oliver suggests that he and Elio were “two young men who found much happiness for a few weeks and lived the remainder of their lives dipping cotton swabs into that bowl of happiness, fearing they’d use it up, without daring to drink more than a thimbleful on ritual anniversaries” (237). Oliver proposes the past as a finite resource for future happiness—just as Elio, earlier in the novel, narrates himself as a “robber” of the present to prepare for future misery. Although Oliver stresses a fear of scarcity—that he and Elio would “use it up,” exhaust through overuse the memory of their summer together—Aciman’s novel purports the opposite: a surplus of temporal freedom, offering fleeting if perpetual moments to utopize, to San Clementize, the reality of the present moment. Consequently, for Elio, the past proves a site of (im)possibility:

[T]his thing that almost never was still beckons, I wanted to tell him. They can never undo it, never rewrite it, never relive it, or relive it—it’s just stuck there like a vision of fireflies on a summer field toward evening that keeps saying, You could have had this instead. But going back is false. Moving ahead is false. Looking the other way is false. Trying to redress all that is false turns out to be just as false. Their life is like a garbled echo buried for all time in a sealed Mithraic chamber. (238)

Elio claims that the past can never be undone, unwritten, unlived, or relived, even as the entire project of Call Me by Your Name seems to suggest the inverse: that the past
becomes a utopic site which critiques the present and visits the future.\textsuperscript{46} Through the mirage-like image of “fireflies on a summer field,” Elio centralizes transience and brevity, but he fails to reach a satisfactorily freeze the past as static and already-concluded. He declares that “going back,” “moving ahead,” and “[l]ooking the other way” all constitute falsity, wrong ways of being and enacting one’s desire. Elio attempts to dodge both retrospection and futurity, before qualifying that even this attempt “turns out to be just as false,” akin to a “garbled echo buried for all time.”

In contrast to Elio’s grim assessment of the temporal relationship between the realities and possibilities of queer desire, Oliver once again turns to multiplicity and excess: “Seeing you here is like waking up from a twenty-year coma… I prefer to call it a parallel life. It sounds better. Problem is that most of us have—live, that is—more than two parallel lives” (240). Conceptualizations of life throughout the novel run the gamut, from Professor Perlman’s stark reminder that there is only one life, to the narrative’s frequent mentions of other, parallel lives. Oliver’s declaration that he feels as if he has lived more than one life demonstrates the complicated relationship between selfhood and time. Constrained to one summer in the past, Elio and Oliver’s romance nevertheless comes to bear upon their futures in repeated and accumulative moments, each of which destabilizes the boundaries between conclusion and continuation, evincing the many possibilities of queer utopia. Oliver invites Elio to dinner at his house, with his family, but Elio fears the potential crisis of such an evening. Elio describes how “[o]ver the years I’d lodged [Oliver] in the permanent past, my pluperfect lover, put him on ice, stuffed him with memories and mothballs like a hunted ornament confabulating with the ghost of

\textsuperscript{46}Aciman further expands this revisionist temporality in \textit{Find Me}, when Elio’s boyfriend declares: “Fate works forward, backward, and crisscrosses sideways and couldn’t care less how we scan its purposes with our rickety little befores and afters” (134).
all my evenings” (233). In the face of a new present moment, Elio recognizes that he has relegated Oliver to the pluperfect, the past perfect, the realm of having been done, having been completed. Going to Oliver’s house and meeting his family would demarcate a radical present moment, an instance that would require Elio to reckon with the temporal gulf between past possibility and future potentiality; it would force a conclusive kind of realism:

as he’d pour the wine for his wife, for me, for himself, it would finally dawn on us both that he was more me than I had ever been myself, because when he became me and I became him in bed so many years ago, he was and would forever remain, long after every forked road in life had done its work, my brother, my friend, my father, my son, my husband, my lover, myself. In the weeks we’d been thrown together that summer, our lives had scarcely touched, but we had crossed to the other bank, where time stops and heaven reaches down to earth and gives us that ration of what is from birth divinely ours. But we’ve always known, and not saying anything now confirmed it all the more. We had found the stars, you and I. And this is given once only. (Aciman 244)

In this imagined (future) moment of convergence between past and present, the utopic and the real collide. Elio toggles between ideas of plurality and singularity, detailing the plethora of roles, actual and symbolic, which Oliver inhabits for him: “my brother, my friend, my father, my son, my husband, my lover, myself”—before qualifying that such multiplicity “is given once only.” Elio at last traces the confluence between himself and Oliver (“when he became me and I became him in bed so many years ago”), and establishes the residual perpetuity, the lingering aftereffects of “that summer [when] our lives had scarcely touched.” Together, Elio and Oliver reach the point of aporia, where “time stops and heaven reaches down to earth,” the utopic perfect-place and no-place which, in its limited accessibility, manifests in an occlusive but “real” world long after its achievement and dissolution.
In a last bout of unreality, *Call Me by Your Name* turns to the spectral as a way of metaphorizing the thematic and structural currents of time, space, and affective which qualify and attenuate its realist ends. Oliver returns to Italy after Elio visits him in New England, and his visit to the Perlmans’ villa closes the temporal and geographic gaps which for years occupied Elio’s imagination:

I’ll catch myself thinking that you’re in there, staring out from your world to my world, saying, as you did on that one night when I found you on the rock, *I’ve been happy here*. You’re thousands of miles away but no sooner do I look at this window than I’ll think of a bathing suit, a shirt thrown on the fly, arms resting on the banister, and you’re suddenly there, lighting up your first cigarette of the day—twenty years ago today. For as long as the house sands, this will be your ghost spot—and mine too, I wanted to say. (Aciman 247)

After two decades of phantasmagoric retrospection—false starts and imaginative reunions—at the moment of Oliver’s literal, actual return, Elio acknowledges that his home has become a mutual “ghost spot”—a point, an aporia beyond the confines of geography and years apart. After Elio tells Oliver of this “ghost spot,” he narrates to himself: “Tomorrow, I’ll think back on this moment and let the ghosts of their absence maunter in the twilit hour of the day” (247). Even in this moment of reunion, Elio looks to the future, perpetually looking beyond the moment to ensure its ensconcement within the larger arc of his life, able to furnish both present joy and future survival: “Twenty years was yesterday and yesterday was just earlier this morning, and morning seemed light-years away” (248). Time unfurls and then collapses in on itself, in perpetuity.

Aciman’s novel ends in much the same place it begins: retrospecting about a moment somewhere in Northern Italy, as two men attempt to discern their selves in relation to one another and the time they can spend together. Elio concludes with a plea to Oliver that is unverbalized, except to the reader:
If you remember everything, I wanted to say, and if you are really like me, then before you leave tomorrow, or when you’re just ready to shut the door of the taxi and have already said goodbye to everyone else and there’s not a thing left to say in this life, then, just this once, turn to me, even in jest, or as an afterthought, which would have meant everything to me when we were together, and, as you did back then, look me in the face, hold my gaze, and call me by your name (248).

In this one long, convoluted, multi-clausal sentence, Elio attempts to merge the realist and the utopic, to render the simultaneous impossibility and actuality of his relationship with Oliver. The same action narrated on the first page—Oliver’s arrival in a taxi—constitutes its end, and signifies the persistence of the past upon the present and future. In the imagined moment of aporia, death, “when there’s not a thing left to say in this life,” Elio turns to the imperative form of union, the titular structure of desire: “look me in the face, hold my gaze, and call me by your name” (248). This narrative—rewritten and re-imaged in Guadagnino’s film, and extended in Aciman’s 2019 sequel—suggests that time is both beside the point and the primal, final point. There is no future except this future, which cannot be except for in the present imagination, perpetually. Realism, for Elio and Oliver, is the perpetual delay of “later,” the aporia of retrospection, the unforeseen reunion, the ghost spot, the self-indulgently nostalgic. Call Me by Your Name refracts, over and over, the same questions of space, time, and feeling; its prismatic rendering of queer desire remains ambivalent but ever-continuing, melodramatic in its revelry of the melancholic. What are we to make of this queer novel of the early 2000s, and its concordant film of the late 2010s? Perhaps most of all, the idea that desire is ceaseless and real, that “time is always borrowed,” and that through such perpetuity, we can catch glimpses of utopia—which constitutes both its tragedy and its perfection, a warning against hopes for utopic salvation that never will be.
CHAPTER III

“[J]ust One More Thing”: A Little Life and Queer(ed) Naturalism

Sara Ahmed writes that “[e]very sad book has its moments, moments where it is all ‘too much,’ when a body, a life, a world becomes unbearable” (Promise of Happiness 97). Hanya Yanagihara’s sprawling second novel, A Little Life, certainly depicts many such moments over the course of its 800+ pages. Published to popular and critical acclaim in 2015, the novel depicts the titular, ironically un-“little” life of its protagonist, Jude St. Francis. Abandoned to the care of a monastery at birth, Jude suffers physical, sexual, and mental abuse at the hands of various men for the first fifteen years of his life, years that Jude later decides “have determined everything he has become and done” (Yanagihara 785). When one of his abusers, Dr. Traylor, runs him over with a car, Jude sustains lifelong injuries to his legs and back; he also learns from another of his main abusers, Brother Luke, a lifelong practice of self-harm. After medical and legal intervention, Jude gets a fresh start at life when he gains acceptance, on scholarship, to a prestigious, unnamed university. In college, Jude meets a coterie of male friends—Malcolm, JB, and Willem—whose lives the novel also traces. Post-college, Jude attends law school, where he meets professor and mentor Harold, who ultimately adopts Jude as his adult son. Jude becomes a successful litigator, Willem becomes a famous actor, JB becomes a prolific artist, and Malcolm a renowned architect. And yet, despite these upward trajectories, the novel remains steeped in naturalist tragedy, as Jude proves unable to overcome past currents of trauma and abuse. Split into seven sections, with frequent leaps back and forth in time, A Little Life depicts a world familiar to readers—roughly the past thirty years—even as it completely eschews any overt historical
references. Yanagihara’s narrative is thus both a near-encyclopedic narration of suffering and, simultaneously, an unspecific record of the larger currents within which its events take place. Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, the novel’s robust afterlife continues today on Instagram, where people post photos taken on Lispenard Street—the site of the novel’s beginning and ending, and the location of Jude and Willem’s first apartment together. The novel thus finds itself both well within the mainstream of the cultural zeitgeist, but also situated in the wake of seminal late-twentieth and twenty-first century debates about queer lives, the strictures of race and class, and about the possibilities of literary realism after postmodernity.

Christophe den Tandt suggests that realist texts are supposed to be “demystifying,” “validated by the communicational trust binding the community’s members” (418). den Tandt claims that literary naturalism, on the other hand, constitutes a “breach of realist cognitive trust” (418). Traditionally periodized as a literary “movement occurring between 1890 and 1915,” literary naturalism focuses “on deterministic depictions of humanity as the passive pawns of an indifferent world,” according to Keith Newlin (3). For Newlin, the naturalist novel is “primarily a novel of ideas,” often conceived of as “a version of realism, as a genre that grafts realistic detail onto a necessitarian ideology” (5). While realism “typically ‘observes’ life, depicting the details of the commonplace without overt moralizing or authorial commentary,” naturalism “expresses a melodramatic vision of human beings at the mercy of forces over which they have little control” (10, 15). As Emile Zola suggests, naturalists “experiment on man [sic] take apart and put together the human machine piece by piece in order to
make it function under the influence of environment” (177). Hanya Yanagihara herself has expressed a similar notion in an interview with The Believer literary magazine:

I wanted to write something big, something excessive: something extravagant and self-indulgent and large of emotion and feeling…. I wanted to marry two unlikely forms—the fairy tale and the contemporary naturalistic novel—but I also wanted there to be something operatic about the book, in both its structure and its celebration of melodrama. I sometimes think we need to be reminded of violence at its most visceral and explicit: it exists, after all, and there should be no sense that its detailing is not a subject for serious literature.

Yanagihara’s intentions when writing A Little Life illuminate the ways in which naturalism (a certain kind of contemporary realism) operates on a grander scale, with its own agenda: not only to depict life, but to depict “violence at its most visceral and explicit” because, “it exists, after all.” Yanagihara’s connection of melodrama to this excavation of violence recalls Jörg Metelmann’s assertion that melodrama “is one of the most prominent discourses of victimhood in Western modernity,” that “[i]ts worldview focuses on the emotional suffering of a victim, conceived as virtuous and subjected to forces of evil, who can be rescued by forces of good” (185). Keith Newlin argues that distinctions between naturalism and realism—“through the inclusion of sensational effects, sentimental scenes, stilted dialogue”—make it possible to read naturalism “as a version of melodrama.” Nuanced realism, aggrandized naturalism, violent melodrama, and the magic of the fairy tale: these genres pulse throughout Yanagihara’s novel, in response to what she terms “a literary age (at least in America) that is marked by a sense of distance, a coolness” (Believer). Yanagihara locates such coolness in a quote from the late David Foster Wallace, who suggested: “The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the ‘Oh, how banal.’ To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of
overcredulity. Of softness” (*Believer*). Wallace’s suggestion—essentially, the need for a new realism, predicated on risk—not only preconfigures Yanagihara’s novel, but points to a perhaps cyclical question about the genre: What kinds of affects, experiences, and plots are “real”? These questions of representing reality also remain predicated upon affect; once more, plausibility and realism hinge upon people enduring what seems endurable, upon the feelings that underpin experience. Indeed, Lauren Berlant argues that “[a]ny account of realism requires an account of affect” (52). On the other hand, writing against what she terms the “affective hypothesis,” or the idea that “literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience,” Rachel Greenwald Smith critiques James Wood’s celebration of “novels that tell us not ‘how the world works’ but ‘how somebody felt about something’” (1, 11). For Smith, this “reinforcement of the affective hypothesis” in turn “reinforces neoliberal subjective norms” (11). Smith argues that novels should deploy instead what she terms the “impersonal,” a mode which does not “allow for strategic emotional associations to be made between readers and characters” (2). Smith’s critique starkly counters Yanagihara’s explicit desire to write a novel “self-indulgent and large of emotion and feeling,” and points to yet another division point among contemporary critics of realism, and also of contemporary queer theorists: the role of affect. Straddling literary theory and queer theory, Heather Love writes that “tragic, tear-soaked accounts of same-sex desire compel readers in a way that brighter stories of liberation do not” (3). Love examines what she calls “backward feelings—shame, depression, and regret,” affects that circulate prominently throughout Yanagihara’s novel (4). The utility of affect, its imbrication
within ideological and subjective discourses, and its working out in the contemporary novel: these are the sites of tension at play in *A Little Life*, intensified by the narrative’s relentless depiction of queer lives, and its own queered narrative structure.

Garth Greenwell describes *A Little Life* as “the most ambitious chronicle of the social and emotional lives of gay men to have emerged for many years” (*Atlantic*).\(^{47}\) Beyond its centralization of gay male experiences, however, *A Little Life* plots and dramatizes many of the objects of debate in queer theory of the past twenty years, writ large: affect, temporality, possibility, and failure. The two extreme positions related to what critics describe as the “anti-social” turn in queer studies might be glimpsed in Yanagihara’s novel: On the one hand, an anti-futurist embrace of near nihilism, as avowed by Lee Edelman, and on the other, a call to affective restructuring in the form of queer optimism, as Michael Snediker suggests. For queers, Edelman argues, “there can be no future… chosen as they are to bear the bad tidings that there can be no future at all” (30).\(^{48}\) Representing antithetical perspectives on the role that futurity and possibility might and should play in shaping the metanarratives of queer life, Edelman and Snediker both ask a similar question: What is the “reality” of contemporary queerness, and where might it be headed? For José Muñoz, “antirelational approaches to queer theory”—such as Edelman’s— “are romances of the negative, wishful thinking” (*Cruising* 11). Muñoz views queerness as a “utopian formation… based on an economy of desire and desiring… always directed at that thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with

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\(^{47}\) Given the relatively recent publication of *A Little Life* and the general dearth of discussions of the novel by literary critics, I occasionally turn towards reviews and popular assessments of the novel to engage in a more robust conversation about contemporary fiction.

\(^{48}\) Angela Jones reads beyond the polemical qualities of Edelman’s *No Future* to suggest that “[t]he problem with Edelman is that in all of his nihilism he is optimistic” (10). Jones draws on Foucault (whom, she notes, is absent from *No Future*) to suggest that “we can understand that what we might call the ‘hope for resistance’ is an inevitable part of the human condition” (10).
anticipation and promise” (*Cruising* 26). Consequently, for Muñoz, “[t]he present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers,” and that it “must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds” (*Cruising* 27). Nishant Shahani writes that a “return to a traumatic past” might offer a “reparative critique” (46). Reparative looking-back (perhaps akin to the “backward feelings” about which Heather Love writes) finds in Shahani the term “reetrosexuality.” For Shahani, a reetrosexual perspective inextricably links the past and the future, as “the very act of turning back refuses any sense of futurity without a consideration of the constraints of the past” (15). The aim of this project, Shahani suggests, is “mobilizing a politics of shame in reparative directions” (18). Representation, not reparation, is the aim of realism. Existing within the larger genre of realism, a naturalist novel such as Yanagihara’s, however, deploys a more liberal assertion of the ideas and affects which shape its characters’ lives.49

While much of *A Little Life*’s narrative is preoccupied with these questions of naturalist determinism and utopic deviations from the abject, so too is Yanagihara’s text ensnared within questions of queer failure. Jack Halberstam writes that “radical utopians continue to search for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subject” (2). But for Halberstam, such projects often fail—and this does not disqualify them from being generative. Halberstam writes that “failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior,” that “there are definite advantages to failing,” (*Queer Art of Failure* 49).
For Halberstam, failure constitutes itself as “a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit,” functioning as “a counterhegemonic discourse of losing” (Queer Art 11-12). Halberstam does not posit failure as wholly positive—acknowledging “darker forms of failure,” noting it as a kind of “unbecoming” and “unbeing,” but he stresses the ways in which failing offers up new vantage points for understanding the oppressive machinations of normative life (Queer Art 24, 23). Halberstam’s notions of failure also offer an alternate understanding for the always-already failing project of the queer utopia, which, by definition, must always be bound and strinctured by time and space, stranded along the lines of past and present. If the utopia—definitionally, categorically—seems doomed to fail, then this failure emerges as another point in common with realism, which also must fail in that any mimetic rendering will never be that which it copies. Yanagihara’s novel is full of many failures—its characters fail repeatedly in their actions and words, and, more often than not, their naturalistically determined circumstances fail them. But it is also full of utopic hope, a perpetual striving to rework the past and secure a more possible present.

When read against the backdrop of these recent critical debates, A Little Life reveals the inextricability of the past and future, of reality and the possibilities of its literary depiction, and the boundaries between utopian thinking and queer experience as it is lived and felt. The novel’s naturalist prose, its elliptical and erratic movements between past and narrative present, and its relentless focalization through Jude and his distressed, wounded subjectivity, taken together, offer a vision of gay existence filled with pain and trauma, culminating in a life whose very reality is taken to be utopic. In this post-postmodern novel, living life necessitates and constructs a kind of realism, but
one qualified by the exigencies of its insufficiency, one that must fail. For Yanagihara’s characters, racialized categories function as both sites of stricture and (dis)identification; identity becomes akin to what Paula Moya describes as the “complex and mediated way a multiply-situated and embodied human being looks out onto and interprets” the world” (28). One of the ways in which people are “multiply-situated and embodied,” Moya suggests, is through race, a “flexible interest of social distinction and economic control that works in geographically- and culturally-specific ways” (34). Glossing legal scholar Lani Guinier, Moya positions race as “foundational, [...] systemic, [...] and flexible” (32). So too does Yanagihara’s novel envision racial and ethnic identities as unfixed and nuanced, and, frequently, as sites of ambivalence for its characters. While each of the four men at the novel’s center at some point identify as gay (albeit reticently), their relationships to their own racial identities remain, in many cases, unresolved. Each character’s construction and elucidation of identity vacillates, never static or fixed. Both affective and temporal, this perpetual back-and-forth movement problematizes narrative structure, establishes the “present” as perpetually dynamic, and defamiliarizes the possibility of a stable, apprehendable reality. What is “real” changes wildly from paragraph to paragraph, as focalization shifts from character to character, and as the past overtakes the present.

50 Ramón Saldívar, glossing Moya, suggests that “views are changing from formerly held essentialist notions of biological races to more complex understandings of race as an element of human experience based on ancestral group characteristics, shaped by psychosocial patterns, and institutionalized into political and economic structures of inequality” (2). Saldívar consequently points to “the continuing importance of race as a category of analysis, racism as an undiminished fact of contemporary American life, and white supremacy as the unacknowledged ideology of our times” (2).
51 Tyler Bradway’s assertion of the “oscillation” between temporality and affect in relation to specifically queer literature (although he focuses on experimental, and not realist, textuality), offers a useful conceptual tool for staging these kinds of questions.
“[A]n Identity to Inhabit”: Racial and Sexual Disidentifications

A Little Life’s opening pages introduce this understanding of individual and collective identity. The first scene depicts Jude and Willem touring the apartment where they will live as friends and roommates—prefiguring the apartments they later rent together, as lovers. The novel asserts that it “was natural that [Jude] would live with Willem; they had been roommates throughout college,” where “Malcolm and JB had shared one of the [dormitory] units” and “Jude and Willem had shared the other” (7). This expository scene also introduces the novel’s depictions of complex identity structures:

“It’s blacks versus whites,” JB would say. “Jude’s not white,” Willem would respond. “And I’m not black,” Malcolm would add, more to annoy JB than because he believed it. “Well,” JB said now…. “I’d say you could both stay with me, but I think you’d fucking hate it.” JB lived in a massive, filthy loft in Little Italy, full of strange hallways that led to unused, oddly shaped cul-de-sacs and unfinished half rooms, the Sheetrock abandoned mid-construction, which belonged to another person they knew from college. (Yanagihara 7-8)

Through JB’s hyperbolic exaggeration of this roommate arrangement as “blacks versus whites,” and Willem’s subsequent clarification that Jude is “not white,” and through Malcolm’s disidentification with blackness in favor of his biracial identity, the novel both foregrounds and undercuts its own constructions of racialized identity. Each character signals the novel’s wry but ambivalent approach towards racialized identity: Willem’s parents immigrated to the United States from Sweden; JB is the son of first- and a second-generation Haitian Americans; Malcolm’s father is black and his mother is white; Jude, devoid of any knowledge of his parentage, abandoned to the care of a monastery at birth, remains racially ambiguous. Given the novel’s naturalist preoccupations with individual agency in relation to larger (often totalizing) systems, race
functions as a site of individual and collective mediation which never coalesces into a larger metanarrative.

Malcolm struggles to assess his own identity, attempting to plot it along intersecting lines of race and sexuality. For Malcolm, “race seemed less and less a defining characteristic when one was six years out of college, and those people who still nursed it as the core of their identity came across as somehow childish and faintly pathetic... At his age, the only truly important aspects of one's identity were sexual prowess; professional accomplishments; and money” (Yanagihara 71). Malcolm pejoratively associates the sustained interrogation and focus on one’s racial identity as “childish and faintly pathetic,” locating such self-inquiries temporally (“[A]t his age”; “six years out of college”). Instead of identitarian projects, Malcolm centralizes various pursuits of pleasure and currency: “sexual prowess; professional accomplishments; and money.” And yet, despite his late-capitalist preoccupation with earning and spending and pleasure, and even as Malcolm considers himself beyond the age at which identity might be investigated, he:

still didn't know to whom he might be attracted. He often thought that being gay (as much as he also couldn't stand the thought of it; somehow it, like race, seemed the province of college, an identity to inhabit for a period before maturing to more proper and practical realms) was attractive mostly for its accompanying accessories, its collection of political opinions and causes and its embrace of aesthetics. He was missing, it seemed, the sense of victimization and woundedness and perpetual anger it took to be black, but he was certain he possessed the interests that would be required if he were gay. He fancied himself already have in love with Willem, and at various points in love with Jude too. (Yanagihara 73)

Just as he envisions racial identity as “the province of college,” so too does Malcolm attempt to brush away the unknown realities of his sexuality. While he will eventually claim heterosexuality, and find partnership with a woman, Malcolm associates queer
identity as primarily” aesthetic,” an “attractive” orientation with “accompanying accessories” and “political opinions.” Malcolm erases any possible ramifications of homophobia in his reductive conceptualization of homosexuality. Gay male identity functions both for Malcolm as something juvenile (“an identity to inhabit for a period”) and as a somehow easier (and exclusive) category of identity than race. For Malcolm, black identity involves a “sense of victimization and woundedness and perpetual anger.” Malcolm constructs intersecting and coextant ways of being (race, sexuality) as independent and exclusive from one another, and, in so doing, struggles to cohere his self-perception. Malcolm’s ambivalence towards these connected categories gestures towards what Robert Reid-Pharr calls “the disarticulation of identity”: Reid-Pharr also argues that “great joy of living in the modern world is the recognition that all processes of naming, all names (black, gay, man) are ultimately monuments to the impossibility of ever fully distinguishing self from other” (2, 12). Even as Malcolm’s identitarian assessments invite scrutiny and remain problematized, they also make apparent what Molly McKibbin describes as “the nature of racial classification as a social practice”; his thoughts “avoid the idea that race is inherent or ascribed with certainty, and signal that ‘identity’ is something that can take many forms, originate from various sources, and be altered” (5). McKibbin argues that “[t]hose claiming multiracial identity are faced with a more receptive audience in the contemporary era than ever before—an American public more likely to observe an individual’s freedom to self-identify and respect unconventional racialization than in the past” (19). Malcolm’s introspection signals yoked concerns: racial and sexual identity, participation in the larger economic and social
world, and the possibilities of signifying and creating markers of one’s life and self which endure beyond the body.

One of Malcolm’s— and the novel’s— primary concerns is the idea of imaginative possibility. While Malcolm, an architect, eventually finds success and renown, designing large commercial projects as well as homes for Jude and Willem, in his early career he feels besieged by the impossibilities of creation. Rather than locating his identity in himself, Malcolm does so in the process of designing and constructing physical structures:

[O]verything he was unable to articulate, everything he was unable to decide, he could, it seemed, resolve in a building. And in an essential way, this was what he was most ashamed of: not his poor understanding of sex, not his traitorous racial tendencies, not his inability to separate himself from his parents or make his own money or behave like an autonomous creature. It was that, when he and his colleagues sat there at night... all of them drawing and planning their improbable buildings, he was doing nothing. He had lost the ability to imagine anything.... He longed for the years when it was enough to simply be in his room with his hand moving over a piece of graph paper, before the years of decisions and identities, when his parents made his choices for him, and the only thing he had to concentrate on was the clean blade stroke of a line, the ruler's perfect knife edge. (Yanagihara 75)

Race and sexuality fail, for Malcolm, to “articulate” and “decide” the structures and questions of his life. He conceives of his self-knowledge in negative ways: “his poor understanding of sex,” “his traitorous racial tendencies,” and positions himself as a failed capitalist, pinpointing his “inability to…. Make his own money or behave like an autonomous creature.” The naturalist strategies at work in Yanagihara’s novel become evident here, as Malcolm strains against the external and internalized delimitations of possibility; he yearns for a pre-time, “before the years of decisions and identities,” a time marked only by the imaginative and expansive possibilities of a “hand moving over a piece of graph paper.” Balanced as he is on “the ruler’s perfect knife edge” of various
identitarian, economic, and social forces, Malcolm also dramatizes Robert Reid-Pharr’s notion that “black gay men represent in modern American literature the reality that there is no normal blackness, no normal masculinity to which the black subject, American or otherwise, might refer” (103).

Race thus functions in A Little Life as a complicated mechanism of identity, yoked to the novel’s larger preoccupation with temporality, and the possibilities available in past, present, and future. After Malcolm “discover[s] postmodernism,” JB critiques his ideological understandings of race: “You can’t just decide you’re post-black, Malcolm,” JB had said. “And also: you have to have actually been black to begin with in order to move beyond blackness” (107). JB locates race both outside the reach of Malcolm’s individual decision, but also along temporally-marked lines. During their college years, JB grows frustrated with Jude’s complete unwillingness to disclose his past, and so he declares that Jude must be “[p]ost-sexual, post-racial, post-identity, post-past,” leading him to classify Jude as the “Post-man. Jude the Postman” (107). JB’s hyperbolic classifications, made in cruel jest, locate Jude in a temporal context after the formation of recognizable identities. JB fixates on knowability, on the possibilities of perception and categorization: “we never see him with anyone, we don’t know what race he is, we don’t know anything about him” (emphasis added). Seeing and knowing are fallible and partial modes of perception, and yet it is within these processes of discernment that JB locates the “normal terms of identity.” JB yokes normality with ease of perception, and, in so doing, catapults Jude beyond the knowable. In this way, Jude becomes the kind of victimized “cipher” which Jörg Metelmann argues is central to the melodramatic, because such figures “mak[e] the world ethically readable once again” (185). But part of what
frustrates JB is Jude’s unknowability, and so Jude is cast even beyond temporality:
“[p]ost-sexual, post-racial, post-identity, post-past… post-man.” The syntactical anaphora
that JB deploys (post-, post-, post-, post-, post-, post-) matches thematically the cruel
fervor with which he pursues his line of inquiry into Jude’s ambiguous present and past.
Ramón Saldívar argues that “postrace aesthetics” are at work in contemporary American
fiction, distinguished by their connection to the aesthetics of postmodernity, a mixing of
generic forms, an exploration of twenty-first century racial thematics, and imbrication
within what Saldívar terms “speculative realism” (5). For Saldívar, “[s]peculative realism
as the mode of a ‘postrace’ aesthetic indicates desires for forms of representation that will
validate our utopian desires for kinds of social belonging,” a “symbolic way of linking
the realm of public political life to the mysterious workings of the heart’s fantastic
aspirations for substantive justice” (15). This speculative realism is a “hybrid fantasy,”
but “not simply gratuitous, nor merely virtual,” but instead “quintessentially postmagical,
post-postmodern, and postracial” (15). Saldívar’s notion of postracial realism offers a
larger framework for understanding JB’s emphasis on the “post-”ness of Jude’s identity,
within the larger context of contemporary American literary realism. JB’s classification
of Jude as the “Postman,” like his comment about “blacks versus whites,” relies upon an
edgily provocative humor which stages anxieties about the temporal fixity of identities.
Another such instance occurs in JB’s performance art project, Decide to Boycott White
People (After Lee Lozano), wherein he “stopped talking to all white people… and would
reduce his conversational output with Malcolm by a half;” and, “[b]ecause Jude’s race
was undetermined, he would continue speaking to him, but would only do so in riddles or

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52 Saldívar deploys the notion of “postrace” aesthetics “under erasure and with full ironic force” to “identify
the historical contradictions in the justification of racial injustice, discrimination, and oppression in terms
that can then be related to the form and language of the literary text” (2).
Zen koans, in recognition of the unknowability of his ethnic origins” (68). Knowability and perception become sites of (often humorous, parodic, and ironized) sites of dissonance, revealing the ever-bounded field of agency available in the naturalist novel, in the fairy tale, in the utopia.

While JB’s mockery of Jude’s unknowability signals a temporal rupture within the novel, his relationship to his own past and present identity relies upon a similar fluidity. JB—whose unabbreviated name is Jean-Baptiste Marion—is the son of a father “who had emigrated to New York from Haiti, [and who] had died when JB was three,” and a mother who “was a second-generation Haitian American” (17). JB feels disconnected from the past—his fatherlessness and his Haitian ancestry—but performs a closeness in his present as a means of shoring up his identity:

In high school, where a bit of revisionism seemed necessary in order to distinguish himself and, especially, make his rich white classmates uncomfortable, he blurred the truth of his circumstances somewhat: He became another fatherless black boy, with a mother who had completed school only after he was born (he neglected to mention that it was graduate school she had been completing, and so people assumed that he meant high school), and an aunt who walked the streets (again, they assumed as a prostitute, not realizing he meant as a detective. (Yanagihara 17)

Whereas JB obsessively attempts to undermine Jude’s unknowability, to solidify his processes of perception as they relate to Jude, he safeguards against the excavation of his own identity by offering a mediated version, a “bit of revisionism.” This tension between actuality and its representation signals the many ways in which A Little Life muddles the waters of identity and possibility.

53JB’s performative reconstruction of his identity recalls Nick’s class performativity in The Line of Beauty; that is, both characters’ actions foreground the ways in which constitutive speech functions to reveal the contextual and shifting possibilities of identity.
Cognizant of the power of others’ assumptions, JB remains keenly attuned to the possibilities afforded by “blurring the truth,” even as such muddling also produces tension. As he rides the subway on the way to his rented art studio, JB observes Haitians onboard the train: “He’d watch that kind light suffuse the car like syrup, watch it smudge furrows from foreheads, slick gray hairs into gold, gentle the aggressive shine from cheap fabrics into something lustrous and fine” (31). This transformation, however, remains transient: “And then the sun would drift, and the world would return to its normal sad shapes and colors, and people to their normal sad state, a shift as cruel and abrupt as if it had been made by a sorcerer’s wand” (31). Yanagihara’s naturalist prose presents the world, through JB’s eyes, as a kaleidoscopic mirage ultimately underpinned by “normal sad shapes and colors.” JB rebukes Jude for being beyond the parameters of “the normal terms of identity,” but then equates normality with sadness, presenting everyday life as irreducibly sad (107). This sense of disconnect persists as JB continues to observe the Haitians on the subway: “He liked to pretend he was one of them, but he knew he was not” (31). Once more, JB alternates between imagined reality and actuality: “Did real Haitians have studio space? Would it even occur to real Haitians to leave their large rent-free apartment… only to get on a subway and travel half an hour to a sunny dirty space? No, of course not. To conceive of such a luxury, you need an American mind” (32). Real and un-real become the categories JB uses to demarcate his relation to the Haitians he sees, and also, the main point of elision point for his works of art (and, for that matter, Yanagihara’s own novel).

The novel thus positions JB as both a documentarian and interpreter of life: incisive perception (often exaggerated, like the naturalist project) becomes his
characterological hallmark. JB attributes his artistic prowess, in part, to his powers of perceiving the world around him and translating its form: “He had known people—he knew people—who were, technically, much better artists than he was…. But they didn’t have any ideas. An artist, as much as a writer or composer, needed themes, needed ideas” (38). The ideas that captivate JB are those of everyday life, scenes of his friends’ lives, those rendered throughout the novel. He attends a party with the sole purpose of observance: “Tonight, I am a camera, he told himself, and tomorrow I will be JB again” (39). JB’s declaration—“I am a camera”—both explicitly references John Van Druten’s 1951 play of the same name, itself based on Christopher Isherwood’s 1939 novel Goodbye to Berlin, and centralizes the slippage between self and observance. JB dislocates himself from his powers of perception; he equates himself with the actual camera that he holds in his hands, ready to document the night’s quotidian happenings so that he might later interpret and formalize them in his art. JB “enjoyed the godlike role he played. He got to see his friends differently, not just as appendages to his life but as distinct characters inhabiting their own stories” (40-41). JB’s observance of others thus functions as both self-aggrandizing and self-diminishing; the novel suggests that perception of others requires some level of exteriority, even as it remains a process fundamentally inextricable from one’s own subjectivity. “Truth” and its interpretation—of self, of other, of the world—thus become “blurred” sites of artistic mediation in A Little Life, bearing upon ideas of race, sexuality, and naturalism.

“[S]tupid Hope”: Cruel Optimism, Cruel Naturalism

At various points, the narration moves into Jude’s past, to his upbringing at the monastery in South Dakota. One of the Brothers, Michael, tells Jude: “You came, and
you’re here now, and you should concentrate on your future, and not on the past” (166). Michael’s teleological directive—that Jude, in his present, should focus on the future—functions metonymically, a stand-in for the exigencies of straight time, predicated upon the possibility of a future. But the novel immediately undercuts such possibility, as the Brothers “had created the past for him…. Everything he had—his name, his birthday (itself an estimate), his shelter, his very life—was because of them” (166). Bereft of concrete knowledge about his origins, about himself, Jude becomes fictionalized in more ways than one; layers of meta-characterization ensconce him, and precipitate a youthful identity crisis, intensified by the physical and sexual abuse the Brothers also inflict upon him. These issues persist: “As an adult, he became obsessed in spells with trying to identify the exact moment in which things had started going so wrong, as if he could freeze it, preserve it in agar, hold it up and teach it before a class” (175). JB describes Jude as someone beyond the confines of identity, but identity functions as Jude’s idealized fetish, a slippery signifier of a selfhood that can be apprehended permanently. Jude objectifies his fragmented past, wishing he could “preserve it in agar,” “hold it up” to show to others. These tensions—between Jude’s past and his future, played out in his perpetually troubled narrative present—circulate throughout the novel and mark him as both the subject and object of utopic possibility and ceaseless self-negation, entangled within the unfair strictures of the naturalist project.

Although perhaps most widely remarked upon for its deep currents of abjection and trauma, central to A Little Life is the textual construction of optimism. Even when those around him—such as friend and personal physician Andy Contractor—interpret

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54 Laurie Vickroy suggests that “[t]rauma is located within a dynamic process of feeling, remembering, assimilating, or recovering” from an “even[t] so intense that [it has] impair[ed] emotional or cognitive functioning and may bring lasting psychological disruption” (131).
Jude’s constant acts of self-negation (his cutting) as indications of nihilism, Jude avers the opposite: “[b]ut what Andy never understood about him was this: he was an optimist. Every month, every week, he chose to open his eyes, to live another day in the world” (164). Optimism not only functions as a characterological trait, but as a narrative device that propels narrative, sustains life, and attains different registers of significance. Jude effects a kind of pure optimism immediately after sustaining the injury to his legs, a time wherein “it seemed that everything might be improved upon, and that his future self might be something bright and clean,” a time when “he knew so little but had such hope, and faith that his hope might one day be rewarded” (165). This disposition of Jude’s might also be categorized as what Lauren Berlant terms “cruel optimism,” a “relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic” (24). The cruelties of optimism emerge, Berlant argues, in the “condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (24). Jack Halberstam describes a “new kind of optimism” that does not “[r]ely upon positive thinking” or “insis[t] upon the bright side at all costs,” but which rather “produces shade and light in equal measures and knows that the meaning of one always depends upon the meaning of the other” (Queer Art 5). Jude seems to recognize the problematics of his optimism, for even as he chastises himself for “his arrogance and stupid hope” (681), he also reflects upon the utopic trajectory of his life:

Things had not just corrected themselves; they had reversed themselves, to an almost absurd degree. He had gone from nothing to an embarrassing bounty…. Sometimes it would seem like life had not just compensated for itself but had done so extravagantly, as if his very life was begging him to forgive it, as if it were piling riches upon him, smothering him in all things beautiful and wonderful
and hoped-for so he wouldn’t resent it, so he would allow it to keep moving forward. (635)

Yanagihara’s naturalist narration ceaselessly depicts Jude’s operation in the wide space between “nothing” and “embarrassing bounty,” foregrounding the ways in which his utopic hopes become actual and real. The central function of Jude’s optimism, even at its purest state, however, remains fundamentally teleological: “to keep moving forward.”

Forward movement is complicated not only by the novel’s fragmented temporal structuring, but also by the events that it depicts, and the affective valences they carry. Ascension and degradation, possibility and actuality—these twin threads perpetually undo one another in Yanagihara’s telling of a contemporary fairy tale. Jude’s narrative trajectory, post-childhood, signals upward ascent: he attends prestigious university after prestigious university, and secures a life for himself as a wealthy litigator in New York, where he “has nothing to fear. Now he has protected himself: he has this apartment with its triple-locked doors, and he has money. He has parents, he has friends. He will never again have to do anything he doesn’t want to for food, or transportation, or shelter or escape” (343). In contrast to his years of physical, mental, and sexual abuse, where all questions of his agency were removed from his consideration, Jude strives in his later years to control his life, to secure emotional and material comforts, to live in an environment of his own making. He attains fleeting but perfect moments:

The apartment — still impossible in its vastness and possibilities for potential — is silent, and his…. Nothing hurts, nothing even threatens to hurt: his body is his again, something that will perform for him whatever he can imagine…. He closes his eyes, not because he’s tired but because it is a perfect moment, and he knows how to enjoy them. These moments never last for long. (265)
But, even as Jude literally secures the bourgeois comfort of a beautiful apartment, its psychic resonances deteriorate into negative affect: “He often feels as if the apartment is a falsehood: it suggests that the person within it is someone open and vital, and generous with his answers, and he of course is not that person” (361). Jude’s apartment on Greene Street is the site of numerous instances of self-harm: cutting, self-immolation (441-42, 577-78). Before he and Willem become a couple, Jude’s apartment is also the site where Jude’s boyfriend, Caleb Porter, physically and sexually abuses him:

His beautiful apartment, he thinks, where he has always been safe…. This is happening to him in his beautiful apartment, surrounded by his beautiful things… His beautiful apartment, with its doors that lock, where he was meant to be protected from broken elevators and the degradation of pulling himself upstairs on his arms, where he was meant to always feel human and whole. (384-85)

Jude’s attempts to shape the world around him, to carve out a space of safety and security, counter the naturalist assumptions of an indifferent world wherein humans are simply “pawns.” His relentless categorization of his life as “beautiful” signals his desire to locate pleasure in the material, to construct a life not merely of survival but one marked by aesthetic significance.

This magic of utopia, however, transforms quickly into its darker impossibility as perfect places become no-places, sites of trauma and deterioration. During Caleb’s final act of unbelievable cruelty—kicking Jude down a flight of stairs in his apartment building—Jude “finds himself suspended in the air, between the ecstasy of being aloft and the anticipation of his landing, which he knows will be terrible,” he thinks of a mathematical principle, the axiom of equality, wherein “x will always equal x”; “The person I was will always be the person I am, he realizes” (386). Jude questions the possibility of transformation and change, even as the text’s plot stages these dynamisms
over and over. Jude moves from a childhood where he was not adopted to an adulthood where he is; from a childhood of abuse and pain to an adulthood of love, where his best friend becomes his lover. Yanagihara constructs a kind of naturalism, but it is a queer one, concerned with its own possibilities, preoccupied with the actual and the utopic in equal measure. Utopia fails, but it does so perpetually and multiply.

The central queer narrative of the novel—the evolution of Jude and Willem’s relationship—forms one of the many textual cruxes for the interplay between the utopic and the naturalist mode. From its outset, *A Little Life* frames Jude and Willem’s relationship as one of both affection and dependence, transcending easy classification: “[Willem’s] feelings for Jude were complicated. He loved him—that part was simple—and feared for him, and sometimes felt as much his older brother and protector as his friend” (22).\(^{55}\) Marked as heterosexually desirable and desiring throughout the majority of the novel, Willem nevertheless becomes closer and closer to Jude; his “complicated” feelings compound. The novel begins with Jude and Willem apartment hunting, prefiguring the much more organic and nuanced cohabitation that occurs midway through the text, when Willem wakes late after staying at Jude’s apartment, “noticing as if for the first time that somehow his books were now on Jude’s shelves, and the pieces of art he’d brought over were hanging on Jude’s walls. When had this happened? He couldn’t quite remember, but it felt right; it felt right that he should be back here” (489). Willem prioritizes two elements of this epiphany: its temporality and its affective qualities.

Unable to locate the exact moment “when” his material life merged with Jude’s, Willem

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\(^{55}\) Willem has a younger brother, Hemming, born with cerebral palsy; he dies when Willem is in college. When Willem perishes in a car accident near the end of the novel, “his final thoughts are not of Jude, but of Hemming” (712). The text presents both Jude and Hemming as existing under Willem’s homosocial protection.
experiences its affective euphoria: “it felt right.” His casual observation signals an ease and fluidity, an unproblematic and nonchalantly organic union between two men, between two male friends.

This relationship, however, morphs into a frictional Sedgwickian triangulation when it juts against Willem’s heterosexual relationships. Earlier in the novel, he and his then-girlfriend Philippa discuss their imaginary (utopic) future together. Philippa says their home will be “this huge, glorious wreck with termites everywhere, and we’ll have a huge, scarred wooden table big enough to seat all twelve of us” (283). Willem corrects her: “Thirteen…. Jude’ll be living with us, too” (283). Even in the midst of a heterosexual relationship, Willem remains unable to envision his life with Jude. Indeed, he sometimes wondered if he could ever love anyone as much as he loved Jude. It was the fact of him, of course, but also the utter comfort of life with him, of having someone who had known him for so long and who could be relied upon to always take him as exactly who he was on that particular day…. [H]is friendship with Jude made him feel that there was something real and immutable about who he was, that despite his life of guises, there was something that Jude even saw when he could not, as if Jude’s very witness of him made him real. (494)

Willem locates in Jude the litmus test of his love, utopizing and erasing the difficulties of their relationship, much of which is marked by Jude’s self-harm and deterioration of health. For Willem, Jude signals “utter comfort,” the product of both past (“having someone known him for so long”) and future (someone “who could be relied upon to always take him as exactly who he was on that particular day”). When cast against the performative transience of his profession—acting—Willem perceives an affective permanence in his relationship with Jude, “something real and immutable.” Being seen by Jude “made him real.” The novel yokes within homosocial and homoerotic union an
erasure of the division between self and other, offering a kind of queer reality unpredicated upon anything but the validation of union itself.\(^{56}\)

*A Little Life*’s construction of such a utopized union, however, becomes tempered through naturalist determination in the form of a finally-acknowledged cultural homophobia. When Willem tells his agent, Kit, about his relationship with Jude, Kit responds: “I *am* happy for you… I care about you. But have you thought about what’s going to happen to your career? Have you thought about how you’re going to be typecast? You don’t know what it’s like being a gay actor in this business” (532). Kit frames Willem’s relationship with Jude in terms of how it will alter Willem’s professional life as a “gay actor” who is perpetually “typecast.” Willem, on the other hand, reasserts an identitarian ambivalence: “I don’t really think of myself as gay,” though,” to which Kit replies, “Don’t be so naive, Willem… Once you’ve touched a dick, you’re gay” (532). Kit defines gay identity physically—through sexual touch—but also, temporally (“*Once* you’ve touched,” emphasis added); this retrospective categorization then becomes future-oriented: “I hope you like doing gay movies, Willem, because that’s what you might end up doing *for the rest of your life*” (533). Jude and Willem’s relationship thus functions both as a utopic queer union and as a temporally-marked formation whose future appears determined by its past.

“*[T]heir Own Type of Relationship*: Queered Homosociality

If much of the work of a naturalist novel is to demonstrate the ways in which individual actions jut up against—and are determined by—the larger machinations of the world, *A Little Life* also attenuates such agency and autonomy in relation to its

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\(^{56}\)The (lack of) division between self and other also surfaces prominently in André Aciman’s 2007 *Call Me by Your Name* in both title and novelistic content, and suggests a larger impulse in contemporary gay fictions about the ambivalent roles of perception and identity.
conceptions of sexuality. Kit also asks Willem if he and Jude plan to marry. This question presupposes the possibility of gay marriage, and offers an oblique clue into the historical setting of this section of the novel: at least sometime during or after 2004, when gay marriage first became legal in the United States, in Massachusetts, a state that features prominently in Yanagihara’s novel. Reading historicized and cultural actualities into Yanagihara’s novel allows for the recognition of what Lauren Berlant describes as the “affective contract” of all genres: “claiming that certain affects embed the historical in persons in ways that only the aesthetic situation could really capture” (66). For Berlant, as for Lukács, Jameson, and Anderson, whom she cites, the historical novel amplifies this role, functioning as “the aesthetic expression of an affective epistemology, an encounter with the historical present via the intensities of its tone” (64-65). Yanagihara’s novel, on the other hand, has been described by Garth Greenwell as “weirdly ahistorical”; nevertheless, it evinces such aesthetic and affective structures, even as they are veiled through layers of naturalist narration and through the generic reductions of the fairy tale. Coincidentally, A Little Life was published in 2015—the same year that the Obergefell v. Hodges decision made marriage equality the law of the land in the United States. These coterminous and coincidental discourses of contemporary gay sexuality converge and diverge from one another in their assessments of history, possibility, and futurity. On the one hand, gay marriage represents a signal legal victory, a watershed moment in American history, even as some queer theorists, such as José Muñoz, describe “being ordinary and being married” as “antiutopian wishes, desires that automatically rein themselves in, never daring to see or imagine the not-yet-conscious” (Cruising 21). Sara Ahmed similarly claims that “the question of gay marriage remains a political dilemma,”
arguing that “[a]ssimilation and transgression are not choices that are available to individuals, but are effects of how subjects can and cannot inhabit social norms and ideals” (Cultural Politics 151, 153). Ahmed’s reformulation of assimilation/transgression reveals the simultaneously agentic and non-agentic possibilities available to queer subjects, and offers a lens through which to read the conflicting impulses of Yanagihara’s Obama-era novel, wherein hope and its refutations occur on most every page. Willem and Jude do not marry, but they live together, and will all their possessions to the other; they exist in a liminal zone of queer representation and legality, forging their lives together as they see fit.

These glimmers of both utopian and antiutopian naturalism surface frequently in A Little Life. Willem’s discursive transformation from desiring subject to queer object occurs quickly: “with a single revelation, … [he] had now become a gay man; a gay actor”; then, he becomes “a high-profile traitorous gay actor,” after declining to come out publicly at a gala hosted by a gay rights organization (585). Willem argues that “he wouldn’t come out, because there wasn’t anything to come out of: he wasn’t gay,” to which his friend Max responds, “[Y]ou’re in a relationship, a serious relationship, with a man. That is the very definition of gay” (585). This definition—predicated upon serious monogamy—differs from the primarily sexual one offered by Kit, and yet both attempt to establish queer identity firmly within the apprehendable strictures of time, to locate bodies in relation to one another and in relation to the past, present, and future of their joint configuration. Willem, however, pushes back against this definition: “‘I’m not in a relationship with a man,’ he said, hearing how absurd the words were, ‘I’m in a relationship with Jude’” (585). Once again, the novel queers its own conception of
queerness, showcasing the divides between individual perception of self, sexuality, and affect, and those of one’s context. Ahmed suggests that queer feelings “are ‘affected’ by the repetition of the scripts that they fail to reproduce,” that they “may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of… uncertainty” (155). Perpetually wresting and losing the control to define and delimit the contours of existence—especially one’s queer existence—thus remains one of the novel’s main projects, but one entangled in the larger representative aesthetics of realism and the affective, temporal ones of utopia.

Jude and Willem’s relationship offers readers a simultaneously tragic and hopeful vision of contemporary gay lives: a utopic story of loyalty and intimacy, told through the screen of irreparable trauma and disconsolate sadness. Whereas much of Willem’s life as a high-profile actor externalizes his sexuality (as he does, indeed, take on more gay roles: Alan Turing, Rudolf Nureyev), Jude remains conflicted, caught in the interior experiences of his previous sexual trauma. Jude and Willem are sexually active in the beginning of their relationship, but Jude later decides that never wishes to engage in sexual intercourse again. Their physical intimacy dredges up for Jude the fact of “how much he had been surrounded by [sex] all these years, and how completely he had managed to banish thoughts of it from his waking life” (549). Jude’s banishment of sexuality—and its reemergence as the main problem in the otherwise happiest relationship of his life—demonstrates the narrative, thematic, and generic stakes of the novel, as utopia, queer sexuality, and the “real” converge at the nexus of possibility and actuality. Fredric Jameson argues that the “Utopian remedy must at first be a fundamentally negative one, as “miseries and injustices… must seem to shape and
organize themselves around one specific ill or wrong” (12). Jameson writes of historical and collective Utopias, but his comments bear upon the individual; he suggests that “it is a mistake to approach Utopias with positive expectations, as though they offered visions of happy worlds, spaces of fulfillment and cooperation,” which Jameson instead ascribes to “the idyll or the pastoral” (12). This misinterpretation of Utopia, according to Jameson, stems from general “liberal political theory,” formally mistaken for offering “blueprints for bourgeois comfort” (12). Jude’s aims—and, indeed, those of the novel—localize the (queer) utopic within “bourgeois comfort.” And yet the objects of his happiness thwart one another: to not have sex, to make Willem happy. Negation multiplies: the removal of sex is replaced with the addition of sex, beset by intensified episodes of self-harm: “in compensation for the sex, there is the cutting, which he has been doing more and more: to help ease the feelings of shame, and to rebuke himself for his feelings of resentment” (553). Jude chastises himself: “Other people are proud of their boyfriends’ talents or looks or athleticism; Willem, however, gets to be proud that his boyfriend has managed to pass another night without slicing himself with a razor” (573). The novel thus stages its most prominent queer relationship as one perpetually beset by trauma and pain, predicated upon utopic negations which spiral into naturalist determinism.

While Jude is temporarily able to diminish or, at times, even cease cutting himself, he always returns to the practice—to Willem’s perpetual distress, and to his own amplified horror. Jude eventually stops having sex with Willem, and they open up their relationship so that Willem can do so with other people, all of whom are women. Willem struggles to find an accurate descriptor of his relationship with Jude: “The word ‘friend’ was so vague, so undescriptive and unsatisfying…. And so they had chosen another,
more familiar form of relationship, one that hadn’t worked. But now they were inventing
their own type of relationship, one that wasn’t officially recognized by history or
immortalized in poetry or song, but which felt truer and less constraining” (645). This
movement from friend to lover traverses the bounds of heterosexuality and
homosexuality, and remains based on the affective experience of feeling “truer and less
constraining.” Jude and Willem’s relationship also recalls the questions Michel Foucault
asks, in an April 1981 interview with Gai pied: “[H]ow is it possible for men to be
together? To live together, to share their time, their meals, their room, their leisure, their
grief, their knowledge, their confidences? What is it to be ‘naked’ among men, outside of
institutional relations, family, profession, and obligatory camaraderie?” (136).57 Pushing
against the recognized authorities of history and precedent, Jude and Willem forge a
decidedly queer relationship, one which softens the corrosive and unyielding force of
naturalist determinism. The novel frames Jude and Willem’s relationship in terms of its
perpetually qualified possibility: “Both of them were uncertain; both of them were trying
as much as they could; both of them would doubt themselves, would progress and recede.
But they would both keep trying, because they trusted the other, and because the other
person was the only other person who would ever be worth such hardships, such
difficulties, such insecurities and exposure” (530-31). Progression and return: the
oscillating movements that define Jude and Willem’s relationship, but also Yanagihara’s

57David Velasco glosses this interview of Foucault’s in the December 2019 issue of Artforum as a means of
eulogizing Douglas Crimp: “Foucault told the French magazine Gai pied that we ‘have to invent, from A to
Z, a relationship that is still formless, which is friendship: that is to say, the sum of everything through
which [we] can give each other pleasure.’” Velasco writes that “[k]eeping each other alive is our most
important, most impossible, task,” which bears upon my reading of the kinds of homosocialities that
emerge throughout A Little Life.
larger project, predicated on trust in the future, akin to Ihab Hassan’s assertion of the fiduciary quality of post-postmodern life.

“[T]he Stuff of Stories”: Queer Endings and Recursive Utopia

In the queer utopia, Muñoz writes, “[h]ope and disappointment operate within a dialectical tension” (Cruising 155). The deterioration and perpetual renewal of Jude’s optimism functions in a dialectically-similar fashion that interrupts optimistic teleology—and one in which failure recurs and regenerates. The narrative structure of A Little Life becomes a constant movement between past trauma and future possibility, a movement that also operates generically at the boundaries between (queer) utopia and lived reality.

Willem notes simultaneously the implausibility and actuality of their lives:

Wasn't it a miracle to have survived the unsurvivable? Wasn't friendship its own miracle, the finding of another person who made the entire lonely world seem somehow less lonely? Wasn't this house, this beauty, this comfort, this life a miracle? And so who could blame him for hoping for one more, for hoping that despite knowing better, that despite biology, and time, and history, that they would be the exception, that what happened to other people with Jude's sort of injury wouldn't happen to him, that even with all that Jude had overcome, he might overcome just one more thing? (650)

Willem invokes the language of miracle to describe success; he retroactively utopizes the actuality of his and Jude’s existence together, retrofitting impossibility into possibility. “Having survived” the past becomes the hopeful indication of “overcom[ing] just one more thing” in the future. “Just one more thing” also signifies the scene-by-scene narrative propulsion of Yanagihara’s novel, as “one more” instance of trauma or violence is beset by “one more” glimmer of future potentiality. Hope juts against “biology, and time, and history” to suggest the extension of present miracles in perpetuity.

This fluid vacillation between past, present, and future, however, also becomes the site of delimitation for utopic possibility. If having survived the past might indicate
the capacity of surviving in the future, so also must the incidence of past trauma
demonstrate its potential for recurrence. After the amputation of his legs, and Willem’s
sudden death in a car accident, the utopic and the abject elements of Jude’s life collapse
into one-and-the-same: “his only pleasure is thoughts of Willem, and yet those same
thoughts are also his greatest source of sorrow”; “If he doesn’t cut himself, he remains
numb, and he needs to remain numb…. He has finally managed to achieve what Willem
has always hoped for him; all it took was Willem being taken from him” (763; 728).58
Rather than continued engagement with the present as a means of slowly sustaining a
teleology of future-oriented hope, Jude begins to find hope and trauma in equal measure,
and only in the past: through ghostly delusions of Willem and of his past abusers. Bereft
of the capacity to imagine the future, Jude utopizes the possibility of significance in life:
“It had always seemed to him a very plush kind of problem, a privilege, really, to
consider whether life was meaningful or not. He didn't think his was. But this didn't
bother him so much” (780). What disturbs Jude is not the idea that his life might have no
value, but the subtended implication of his own agency within such a context: “Was his
life even his to choose to live any longer?” (780). The impossibility—of significance, of
futurity—becomes the dominant element of a life in which he has moved “past
humiliation, past sorrow, past hope” (788).

_A Little Life_ is a novel of abjection, but also of the ways in which abjection
becomes tempered and endurable. Near the novel’s end, Jude attends a retrospective
exhibit of JB’s work at the Whitney. After Willem’s death, Jude hallucinates visions of

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58 While a fuller analysis of the medicalization of Jude’s disabilities is outside the scope of my analysis, I
want to underscore Robert McRuer’s point that “[A]ble-bodied identity and heterosexual identity are linked
in their mutual impossibility and in their mutual incomprehensibility—they are incomprehensible in that
each is an identity that is simultaneously the ground on which all identities supposedly rest,” that such
identities are “always deferred and never really guaranteed“ (492).
him. At the museum, Jude views a painting titled *Willem Listening to Jude Tell a Story*, 

*Greene Street:*

He steps back, still looking. In the painting, Willem’s torso is directed toward the viewer, but his face is turned to the right so that he is almost in profile, and he is leaning toward something or someone and smiling. And because he knows Willem’s smiles, he knows Willem has been captured at something he loves, he knows Willem in that instant was happy….. He has the sense that if he says Willem’s name, then the face in the painting will turn toward him and answer; he has the sense that if he stretches his hand out and strokes the canvas, he will feel beneath his fingertips Willem’s hair, his fringe of eyelashes. (769)

The portrait occasions the ideas of Yanagihara’s novel: the beauty and trauma of glimpsing and recording life, even when it has ended. In Jude’s near-delirium, the painting becomes simultaneously real and un-real: it represents the past in the present, just as other paintings in the exhibit depict what “might have been…. these scenes he missed the most from his own life with Willem, the forgettable, in-between moments in which nothing seemed to be happening but whose absence was singularly unfillable” (765). These moments stage what Roland Barthes describes as the lover’s discourse, the “site of someone speaking within himself, amorously, confronting the other (the loved object) who does not speak” (3). Barthes also writes that “[t]enderness… is nothing but an infinite, insatiable metonymy; the gesture, the episode of tenderness… can only be interrupted with laceration: everything seems called into question once again” (224). But being called into question again implies futurity, and indicates the ways in which, as José Muñoz articulates, queerness can be viewed as “resonating beyond traditional notions of finitude,” beyond death (149). Tenderness and its laceration, utopia and its naturalist disintegration, impossible to realize except on the page: these are the realities that Yanagihara writes. Yanagihara’s novel, like other fictional gay narratives from the past twenty years, locates the naturalist reality of queer identity and existence within a
temporal and aesthetic utopia, one which is unsustainable beyond the present moment, which furnishes just enough hope until the next such instance.

Jude’s final scene as a living character is with his psychiatrist, Dr. Loehmann, to whom Jude has returned in a “last bout of pretending,” so that he might become “the person he might have been,” that he might “still be repaired” (793). After going to the bathroom, where “recriminations beat a rhythm in his head,” Jude contemplates his course of action: “He could leave, he knows. The elevator is there…. But he doesn’t. Instead he goes the other direction, and returns to the office, where Dr. Loehmann is still sitting in his chair, waiting for him. ‘Jude,’ says Dr. Loehmann, ‘You've come back.’ He takes a breath. ‘Yes,’ he says. ‘I've decided to stay’” (794). Jude’s choice—to stay, to leave—functions as a thematic shorthand for the larger, perpetual choice of whether to continue his life, enacted on nearly every page of Yanagihara’s novel. His final words, words not ventriloquized through another character, constitute a commitment to the present, to life. The reader learns in the next chapter (narrated in a second-person address to Willem by Jude’s adoptive father Harold) that two years later, Jude “injected an artery with air, and [gave] himself a stroke,” taking his own life (811). Through this belated disclosure of the conclusion of a life anything but “little,” Yanagihara challenges the constraints of both hope and abjection, of the entire affective spectrum on which it is possible to exist and depict in any “real” way. Dana Seitler writes that the “suicide plot stages not only a departure from the world but also a departure from narrative: not just weary resignation, but also aesthetic intervention” (602). In Seitler’s reading, such departures also signal “a particularly queer form of resistance to the constraining narratives of live itself,” that “the suicide plot as a queer narratological technique affords
an action in the face of an even greater obligation, and it disrupts standard readings of
death as providing a full sense of closure” (613). Jude’s ending of his own life does not
end the narrative of A Little Life, and Yanagihara’s novel thus demonstrates what Seitler
suggests: the capacity of queer narratives to challenge narratives of death.

Jude stays, and then he leaves, and then the novel ends where it begins: at
Lispenard Street, in Tribeca, where Jude and Willem shared their first apartment. In this
recollection, Harold recounts how he and Jude:

were only standing and looking up at that red-brick building, and I was pretending
that I never had to fear for him, and he was letting me pretend this: that all of the
dangerous things he could have done, all the ways he could have broken my heart,
were in the past, the stuff of stories, that the time that lay behind us was scary, but
the time that lay ahead of us was not. “You jumped off the roof?” I repeated.
“Why on earth would you have done such a good thing?” “It’s a good story, he
said. He even grinned at me. “I’ll tell you.” “Please,” I said. And then he did.
(814).

Harold’s narration enacts what Nishant Shahani describes as the “retrospective
possibilities of reparation,” (15) and deploys something akin to Muñoz’s “backward
glance that enacts a future vision (Crusing 4). By recounting his and Jude’s return to
Lispenard Street, the site of the novel’s inception, its genesis point, Harold foregrounds
the notion of return, a mediation between leaving and staying. The passage invokes
utopic fantasy as accessible only through textuality, “the stuff of stories.” Harold looks
back to a time when he and Jude chose to look forward, and through this oscillation, he
resurrects and circumscribes possibility. The novel’s final lines initiate another story
cycle: the time that Jude jumped off the roof of Lispenard Street, and onto the fire escape,
because he and Willem and their friends, hosting a New Year’s party, were locked out.

59 Seitler emphasizes that though her analysis might “sound too easily utopian,” she writes not “of actual
acts of suicide,” but rather, wishes to unravel a “persistent cultural fantasy of unbecoming,” also pointing to
Edelman’s use of “the Freudian death drive as a narrative force… to point to ways out of the fantasies of
futurity” (606, 603).
This return—to a story that the reader, but not Harold, has been privy to—signals two things: an adjacency to danger, and its overcoming. After the end of Jude’s life, Harold remembers the time that Jude told a story about a time when he could have perished, but didn’t. In the novel’s final words—“And then he did”—Jude returns to the past, inviting Harold and the reader to look, as Muñoz writes, beyond “finitude,” to a story that will continue.

*A Little Life*, as just one novel among many which forms a growing corpus of contemporary gay fiction, offers to its readers an unflinching and uncompromising vision of life’s cruelties, its “cruel optimism[s]” (to borrow Berlant’s phrase), and, to the same degree, its loves and hopes and joys. Its realism is both qualified and bounded: the novel’s plot, while grandiose, long-running, and seemingly impossible in the volume of its suffering, remains tethered to reality. Yanagihara, in an interview, said that many readers frequently suggest to her that no one could suffer the amount of abuse that Jude does, to which she responds, “It’s simply not true, and if you think that, you’re thinking very provincially and you’re not looking hard enough….. It is somebody’s life” (Ubud Writers & Readers Festival). Even as Yanagihara’s novel plots these realities—made large and then rendered in their minutiae—the narrative’s fusion of naturalism and fairy tale requires their expansion. If the state of contemporary realism remains in flux, then so too do its queer iterations, reflecting the hard-won triumphs, the horrifying pain, and the daily hysterias that might be seen and felt in the lives of those who exist beyond a novel’s pages. Utopia has, from Thomas More to José Muñoz, always been something both ephemeral and visceral, a project focused on the fantasies and failures of reality, about
how we can survive the present moment, and “just one more” after that. The same might be said of realism, and of the persistence and hope required of any life.
CODA

The main thing is to tell a story. It is almost very important.

—Frank O’Hara

About a third of the way through The Line of Beauty, as Nick and Leo walk down a London street, “neither of them saying anything,” Nick “had the sense of what an affair might actually be like, and the endless miraculous permission was only a part of it. His limbs were oddly stiff, his hands tingling as if he'd just come in from snowballing to stand by a blazing fire. He felt the moment echoing other occasions when he had just missed success through a failure of nerve, or a stupidly happy anticipation” (104). So bewildered by the “endless miraculous permission” of walking down the street with his gay lover is Nick that his limbs stiffen; his hands tingle with such a surplus of affect that only the polarities of fire and ice can narrate its intensity. In the early pages of Call Me by Your Name, Elio also describes, somewhat melodramatically, a desirous fire: “Not a fire of passion, not a ravaging fire but something paralyzing… Fire like fear, like panic… Fire like a pleading that says Please, please, tell me I’m wrong, tell me I’ve imagine all this, because it can’t possibly be true for you as well” (14). And on the following page: “This is not, cannot, had better not be a dream… it seemed to true to be a dream” (15). Like Nick, Elio is so overwhelmed by even the prospect of Oliver’s reciprocation that he immediately strands such a possibility along the lines of illogic and impossibility. That such similar rhetorics occur in novels published only a few years apart, with both novels depicting (though in very different ways) the 1980s suggests a kind of atmospheric—to borrow Auerbach’s oft-used adjective—realism. Through these individual imaginings, gay desire in its most quotidian moments of longing becomes something powerfully
utopic: it disrupts and interrupts and eviscerates the thin barrier of the real. It cannot contain itself, and, as the previous pages have hopefully shown, realism is most fundamentally a mode of containment and constraint. Melodrama helps explain this excess of affect, but what about the narratological translation of the implausible—or, even impossible—1980s into narratives of real(ized) queer union?

If part of the work of a realist novel is to cast characters in relation to something bigger than themselves—the forces of history and economy, for example—then at the local level, these novels also suggest the transient and fleeting capacities of queer utopia: Elio and Oliver’s first kiss at a berm painted by Monet, Leo and Nick’s hookup in the private gardens behind the Feddens’ house. Are these moments plausible? Yes, but also no. That is, they could happen, but the likelihood of such episodes occurring beyond the pages of a novel is, to some degree, an unanswerable question. If these novels imagine (im)possible pasts within the confines of the 1980s from a distant twenty-first future, they do so nostalgically, and problematically. Both The Line of Beauty and Call Me by Your Name evince what Michael du Plessis has termed a “nostalgia for a homogenous gay masculinity”: a kind of representation which “seeks to canonize its cultural production” (502). As Pam Cook writes, “nostalgia is predicated on a dialectic between longing for something idealised that has been lost, and an acknowledgment that this idealised something can never be retrieved in actuality, and can only be accessed through images” (qtd. in Church 177). For Cook, then, “[a]udiences can consciously enjoy a playful or affecting engagement with history at the same time as exercising their aesthetic judgment” (qtd. in Clark 177). du Plessis warns against the dangerous functions of nostalgia, while Cook suggests that nostalgia mediates history in affective ways—
narrating, of course, an impossibility that any audience or reader should recognize as such. Aciman and Hollinghurst write fictions, narratives that purport and stage and attempt to approximate reality, but the result produces a nostalgia for something non-existent. Perhaps this is also the project of realism at its broadest: the attempt to mediate between the actual and the imagined. Coincidentally, in my reading, this mediation between imagination and actuality also characterizes the workings of utopia, and especially the queer utopia. The nostalgia that Aciman and Hollinghurst deploy perhaps emerges as a kind of melodramatic by-product: an effect of both novels’ attempts to work out the then-impossibilities of queer union as we understand it in the twenty-first century. Difficult, selective, incomplete, and affecting, these fictional records thus attempt—and fail, queerly—to reconcile the era’s larger histories with the smaller ones of their characters’ romantic lives. But in both, the realist novel—that stalwart form, in its newly post-postmodern trappings—constitutes the site for exploring how things are and how they are wished to be.

These questions of imaginative possibility extend beyond the historical questions of contemporary realisms that look to the 1980s, for so too does the Obama-era, “weirdly ahistorical” narrative of A Little Life chart such utopic investigations. Just past the midway point of Yanagihara’s novel, Jude thinks about the plausibility of his newly romantic relationship with Willem: “[H]e wasn't what he had ever imagined for Willem: he had imagined someone beautiful (and female) and intelligent for Willem, someone who would know how fortunate she was, someone who would make him feel fortunate as well. He knew this was—like so many of his imaginings about adult relationships—somewhat gauzy and naïve, but that didn't mean it couldn't happen” (511). Jude’s past
imaginings for his future self fail entirely; consequently, what seems “gauzy and naïve”
gets recoded as, if not realistic or likely, at least plausible: “that didn’t mean it couldn’t
happen.” If we take “it couldn’t happen” to be, in essence, the gatekeeping logic of the
realist novel, then Jude pushes against plausibility and tenability in order to think more
utopically. Similarly, Willem “allowed his native optimism to obscure his fears, to make
their relationship into something essentially joyous and sunny” (590). Like Elio and Nick,
Willem also wonders—intellectually and affectively—about the reality of his life with
Jude: “Often he was struck by the sensation… that they were playing house, that he was
living some boyhood fantasy of running away from the world and its rules with his best
friend” (590). The actualization of queer life becomes something conspiratorial: “[L]ife
felt like an extended slumber party, one they’d been having for almost three decades, one
that gave him the thrilling feeling that they had all gotten away with something large,
something they were meant to have abandoned long ago” (590). Willem discards the
normalizing and restrictive rubrics of heteronormativity—by which he and Jude have
most certainly failed—but still grapples with queer imagination, with how to understand
the affective qualities of “getting away with” the realities of a gay relationship with his
best friend. Jude similarly finds himself “disoriented” when he considers his past traumas
in light of his present happiness: “Because as assaultive as his memories were, his life
coming back to him in pieces, he knew he would endure them if he could also have
friends, if he kept being granted the ability to take comfort in others” (570). Like “a slight
parting of worlds,” Jude moves between past and present; he, actualizing the novel’s
naturalist project, suggests that such movement “was the price of enjoying life” (570).
Jude tries to account for affective and temporal movement in the same way that Elio,
foreseeing the end of his summer with Oliver, “began, reluctantly, to steal from the present to pay off debts I knew I’d incur in the future” (162-63). To understand the queer real and the queer utopic, past and future come to bear upon the present in coextant ways, always (re)imagining what was and is and will be possible.

All of these novels, then, are about the real and the utopic, and thus fundamentally about the (queer) failures of imagination that underpin both. Before Nick gets together with Wani, the latter, “like Toby, remained in the far pure reach of fantasy, which grew all the keener and more inventive to meet the challenge of his unavailability” (59). Nick “felt the loss of [Wani] as though he had really stood a chance with him, he’d gone so far with him in his mind… He clung to what he had, as it gathered speed: that quarter of an hour with Leo by the compost heap, which was his first sharp taste of coupledom” (59). Nick struggles to reconcile his erotic imaginings—utopic in their complete expansivity—with what he perceives to be real, actual, and plausible. But the irony is, of course, that Nick will stand a chance with Wani, and, more tragically, will lose both him and Leo over the course of the novel’s pages. Hollinghurst, like Aciman and Yanagihara, pulls the threads of queer imagination and queer “reality” simultaneously to suggest their complicated inextricability. Nick tries to acclimate to “actually existing gayness”—as do Elio and Oliver and Malcolm and JB and Jude and Willem (Hollinghurst 95). Actual gayness, fictionalized: this is the project of each of these novels written, published, and read in the past fifteen years. Myriad points of further similarity mark these novels; by constellating them together in this way, I hope not to generate endlessly recursive comparative readings, but to show the ways in which contemporary gay fiction so often stages the same questions. And these questions, as I hope to have shown, are the ones
which have preoccupied queer theorists and literary critics alike for so many years: What is real? What is un-real? And for whom? And who gets to decide?

These are, fortunately, open questions, and perennially contested ones. Also fortunate: the answers to these questions so frequently take place in the pages of novels written by authors who still draw breath, who give interviews, who comment on their work, and who live in the world beyond the pages they write, like and amongst their readers and critics. The history of literary realism, like the histories of queer people and queer theories, has always been multiple. In these novels the representation of life—its inscription in and through fantasy but in such a way as to not seem like fantasy—attests to the perpetual commingling of such histories, and to their place within what we might call and resist as the “real.” And the utopic remains not unreal. Rather, it is bound by time and space—these stricture its possibility—into transience, into textuality. Utopia will never a totality make, but neither will the realist novel. Both are impossibilities obsessed with the possible. What Hollinghurst and Aciman and Yanagihara persistently dramatize are the ways that these coterminous impulses—towards the real, towards the utopic—get caught up in queer lives, which so often must imagine beyond the present, beyond the closet. Actualized gay lives, these novels suggest, mark a kind of utopia, but a very real one, and one that persists in our present and into the future.
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