

The Voice of the Internet

Caucasianblink.gif

A girl applying her foundation with a hard-boiled egg

Dark stock photo of an elderly ob-gyn crouched between a pregnant woman's legs, eating a large and luxurious sandwich¹

THESE ARE JUST SOME OF the memes archived in Patricia Lockwood's 2021 novel *No One Is Talking About This*—three of fifty-five, if you abide by LitHub.com, whose staff writer Walker Caplan diligently counted “all the memes referenced” in it.² When Lockwood presented an excerpt of her book at the British Museum in 2019, she stood before a PowerPoint presentation, guiding her audience through the tweets, screengrabs, and other born-digital content to which her words referred.³ That same year, the *London Review of Books* published Lockwood's talk as an essay titled “The Communal Mind,” with her PowerPoint slides included as in-text illustrations.⁴ When later printed in hardback as fiction, Lockwood's meme-stream-of-consciousness text included no grounding images. For her novel's readers, then, her words hit with a strange sense of recognition without a referent. Lacking a visual aid, we may have struggled to remember these particular memes, once kinetic, now more or less inert. We may not have shared “Lockwood's internet,” which is to say the viral jumble that made up her newsfeed, when she gleaned it into print in the accommodating form of a novel. But we just as likely recognize the voice that emerges from her pages, as distinct and controlled as it is heinous and unregulated. The adjectives we have won't do: ironic, boorish, random, invulnerable. The voice of *No One Is Talking About This* can only really be described by what it once was: online. *Very* online. *Extremely* online.

The “communal mind” of Lockwood's *London Review of Books* essay is, of course, the hivemind, the collective consciousness of Web 2.0, at once heralded as a democratic instrument and the instrument of democracy's undoing. It operates within what Lockwood calls “the portal,” which is variously one of her novel's authors, settings, narrators, and characters—the source

and host of the shards of language, of images in translation, that sit alongside Lockwood's prose and are oftentimes undifferentiated from it. Cracked into so many counterpublics as to make a mockery of the public sphere, the portal is nonetheless singular in its verbal effect. After all, the prevailing logic of Lockwood's novel is that we might not all be talking *about* this (or that) online, but we are all talking (or writing) *like* this. The portal "had . . . once been the place where you sounded like yourself," we read. "Gradually it had become the place where we sounded like each other, through some erosion of wind or water on a self not nearly as firm as stone" (72).⁵

But is the voice of the internet really so homogeneous or, more menacing still, homogenizing? Lockwood's novel frantically shifts its focalization (sometimes *she*; sometimes *we*; rarely *I*), dissolving its unnamed protagonist in an acid bath of internetspeak. "Her pronoun," we read, "which she had never felt particularly close to, traveled farther and farther away from her in the portal, swooping through landscapes of *us* and *him* and *we* and *them*. . . . Mostly, though, it passed into *you, you, you, you*, until she had no idea where she ended and the rest of the crowd began" (10–11). Lockwood's narrator concedes that the voice derived from this subject-eroding wave of discourse erodes subjects unevenly. The "new language," or the "new sense of humor," as it is sometimes called, "stole, defanged, co-opted, [and] consumed." See page 70: "thanksgiving titties be poppin." Or page 195: "Girl, she was a real one." This Blaccent might be worth resisting, but, it's implied, who's counting when the net result of the new language's appropriation is a collective disappropriation—conceding all of our verbal sensibilities to that of the internet itself?

The voice of *No One Is Talking About This* is sometimes depersonalized: no flesh on the bone, just a vertebra on which to hang *grisly british witch pits*, *that's the cost of my vegan lunch*, *pants burn wound leg*, and other crowd-sourced fragments of the communal mind (20). It is, however, just as often hyperpersonal, a direct line to the protagonist's electrified synaptic processes and the mechanisms by which her serotonin levels and consciousness are hap-hazardly raised and debased. The portal gives her protagonist access to that "all-discerning third eye," allowing her to omnisciently scan the exteriorized interiorities of the newsfeeds around her (130). Depersonalized, hyperpersonal, all-knowing—what is this *extremely online* voice and who exactly speaks it? Who speaks, for example, through a meme? Its originator? Its copy-and-pasters, circulators, or image manipulators? "The portal" itself?

Literary critics have encountered such enigmatically sourced voices before. We call them moments of "free indirect discourse," although there is no critical consensus about which techniques enable this speech, to say nothing of its ideological or aesthetic effects. For some, free indirect discourse is the device by which a novel's narrator "gets into its characters'

heads,” providing a transparent rendering, or a “psycho-narration,” of their thoughts.⁶ For others, it enacts the capture of voice (and its authority) by one agent (the narrator) over another (the character); or, in a similar operation, the supremacy of ideology (the *idée reçue*) over the voices of character and narrator alike.⁷ For others still, free indirect discourse liberates characters from having to speak for themselves: it doesn’t colonize voice so much as relativize it.⁸ Following this last logic, no one is holding anyone to the words expressed by way of free indirect discourse; unanchored by any speaking subject—no quotation marks or “she thought” tags to be found—they are unaccounted for and unaccountable. These interpretations operate along a sliding scale of impersonality. Accordingly, an unattributed statement like *How was she to bear the change?* could, for example, be understood as something that Emma Woodhouse thought about her life after Miss Taylor’s marriage (a personal reflection, psycho-narrated); or something that sounds like *the kind of thing* Emma would have thought (more impersonal); or the kind of thing that *someone like Emma* would have thought (more impersonal still); or, finally, something that no one in particular thought but that merely circulated in Jane Austen’s novel, like so much gossip, as a rhetorical possibility (totally depersonalized).⁹

Because of its contested, complicated purchase on questions of characterization, liberal subjecthood, bourgeois social norms, ideological hailing, the terms of authorship, and the nature of writerly style, free indirect discourse has been closely associated with the novel and often claimed as its preeminent achievement.¹⁰ Identifying its occurrences is therefore usually performed on the stage of novel studies, but it has not remained there. Instead, its various problematics and interpretive frameworks have been passed back and forth between novel and film studies, and, this article ventures, might be productively passed to media studies and the study of memes.

When media studies scholars turn their attention to memes, they might examine a verbal-visual trope as a symptom of the political unconscious (digital blackface, neo-Nazi humor, e.g.); or the platforms and publics that account for its development and spread (black twitter, 4chan, e.g.); or the method of algorithmicized circulation on which it depends (recommendation systems, data caching, e.g.). While not negating the value of these modes of inquiry—indeed, by building off them—my concern is at once more local (to the individual internet user’s body) and more general (to the apparently universal experience of “being” online). It is between the local and the universal, the particularized and the general, that this study about the textual practices and metaphysics of online speech takes root. My wager is that the voice that emerges from a meme—free indirect, unaccountable, indeed unable to be traced to any single social media account—transcends

the infrastructure of any platform or the vernacular of any subculture. It is paradoxically recognizable (“I know that”) and nowhere instantiated (“Who said that?”). This is why Lockwood’s novel needs no grounding illustrations—and why her novel, as opposed to any particular meme, circulated on any particular platform, is the primary source of this study. After all, the memes in *No One Is Talking About This* speak in the space between subjects and objects, particulars and universals; they speak for the internet, and they speak for themselves.

Let’s start, then, with the question that motivates all studies of free indirect discourse, narratological, political, psychological, or some combination thereof: *Who is speaking?*¹¹ It’s a question that must be raised—a useful heuristic—and then summarily dispensed with, as its limiting pronoun is overwhelmed by the suspect humanity (why *who* and not *what*?) and internal multiplicity (why *who* and not *which*?) of the free indirect voice that one encounters in Lockwood’s novel. *Who is, what is, which are speaking?* This ungrammatical, aggregate question is more suited to its pastiche work; it’s the question that the novel poses with its ubiquitous use of free indirect discourse, beginning with its opening lines:

She opened the portal, and the mind met her more than halfway. Inside, it was tropical and snowing, and the first flake of the blizzard of everything landed on her tongue and melted.

Close-ups of nail art, a pebble from outer space, a tarantula’s compound eyes, a storm like canned peaches on the surface of Jupiter, Van Gogh’s *The Potato Eaters*, a chihuahua perched on a man’s erection, a garage door spray-painted with the words STOP! DON’T EMAIL MY WIFE!

Why did the portal feel so private, when you only entered it when you needed to be everywhere? (3)

It would be fair to say that the subject of these sentences, no less than the literary device they selectively employ, is free indirect discourse. Readers are met with a mind-meld, the conjunction of two barely elaborated, apparently discrete forms of consciousness: “the mind” and “her.” The conjunction of voices will follow.

While the first paragraph appears to be narrated in an omniscient third person, the last is more ambiguously voiced, more classically free indirect. Perhaps it represents the personal thoughts of a character whom we don’t yet know. Maybe it’s the *she* of the first sentence—the *she* with a tongue, and so presumably a mouth and also a voice—who nonetheless identifies

by way of the impersonal pronoun *you*: “you only entered it when you needed to be everywhere.” With that *you*, any particularity that might have attached itself to this would-be character—this individual capable of “feeling privacy”—loses its stick. That *you* makes her *anyone*. It makes her anyone and everyone who has ever entered the portal because they needed to be everywhere. Everywhere—and thus grasping for the narratorial omniscience of the first paragraph—but also right *there* in the blizzard of everything.

Shuttling between the impersonal/universal and the personal/particular, the first and third paragraphs of Lockwood’s opening page establish a discursive turnstile—“a kind of turnstile,” D. A. Miller writes about Jane Austen’s free indirect style, “that helps organize the boundary, and recycle the binary,” between narrator and character, despite their extraordinary proximity.¹² Without collapsing into each other, narrator and character come daringly close to achieving the promise of the portal: the promise of having a *subjectivity*, of feeling private and “seen,” and operating with *objectivity*, seeing everything and not feeling at all.¹³ In their torsion, then, the first and third paragraphs enact the rhetorical world of free indirect discourse—a world of horse-trading between characters and narrators, between having a body and accessing a communal mind.

But what about that second paragraph? That solid chunk of cyberspace debris? What role do “a tarantula’s compound eyes” and “a chihuahua perched on a man’s erection” play in the miniature psychodrama between narrator and character—between portal and person—that is staged on the novel’s first page? *Who, what, which* speaks for it? To ask such questions is to fall into a trap that Lockwood has set for us—a trap that, for convenience, let’s call internet studies.

It consists of a problem of register. Doesn’t it feel slightly silly, pretentious, or just wrong to bring the semiotic precision and oftentimes sanctifying tone of literary analysis to memes? Lockwood dramatizes the trap, as her protagonist negotiates the fine line between understanding social media and letting its bottom-feeding repertoire make a mockery of all expertise. Famous for her adeptness at internetspeak, the novel’s protagonist has been launched into celebrity after her tweet “Can a dog be twins?” goes viral. On a world tour of panels and speeches about the “new language” and the “new sense of humor,” she stumbles into a bit of internet studies:

“Stream-of-consciousness!” she yelled onstage in Jamaica. . . . “Stream-of-consciousness was long ago conquered by a man who wanted his wife to fart all over him. But what about the stream-of-a-consciousness that is not entirely your own? One that you participate in, but that also acts upon you?” One audience member yawned, then another. (42)

She's working toward a literary theory of the internet that positions the communal mind as the captor of individual thought, in which the voice of the protagonist is no longer her own but that of a distributed consciousness. Hers are the thoughts of anyone and everyone—the thoughts of an impersonal *you*, which is also, in its very impersonality, a *we* and an *us*. But to stand outside of this collective, to speak about it from the outside, is not only alienating to those who aren't already fluent in its frenetic discourse; it's anticlimactic for those who are. To the extremely online, internet studies is at best redundant, and indeed a bore, because already knowing everything is the virtue of being in the portal in the first place. The knowledge that it hosts must be everywhere articulated but nowhere anatomized.

The protagonist's foray into internet studies—rendered in direct quotation, accounted for, yelling on stage in Jamaica—can only but paraphrase the apparently collective voice that she is trying to render for her audience. Lest she appear self-serious, paraphrasing poorly, she takes a scatological detour, aligning her subject with tone, turning Joyce into a joke to invoke Joycean stream-of-consciousness as a possible prototype for “the new sense of humor.” But does she make him into a joke or into a meme? See number 22 on LitHub's listicle:

22. “a man who wanted his wife to fart all over him” (pg. 39)

James Joyce.

What makes this a Joyce meme, as opposed to, say, a Joyce allusion, intertext, or cameo? Perhaps nothing; perhaps the listicle's author was playing fast and loose with his taxonomy; or perhaps he was sticking rather closely to the term's original definition in Richard Dawkins's 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, according to which a meme is “a unit of cultural transmission.” Dawkins's coinage stems from the Greek root *Mimeme*, meaning “imitated thing,” but, he wrote, “I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene.’ . . . [And] it could alternatively be thought of as being related to ‘memory,’ or to the French word *même*.”¹⁴ For reference, the listicle's author links to a parisreview.org blog post featuring excerpts of Joyce's most scatophilic love letters to Nora, with an editorial introduction that reads, “These letters, or excerpts of them, have been floating around the Internet for some time now, but they merit multiple joyous re-readings.”¹⁵ The letters, then, are units of cultural transmission and collective memory that haven't been imitated, reproduced by mimesis, so much as circulated, “floating around,” reproduced, we might say, by way of memesis.

Memesis is no simple copy-and-paste job or retweet, although it can involve such techniques. It is, rather, a slick relationship between self and other—person and portal—that involves a form of recognition (“I know this unit of cultural transmission”), an implied familiarity (“it’s the kind of thing I would say/post”), despite operating along a sliding scale of impersonality (“it’s the kind of thing that someone like me would say/post”). This is to say that it’s a free indirect maneuver, approximating an impossible rapprochement not between narrator and character but between oneself and one’s self-narration—and, more, between oneself and the portal, that collective impersonality that exists not as a body *per se* but as a body of knowledge. Like the self-fashioning protocols of Bourdieusian taste and the narcissistic fantasy of the Lacanian mirror stage, memesis is a social procedure that allows one to identify as *the kind of person who . . .* More often than not, it allows one to identify as *the kind of person who knows*.

“She was an instantaneous citizen of the flash of lightning that wrote across the sky *I know*,” we read (93). When the extremely online must contend with the mechanics and politics of their existence *there*, they cannot be caught out. What if the raw material for their in-jokes has been not homegrown but was instead planted there by Russian bots or psyops!? What if they’ve been baited, brainwashed, manipulated, their words and thoughts not properly their own!? But they cannot *not know*, and so, rather than find themselves a step behind, they launch out in front:

Had they bloated us with *homebrew*? Had they *made Christianity viable again*? Had they brought back *snap-crotch bodysuits*?

But no. No, this is how conspiracy thinking began. This is how you became someone who put the whole sky into finger quotes. (93–94)

To succumb to paranoia about *them* and *they* is to let memesis run wild. By attaching oneself to units of cultural transmission (*homebrew*, *Christianity*, *snap-crotch bodysuits*)—not as a foolproof identity but as something that you can situate socially, something you *know*—you allow a meme to “speak for” yourself. You establish the *kind of thing* you might say, so as to instantiate *a kind of you* online. In the paranoid scenario, where the brain is washed and the voice captured, one’s self-narration online is, in fact, other-narrated. The online paranoiac is convinced that their tweets and posts are not ultimately their speech (the kinds of things they would say), nor even ironic speech (in finger quotes, as the kind of thing they wouldn’t say but *that* they wouldn’t say it is kind of like them), but speech actually inscribed by some third party. Some *Deus deceptor*. This would be a nightmare of free indirect discourse.

To the nonparanoiac, the result of speaking through a meme—of reproducing a joke du jour or a range of syntax and rhythm—is not self-objectification or submission to capture, but nor is it exactly self-articulation. Neither a mouthpiece for some Other, nor a platform for authentic speech, memesis produces a third thing—an online personality—which likewise recycles or reinscribes the boundary between other and self, despite the conceit that they’ve become virtually, yes, *virtually*, indistinguishable.

This third thing seems like a bargain: one presumably gets to be a personality online without having to bear all that trouble of being a person—or the tragedy of not being one at all. “The condition of being in a body that suffers,” Lockwood said in an interview on her press tour for *No One Is Talking About This*, “is one of the reasons that many of us enter the Internet so completely: it is an ether where you can move as a stream of air, of thinking, of Terminator fluid.”¹⁶ Maintaining the absolute fiction that one can be oneself *without* being a “body that suffers,” however, requires what I’ve called the horse-trading of free indirect discourse. Perhaps this is why the raw material for memesis so often involves the human body in all its fallibility, the desublimated reminder of what must be sacrificed to be an online personality but not a person per se. See: *Caucasianblink.gif*; *A girl applying her foundation with a hard-boiled egg, fart all over his wife*, or see:

A picture of a new species of tree frog that had recently been discovered. Scientists speculated that the reason it had never before been seen was because, quote, “It is covered with warts and it wants to be left alone.”

Me

me

unbelievably me

it me (29)

When Lockwood’s narrator falls into this meme, is the internet “capturing” her voice? Or her protagonist’s voice? It is conventional, in novel studies, to describe free indirect discourse as a collapse of distance between narrator and character, but Lockwood’s novel figures the relation differently.¹⁷ Instead of disintegrating the boundary between two discrete entities (*it* and *me*, say), *No One Is Talking About This* imagines the internet to be creating a “new kind of connection” that allows for the internet personality, the mediating term between self and nonself, to emerge. “Why were we all writing like this now?” we read. “Because a new kind of connection had to be made, and blink, synapse, little space-between was the only way to

make it. Or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote” (63). This “new” connection that the portal hosts in the blink of an eye or the flash of synaptic processing isn’t the universal connectivity marketed by Facebook or X. It might more properly be called a disconnection—from one’s chair, from one’s body, despite that accelerated heartbeat, that strain on the neck and wrist—a way of connecting to an ideally disembodied nonself, a “stream of consciousness that is not fully your own,” that is at once a function of the self and a product of self-abstracting algorithmic procedures.

Returning to the opening page of *No One Is Thinking About This*, we can now posit *who, what, which* speaks that second paragraph, that unbeautiful imagist meme-poem. For if the first and third paragraphs establish the intense intimacy and yet unbroachable distinction between the universal/omniscient and the particular/embodied as a drama between Lockwood’s narrator and protagonist, then the second paragraph recasts it as a drama between Lockwood’s protagonist and herself. The voice of that second paragraph, we might say, is the free indirect operation of her newsfeed, the voice cultivated by her online personality. Why she—or anyone—might see the particular stream of memes that floods her individualized feed is not a function of an evil demon, or luck, or the happenstance of particles floating through an “ether.” It is, of course, an algorithmicized operation, as the protagonist is fed thoughts and images that are generated to appeal to her as she has been—to the particularized sensibility, and indeed personality, that she has cultivated with every like, post, and repost. The voice that calls out from this meme-stream is marked, *sotto voce*, *for you, for you, for you*, even if what she perceives is her own self-stylizing form of recognition *it me, it me, it me*.

But the apparent reciprocity of this relation is, ultimately, an illusion. It functions according to a sleight of hand that obscures the impersonal nature of its intimacy: this meme is *for someone like you*, received by *someone like me*. It is both the product of the protagonist’s past interventions in the portal and its algorithmicized anticipation of her next move. It can feel good to settle into these abstractions, to be someone like you and yet not yourself, to write in the voice of the internet and let it overwrite you. We read:

For a moment, if she allowed herself, she could even feel exhilarated to think . . . [t]hat all the thickness, clumsiness, ploddingness she had ever felt in her biological vehicle could be overwritten. She was not those things. She was not her own slowness. She wasn’t trapped, rooted in her provincial ignorance and her regional mispronunciations, pinned to one place. (93)

This is the fantasy of the portal: that one can become No One—no “body that suffers”—by becoming someone or something like oneself. Lockwood’s

protagonist feels its exhilaration just as much as its material impossibility: she sends out a missive—something about the latest news item—and “her hands . . . waver in their outlines” (33). She “rock[s] the crown of her head against the cool wall, back and forth, back and forth,” a reflexive reminder of the physics (metabolism, body heat, blink, synapse) accompanying the strange metaphysics of “being online.” Is her person an index, a wavering outline, of her online personality? Or is her online personality an index of her person, a web cache of her existence? What is lost by living so much of your life in the portal? By collecting “units of transmission” as a proxy for yourself? What happens to you when your daily interlocutors are No Ones—bots, newsfeeds—addressing *someone like you*? We all know the experience.

We all know the experience. Frances Ferguson calls it “intimacy-through-algorithm”—the uncanny, apparently personal address of a newsfeed or targeted ad or, as she renders it, “a suggestive series of questions”:

Would we like a hotel room in New York on 5 May, a rental car at Newark Liberty Airport on 5 May, a good price on a hot water heater?¹⁸

It’s a strange articulation of the voice of *her* internet. Are these subject lines on her emails? Pop-up ads in her browser? Why are they addressed to a collective *us*, when they are so clearly the result of her past online searches? Had she already purchased a plane ticket to New York on 5 May? Was she going to a conference? To visit a friend? We or, more properly, I am left to wonder what this *someone like Frances Ferguson* has done to foster her algorithmic intimacy. “The tracks of what we have seen, what we have done, constitute our signatures, our profiles,” she writes, finding formal continuity between a search engine or social media platform’s “intimacy-through-algorithm” and a host of predigital operations that signal to *someone like you*, anticipating *someone-like-me* recognition: unsolicited catalogs received in the mail; a book or movie review (“if you liked *x*, I think you’ll like *y*”); romantic matchmaking; above all, the affordances of distinction, the social fortifications of “good taste.” These everyday addresses and affiliations buttress one’s personality on- and offline. They also account for a phenomenon that Ferguson calls “literary hailing”—“our recognizing texts and feeling recognized by them . . . the ways in which even apparently particular descriptions in novels proceed with a generality or virtual universality to override those particulars.” Such identification can proceed across the would-be interferences of one’s particular person and the particularities of a literary character. One identifies with and as “a person as a concept, not a person as an

individual,” she writes, to reap the rewards of reading *Emma*, of knowing (someone like) Emma, and of being *the kind of person* who knows (someone like) her (523).

Following D. A. Miller, who is in fact the subject of her article, Ferguson claims free indirect discourse as the mechanism facilitating this identification through abstraction. It is “a mode that recruits us as readers to an intimacy both pleasurable and unseemly with the characters we read about,” making us think that we know them, when, in fact, what we do is “over-know[]” them (526–27). The language of algorithms drops out of Ferguson’s article when she turns to free indirect discourse, requiring her reader to make the perhaps unseemly connection between targeted advertising and novel reading on her own. Algorithmic recommendation systems (“Would we like a hotel room in New York on 5 May?”) function like novelistic free indirect discourse (“How was [Emma] to bear the change?”) by overwriting the particular logistics of embodiment to craft an apparently direct line from computer to user, character to reader: *for (someone like) you, for (someone like) you*, the newsfeed or novel calls out; *it (someone like) me, it (someone like) me*, the user or reader hears.

The homology between algorithmic and readerly forms of address, however, only comes to the fore with Miller’s assistance—with the metaphor he crafts between what he calls “too close reading” and Austen’s “close writing” over Emma’s voice through free indirect narration. The too-close reader hears the novel’s call—*for (someone like) you*—and responds accordingly. He attaches himself to Austen’s writing through a process not unlike the one I have been calling memesis (“I know this voice, this unit of cultural transmission”), finding himself its impossible addressee. More, he finds his voice *in* its voice, but he can only get as close to Austen as her narrator can get to a character. He can only be *someone like* the addressee of Austen’s novels—someone hailed by its style as a likeminded reader with a likeness to her voice. As a too-close reader, Ferguson writes, Miller “sees in criticism, in novels, in films the ways in which they were already speaking [his] language” (539).

Ferguson won’t call this readerly feeling an intimacy-through-algorithm, although she sets up her reader to say it for her. Indeed, what she doesn’t say, but everywhere implies, is that the novel’s preeminent achievement might be the internet’s status quo. That what Austen perfects as writer and Miller perfects as reader might be something a meme can’t *not* achieve: an impossible but not undesirable disconnection between self and not-self, an impersonal form of intimacy with a style of writing that is at once inimitable and calling out to be imitated, rearticulated, as one’s own. “She opened a portal where her mouth was and spoke better than she ever had before,” we read in Lockwood’s novel. Substitute “portal” with “character” or

“novel,” and you arrive at an almost too-perfect motif for the close writer and too-close reader alike (112).

It is not altogether strange that Ferguson abandons her discussion of internet advertising—and, for that matter, predigital commercial addresses—when she begins to discuss Miller’s method. It is a matter of style, a matter of aligning subject with tone with audience (in this case, the readers of *Critical Inquiry*); in other words, it’s the very matter at hand. Ferguson proceeds with a general politesse toward all things internet. She describes its technical means of existence in terms of the most sanitized, most elemental media—the *ether*—nothing “dank” about it. “We choose the next novel off the shelf or in the *ether*,” she writes. “The bookstore, the library, and the movie theater are architectural tributes (in bricks and mortar or in the *ether*); “the greetings that arrive in mail both slow and *etherized*” (521–22, emphasis added). Silicon Valley advertisers call it “The Cloud,” addressing a consumer market. Lockwood calls it “Terminator fluid,” addressing her own. It is the online personality’s natural habitat. Not the computer, not even the web browser or web-hosted app, the ether is the impossible medium for the person’s alchemized transformation into not-quite-herself online. It’s where she refines the terms of the impersonal, personalized address she encounters “there”.

Although Ferguson turns her back on the practical logistics of this medium—no megacorporations or data servers to be found; no wavering of the hands or rocking of the head—she fastidiously and ingeniously captures the metapragmatics of its address, finding them located, unexpectedly, in Miller’s work and emblemized by, of all things, his author photo for his book *Jane Austen, or, the Secret of Style*. The photo, Miller in silhouette, in profile, puts him, she writes, “in a position of recognizability without any gesture of reciprocity. . . . It chimes with and underscores . . . his own meditations on the relationships between a closely observed author and the closely observing reader” (525). Elaborating her reading of Miller’s image, she writes, “Free indirect style is, then, an analogue to the profile or silhouette, so that recognition takes place as if with familiarity (‘That’s the kind of thing Emma would say’) and in the absence of the character’s actually saying it” (528). What Miller’s profile also chimes with and underscores—one wants to say, at this point, “of course!”—is the online personality’s profile: the composite image of “units of transmission” that allows you to be recognized as *someone like you* by a newsfeed or targeted ad. Despite her aversion to the logistics of the internet, Ferguson has nonetheless developed the free indirect logic of its intimacy-through-algorithm, its at once universal and yet relentlessly particular voice. Or perhaps she has only grasped one half of it, from the side.

In his 2022 book *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*, Timothy Bewes reconsiders the stakes and state of relativized speech—speech, in other words, voiced by No One—for the contemporary novel. Bewes is not interested in free-indirectness as a literary device or technique of close writing. Instead, he claims, free-indirectness is the prevailing “logic” of contemporary fiction—a logic that “unthinks or deauthorizes the very claims made by the work.”¹⁹ These are novels in which no author, subject, or zone of relation might connect the work to the outside world. There is no general world to which these fictional works offer particulars, no particular world about which they are generalizing. They refuse what he calls any “instantiation relation” between the world and the work, the writer and the novel. Instead of representing the thoughts of this or that narrator—speaking on behalf of this or that subject position, this or that worldview—the free indirect novel, Bewes suggests, thinks for itself.

This will seem like a highly counterintuitive understanding of the contemporary works of fiction that Bewes collects under the umbrella of free-indirectness, many of which readers might otherwise recognize as works of autofiction. A contested genre that appears to conflate autobiography and the novel, autofiction might seem to amplify the role and site of authorship in the voice of the narrator, who appears to be so closely aligned with the author herself: works like Ben Lerner’s *10:04*, in which a character named Ben Lerner publishes a story in the *New Yorker*, the very same story that is embedded as a chapter in *10:04*. Or Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* trilogy, whose unnamed narrator-protagonist is a writer, visiting residencies and sitting on panels that bear a striking resemblance to residencies and panels that Cusk herself has attended. How can these works present “deauthorizing” or “deauthorized” thought when we are so tempted to see them as “hyper-authorized,” or at least “meta-authorized,” thoughts on the page?

Bewes points to these “conjoined-dissociated pair[s] of writers” as free indirect operations. Identifying where one “Ben Lerner” ends and the other begins is “impossible and paradoxical,” he writes. It is as “presupposed and severed” as the relation between Austen’s narrator and her characters.²⁰ Instead of autofiction, then, Bewes calls these works “postfiction,” as they have undermined the very conceit of fiction: “it is no longer possible,” he writes, “to distinguish the person writing from the person represented, the actions described from the act of description” (225, 43).

In a peculiar but clarifying interlude near his book’s conclusion, Bewes implicitly contrasts the work of postfiction with the activity of “profiling,” which he calls “one of the principal forms for the dissemination of the logic of instantiation” today (228). Extrapolated from constants in a dataset, a profile effectively turns a person into a concept—the concept of a “criminal” or “Trump supporter,” say. This conceptual, quantifiable extension of

the self's qualitative attributes is, Bewes writes, "by definition legible, transposable, and monetizable" (229). To understand profiling as an effect of instantiation (connecting particulars to generals in a direct, albeit abstract, line) rearticulates an ideological project (policing, data brokering, e.g.) as an ontological one. The profiled person becomes *someone like themselves* for a surveilling authority. Bewes doesn't describe the Facebook profile or the X profile as an extension of this logic of instantiation, but he might just as well have: one doesn't *become* a concept of a "Trump supporter" on Facebook—although one's Facebook data might be used to manufacture that relation. One becomes, at least partially, a concept of oneself.

Returning to Ferguson, we should remember that for her, the logic of algorithmic connection, pleasurable but unseemly, is that it hails and subjectifies. It particularizes something that is, in fact, general (a rental car on 5 May, perhaps?). It addresses *anyone in general* as if they were *someone like you*. For Bewes, meanwhile, the logic of algorithmic connection, unseemly to say the least, is that it objectifies. It makes general something that is importantly particular: one's racialized appearance, one's accent, the make and model of one's car. It addresses *someone in particular* as *anyone like you*. How can we reconcile these two notions of profiling, one particularizing, the other generalizing? For Ferguson, the individual overwrites the algorithmic address, finding in its generality a direct relation ("it me"). For Bewes, the address overwrites the individual, scrubbing out all that might particularize a person, replacing it with a fictive, if not fictional, connection ("it ~~me~~").

Between me and not-me (~~me~~), however, is a me with an unmarked difference—the me that exists online, my online personality, overwriting my biological vehicle, reproducing itself through my likes, reposts, and clicks. It is not the same as me (not *même*): I am not a representation of it; it is not a representation of me. But it is carved out of the "little space-between" (*me ~~me~~*), a product of memesis. Although it cannot be located or sourced—it is everywhere, in the ether—it is the subject and voice of Lockwood's novel.

By articulating only one half of the memetic operation, Ferguson and Bewes each maintain its connection—or its instantiation relation—to a world outside of computation. It's this relation that Lockwood's novel endlessly troubles by figuring it not as a connection but as a disconnection: "blink, synapse, little space-between. . . . It was the way the portal wrote." In Lockwood's novel, a voice—which seems necessarily instantiated, necessarily connected to a self with a larynx, a throat, and a tongue—nonetheless emanates from nowhere, from an in-between space, from a portal. This is the "voice of the internet" itself.

To posit a voice of the internet may seem reductive at best (aren't there many voices represented online? Many subcultures, counterpublics, and

lingos?). Meanwhile, the possibility of the internet's singular perspective doesn't seem like a liberatory artistic possibility so much as a technodystopian fantasy. Where, we might wonder, is the freedom in its free indirect operation? That a technical apparatus can represent the world freely, uprooted from the perspective of a human agent, is, however, precisely the motor for artistic freedom in Gilles Deleuze's books on cinema from 1983 and 1985. Taxonomizing images from film history, Deleuze lands on the "pure time-image," capable of articulating what he calls "free indirect vision." Newly available in free indirect cinema—a cinema that Deleuze identifies with films by Jean-Luc Godard, Roberto Rossellini, and Werner Herzog, among others—are images that open directly onto time itself, unencumbered by any relationship between universals and particulars, any subjectifying or objectifying gaze.²¹ Each pure time-image is "without metaphor," he writes, "bring[ing] out the thing in itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty, in its radical or unjustifiable character, because it no longer has to be 'justified.'"²² The only thing that connects time-images is their lack of connection—to each other, to the world outside of the film, to any agent, character, author, or viewer.

It is through Deleuze's writing on cinematic free indirect discourse that Bewes refines his definition of free-indirectness in contemporary fiction. The film images that Deleuze identifies with free indirect discourse radically break with focalization. They no longer have to justify themselves according to human perceptions because they don't gesture to a world *out there* instantiated by a seeing subject; they no longer attend to space in a way that mimics human perception. This cinema, Deleuze writes, has suffered a "sensorimotor collapse." It undermines the protocols of instantiation by collapsing the perspective of the film with that of the cinematic apparatus itself. The postfictional works that Bewes identifies with free-indirectness undermine it by collapsing the perspective of the novel with, well, the novel—as the perspectives of the author, narrator, and characters can no longer be differentiated, identified, and named as such.

If Godard's *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*, say, is an exemplary work of free indirect cinema in Deleuzian terms, then *No One Is Talking About This* could be called an exemplary work of free indirect fiction—or postfiction, although Bewes is careful to avoid the language of exemplarity, noting that it rests on the very instantiation relation (that is, a work of fiction makes an example of something in the world outside of it) that postfictional writing wrests apart. As we have seen, Lockwood and her protagonist are so close as to be indistinguishable. Whether speaking on behalf of *us* or *her* or *you*, *you*, *you*—it doesn't really matter. They are a "conjoined-dissociated pair of writers," and, like the lives of the two Ben Lerner's of *10:04*, the loose narrative

of *No One Is Talking About This* follows the loose contours of Lockwood's very recent life very closely.

Lockwood's protagonist, like Lockwood, is famous for her adeptness at internetspeak. She gives speeches based on her success, including, in the novel's final pages, that PowerPoint-assisted lecture at the British Museum. Halfway into the novel, however, her protagonist finds herself lurching offline when her sister's unborn child is diagnosed with Proteus syndrome, a rare and fatal genetic condition that causes parts of the body to grow out of proportion with the gestalt. Her niece's head is too large for her body; hers is the first case of Proteus syndrome to be diagnosed in the womb, and, because of the state's restrictive reproductive health laws, the baby can neither be aborted nor induced early to protect the life of her carrier.

The acute, violent humanity that the protagonist's niece introduces into her extremely online life—and the canny metaphor of Proteus syndrome for collective life on the portal (a growth outpacing the body politic)—might provoke the reader to resist the novel's second half as sentimental or exploitative. A *deus ex embryo*. Does it matter, then, that Lockwood's sister did have a child who received the first in utero diagnosis of Proteus syndrome, and that the impulse to make this condition figurative turns out to be as much the reader's as the writer's—and the protagonist's? “It spoke of something deep in human beings, how hard she had to pinch herself when she started thinking of it all as *a metaphor*,” we read (158). It is tempting, in other words, to think of her niece's life not as stranger than fiction but as fiction. As if the baby stood outside of “real life” and pointed to it—*it me*. But no such relation exists. In fact, the “earth of the baby,” as Lockwood calls it, is just as much a metaphor for the “earth of the portal” as the “earth of the portal” is a metaphor for the “earth of the baby.” Where one begins and where one ends, like the relationship between fiction and reality, are so close as to be “‘impossible’ and ‘paradoxical,’ . . . ‘presupposed’ and ‘severed’” (225).

Instead of conceding the connection between fiction and reality—a connection fueled by literary devices like allegory and metaphor, or cinematic devices like continuity editing—Lockwood's “conjoined-dissociated pair of writers” is “thinking, inhabiting, even forging the space of their disconnection” (6). The lurch offline, then, is a conceit—one that many readers of the novel have taken as proof of a false distinction, identifying the first half of the novel with life online and its second with life “off” it.²³ But the voice of the internet and the perspective of the portal transcend the divide, even as the protagonist, holed up in the NICU, finds its humor less funny, its temporality and political turmoil out of step with those of her niece's life. On both sides of the novel's section break we read, “This did not feel like real life, exactly, but nowadays what did?” (14, 206). *Real life*, something

presumably untouched by the portal, something that fiction—Lockwood’s or otherwise—could instantiate in prose “nowadays” seems somehow incongruous with living. When did this happen and why?

Bewes resists historicizing the collapse of the fictional conceit in contemporary fiction, although he loosely dates its “blazingly evident” rise in Anglophone fiction to the “two decades since the publication of J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003)” (5).²⁴ In not accounting for the historical conditions of postfiction, however, Bewes breaks from Deleuze, who, in an uncharacteristic and half-hearted paragraph, describes the factors that enabled the technological and philosophical feats of modernist cinema’s free indirect time-images. Deleuze writes:

The crisis [of the sensorimotor collapse] . . . has depended on many factors. . . . We might mention, in no particular order, the war and its consequences, the unsteadiness of the “American Dream” in all its aspects, the new consciousness of minorities, the rise and inflation of images both in the external world and in people’s minds, the influence on the cinema of the new modes of narrative with which literature had experienced, the crisis of Hollywood and its old genres. . . . Certainly, people continue to make [narrative-driven] films: the greatest commercial successes always take that route, but the soul of cinema no longer does.²⁵

In other words, select film images may unveil a disinterested cinema—an art formally free of perspectival, narrative, and ideological interest—but there is no such thing as disinterested art production. This is not a concession that Bewes is interested in making, although one might imagine, based on his loose periodization, a set of factors that has contributed to postfiction, as he describes its aesthetic project. It might go something like this:

The War on Terror and its consequences, the decimation of the welfare state, the social effects of deindustrialization and the radical insufficiency of the family wage, the cultural hegemony of Intellectual Property and “world building” dispositifs; the invention of targeted advertising, which has rebranded commercial demography as virtual subjectivity, the advent of cloud computing and social media, the inflated visual economy of endless screens, endless gamification, and endless “streaming” as a way of life.

To account for these material and social conditions “since 2003” would be to concede a connection—an instantiation relation—between postfiction and the world from which it emerges. This is, of course, precisely the relation Bewes understands contemporary novels to be undermining and, in a paradoxical project, the relation he wants to trouble through a theory of the novel that is, if not historicist, necessarily historical because teleological: a work of theory that tells “the story of the novel . . . *from the hypothetical perspective of the novel’s fullest realization*,” as he describes it (14). His is, importantly, a project of continuity, not rupture (sensorimotor or

otherwise). This continuity, based on the novel's longstanding use of free indirect discourse and its "evolving toward a thought . . . whose 'subjectivity' is located outside the novel's representational economy," allows him to claim the medium's pride of place in the contemporary cultural landscape. It justifies the novel's "singular" significance "in a technocratic era where all possible options for thought—data-linked to income, postcode, employment, demographic reporting, patterns of behavior—seem to have been anticipated and laid out in advance" (34). In such a world, and such a theory, the novel opens up "the site of a thinking that resists the imperatives of an increasingly 'interconnected,' networked, economically administered society" (19).

But what if this story of unfocalized thought were focalized differently—not around the novel but around the internet? What if the historical continuity between fiction and postfiction that Bewes posits is another way of articulating a historical rupture between the internet and "postinternet," as it has been advanced by artists and art critics since 2008 and, most relevantly, by Hito Steyerl in 2013. Although Steyerl doesn't entirely defend the coinage ("The internet is not dead. It is undead and it's everywhere"), she invokes it to describe a historical condition in which "images start pouring across screens and invading subject and object matter." "Postinternet" articulates a world in which "one cannot understand reality without understanding cinema, photography, 3D modeling, animation, or other forms of moving or still image."²⁶ She writes:

Far from being opposites across an unbridgeable chasm, image and world are in many cases just versions of each other. They are not equivalents however, but deficient, excessive, and uneven in relation to each other. And the gap between them gives way to speculation and intense anxiety.²⁷

This sounds awfully like a free indirect relationship between world and image, as advanced by Deleuze and Bewes—a mode of representation that forges the disconnection between them. World and representation, in the terms of postfiction and postinternet, are not simulacra but imitations with an unmarked difference. For Steyerl, however, the inflection of this difference is anxiety-ridden. The gap that opens up in the absence of an instantiation relation leaves room for financial speculation and social control. It is not a "hyperspace"—to call it that would reproduce a distinction between reality and virtuality that the postinternet condition endlessly troubles—but it nonetheless produces a gap, a disconnection between self and nonself, in which human subjectivity is endlessly performed, always addressed, and yet never anatomized. It's in this abstract realm—this realm of self-abstraction—that we are courted and surveilled as *someone like us*. Steyerl's is not a redemptive story of modernist cinema or the novel of pure thought. No, not a cinema of things in themselves opened up onto the world itself (Deleuze), nor a novel

of things that “thinks without a communicative function” (Bewes, 141), but “an internet of things all senselessly ‘liking’ each other, reinforcing the rule of a few quasi-monopolies.”²⁸

It is nothing new to acknowledge the novel’s commodity status, the ever-accelerating conglomeration of publishing, or fiction’s imbrication in networks of capital and prestige. Historians of the book and sociologists of literature have been tracking these markets for decades. But there’s a tendency in literary studies to hold free indirect discourse, as either a form or a logic, at a remove from such forces—to hold it up as a means of unlikely resistance. In rare agreement with Bewes, for example, Anna Kornbluh calls free indirect discourse “one of fiction’s magical properties.” For her, it functions as a representation of “collective intellection” and “construct[ed] generality,” allowing for a mode of thinking that “extrudes beyond proprietary subjectivity,” beyond “algorithmic theology,” beyond capital’s cooption of mass movements, on the one hand, and its data-driven market for personality, on the other. This would, indeed, be magical.²⁹

Lockwood draws the shades on these sunny views. Discovering the homology between postfiction and postinternet, she mines the free-indirectness of both medium conditions, incorporating their excesses of horror (“This did not feel like real life, exactly, but nowadays what did?”) and beauty (“She was an instantaneous citizen of the flash of lightning that wrote across the sky *I know*”) into a singular yet universal voice. Cracking open the discursive space of the ether—in which the virtual floods the material, and the Imaginary outpaces the Real—her novel speaks the internet. In her hands, free indirect discourse is no less inviolate and no more resistant to ideological capture than the novel or the internet itself. It’s a rhetorical mode that constructs generality *and* particularity, calling out for recognition and imitation. Novels can enact this impersonal collectivity and uncanny intimacy. Hers certainly does. But the “unaccountable” meme—the writing of *you, you, you* . . . , of *we* and of *us*—necessarily will.

Notes

1. Patricia Lockwood, *No One Is Talking About This* (New York, 2021), 3, 7, 139. Further citations will be parenthetical in text.
2. Walker Caplan, “All the Memes in Patricia Lockwood’s *No One Is Talking About This*, Explained,” *Literary Hub*, 22 February 2021, <https://lithub.com/all-the-memes-in-patricia-lockwoods-no-one-is-talking-about-this-explained/>.

3. Patricia Lockwood, "The Communal Mind," Winter Lecture, *London Review of Books*, 8 February 2019, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/podcasts-and-videos/videos/lectures-events/the-communal-mind>.
4. Patricia Lockwood, "The Communal Mind: Patricia Lockwood Travels Through the Internet," *London Review of Books* 41, no. 4 (21 February 2019).
5. In an effort not to close the questions of authorship that the novel leaves radically open, I'm using the tag "we read" to attribute a quote to the novel, instead of the more conventional form "Lockwood writes."
6. See, for example, Dorrit Claire Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, 1983).
7. D. A. Miller and Franco Moretti's readings are representative, for their influence and elegance, of this understanding of free indirect discourse: D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or, The Secret of Style* (Princeton, 2003); Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London, 2013).
8. Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, 2008).
9. Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan (Cambridge, 2005), 5.
10. See, for example, Frances Ferguson's claim—"I believe that free indirect style is the novel's one and only formal contribution to literature"—in "Jane Austen, *Emma*, and the Impact of Form," *Modern Literature Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 159.
11. Anna Kornbluh helpfully distinguishes between the "psychonarratological" paradigm (in which "there can be no question that FID ultimately gives us the character's own perspective") and the "political" paradigm (in which "FID decidedly gives us narration's perspective"); Anna Kornbluh, "Freeing Impersonality: The Objective Subject in Psychoanalysis and *Sense and Sensibility*," in *Knots: Post-Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Film* (New York, 2019), 38.
12. Miller, *Jane Austen*, 59.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, 1976), 192.
15. Nadja Spiegelman, "James Joyce's Love Letters to His 'Dirty Little Fuckbird,'" *Paris Review*, 2 February 2018.
16. David S. Wallace, "Patricia Lockwood on the Extremely Online," *New Yorker*, 23 November 2020.
17. As Timothy Bewes summarizes: "Free indirect discourse enables, in Bakhtin's words, the 'represent[ation of] someone else's idea, preserving its full capacity to signify as an idea, while at the same time preserving a distance, neither confirming the idea nor merging it with [the author's] own expressed ideology.' That reference to 'distance' is misleading, for in free indirect discourse the distance between author and idea is infinite, or we might say, vanishes to nothing"; Timothy Bewes, "Free Indirect," in *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, <https://www.politicalconcepts.org/free-indirect-timothy-bewes/>.
18. Frances Ferguson, "Now It's Personal: D. A. Miller and Too-Close Reading," *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 521, 522. Further citations will be parenthetical in text.
19. Timothy Bewes, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* (New York, 2022), 10. Further citations will be parenthetical in text.
20. Bewes pulls these adjectives from Miller, *Jane Austen*.
21. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, 1989), 183.

22. Ibid., 209–10.
23. See, for example, Alexandra Schwartz, “The Voice That Gets Lost Online,” *New Yorker*, 17 February 2021; and Adam Fales, “The Unpostable: On Patricia Lockwood’s ‘No One Is Talking About This,’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 16 February 2021.
24. He clarifies, “*Elizabeth Costello* does not inaugurate this mode of thought, nor does it bear any responsibility for it. Coetzee’s novel is simply one of the works from our own period that illustrates it most clearly” (5).
25. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (Minneapolis, 1986), 206.
26. Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?,” *e-flux* 49 (November 2013), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/>.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (Brooklyn, 2023), 197. Kornbluh’s agreement with Bewes about the power of free indirect discourse to resist the ideological imperatives of late capitalism—or what she calls “too late capitalism”—is noteworthy because it is, in fact, rare. For her, works of autofiction are symptomatic of too late capitalism’s impediments to collectivity, discernment, and, above all, art. She names works of autofiction “antifiction,” not postfiction, and contrasts them to novels narrated with third-person omniscience, which allow for the “imaginative indirectness, speculative adumbration, [and] collective collation” of free indirect discourse (195). In other words, where Bewes sees free-indirectness as the logic of much contemporary fiction, Kornbluh sees its extinction as a literary form. For both writers, however, free indirect discourse provides a political and cultural countertendency, a strategy for thinking outside of technocracy (Bewes) and immediacy (Kornbluh).