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Queer Realities: Disidentification, Utopic Realism, and Contemporary American Fiction

{T}he utopian is an impulse that we see in everyday life.
(José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*)

Near the end of Brandon Taylor's 2020 novel *Real Life*, the narrator observes: "Consider the act of breathing, which comes regularly and without effort – and yet the great surge of air that must enter and exit our body is an almost violent event, tissues pushed and compressed and slid apart and opened and closed, so much blood all over the whole business of it. Ordinary acts take on strange shadows up close" (269). Taylor's realism illuminates the almost-violence of ordinary acts, the "strange shadows" they cast upon our perceptions of the "real." But around the turn of the twenty-first century, realism seemed, in the opinion of some literary critics, to be at a breaking point, having been "philosophically compromised" (Beaumont 3) by postmodernity from at least the 1970s onwards. This "compromised" realism perhaps reached its nadir in a polemical 2001 critique from James Wood, who argued that the then-recent novels from Don DeLillo, Salman Rushdie, and Zadie Smith, among others, depicted characters who "could never actually endure the stories that happen to them" (180). Wood's notion of "hysterical realism" has proven a long-lived shorthand for thinking about contemporary Anglophone realism after postmodernity – a still-salient site of critical inquiry.[1]

Julia Breitbach identifies two critical impulses regarding contemporary literary realism: "those who maintain that literature today is still part of the aesthetics of postmodernism," and those who "attest to a whole new era of writing 'after' or 'beyond' postmodernism" (5). Robert Rebein makes a case for discontinuity, locating a "turncoat realism" at the beginning of the twenty-first century, citing shifts by prominent American writers such as

Jonathan Franzen, from writing "postmodern" novels to more traditionally realist ones (40). David Brauner veers closer to a model of continuity, arguing that realism has remained the "dominant mode […] of American fiction" (12). Others emphasize instead how contemporary realism is predicated upon an "unselfconscious mixing" with other modes, including "a few borrowed from postmodernism itself" (Rebein 30). For these critics, contemporary realism evinces "the technical experiments of postmodern fiction," even as it strikes a kind of "gentler balance" between "the attempt to accurately render life as it is and toward formal and theoretical play" (Dawson 5; Smith 31). But despite realism's newfound hybridity, Patrick O'Donnell bestows upon it "an amorphous designation" (36), while Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard similarly describe it as "an essential – if slippery as ever" formation (6).

During this same period, queer theorists were preoccupied with the temporal and affective possibilities of queer life. Despite its binary-defying ethos, queer theory's major debates over the past twenty years have perhaps unwittingly reified new dichotomies: positivity or negativity? assimilation or anti-assimilation? relation or anti-relation?[2] José Esteban Muñoz's theories of disidentification and queer utopia have proven particularly generative in their eschewal of these more rigid formations: "Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism)," moments of disidentification attempt to "transform a cultural logic from within" (*Disidentifications* 11), by "the reworking of those energies that do not elide the 'harmful' or contradictory components of any identity" (12).[3] While he parses out disidentificatory strategies from a pure utopianism, Muñoz nevertheless avers that such performances "require an active kernel of utopian possibility," arguing that we must "hold onto and even risk utopianism if we are to engage in the labor of making a queerworld" (25).

A decade after *Disidentifications*, Muñoz fleshed out such a utopian queerworld. Expanding upon Ernst Bloch's "unorthodox and messianic Marxism" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 86), in which the past performatively "does things" (28), Muñoz conceptualizes queerness as "a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility," a "utopian formation

based on an economy of desire and desiring" (26). Muñoz views queer identity as a desirous "horizon," an anticipated arrival, "always directed at the thing that is not yet here" (26). Taking up spaces such as stages and public toilets, Muñoz foregrounds the capacity of queer utopia to "offer us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what can and perhaps will be" (35). Muñoz distinguishes between possibilities, which "exist within a logical real, the possible," and potentialities, which "do not exist in present things," but exist "in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity" (99). Extending this line of analysis, the contemporary queer novel emerges as a site of interrogation for what is and what could be, a twinned inquiry which, I suggest, interprets the strategies of literary realism through the disidentificatory queer utopia.

I turn to four critically-acclaimed American novels published over the past twenty years to foreground these tendencies: André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* (2007), Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015), Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* (2020), and Sam Lansky's *Broken People* (2020). These novels negotiate the temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions of queer life by tempering the literary realist mode with what, following Muñoz, I term the "queer utopic" in order to both depict and narrate beyond the various (im)possibilities and potentialities of gay masculinities. From Aciman's neo-melodramatic, first-person narration of American expatriates in northern Italy during the 1980s, to Yanagihara's and Taylor's excavations of physical and sexual trauma, to Lansky's revisionary interrogation of bourgeois self-invention, these texts demonstrate Muñoz's assertion that queerness is "a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility" (*Cruising Utopia* 16). Through their temporal slippages, these novels relentlessly ask: What is real? What is possible? For whom and when?, questions with significant aesthetic and political consequences for both theories of queer life and contemporary American realism.

Queer Fictions, Utopic Realisms

"Time makes us sentimental. Perhaps, in the end, it is because of time that we suffer" (Aciman 232), declares Elio Perlman, the narrator of *Call*

Me by Your Name, a novel with afterlives in Luca Guadagnino's 2017 film adaptation, and Aciman's 2019 sequel, *Find Me*. Elio, seventeen years old, is a Jewish American living in Northern Italy; over the course of one summer in the 1980s, he falls into a slow-burning romance with visiting American graduate student Oliver. Their relationship evokes – but is a far cry 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). Such a tragic episode reveals how Aciman's disidentificatory, utopic imagining of the 1980s relies upon a carefully scaffolded, embellished realism.[4] Richard Kaye describes Guadagnino's film adaptation as a "Mediterranean vacation from plausibility, politics, and history," one "not set in any kind of recognizable world," a "fantasy universe where homosexuality represents no social transgression" (n. pag); Justin Hudak similarly notes that the film begins "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).[5] Via Kaye's and Hudak's claims about Guadagnino's adaptation, the workings of Aciman's source text come into sharper focus: how it imagines and erases different queer realities within the spatial, affective, and temporal protocols of the realist novel, shoring up the interstices of class privilege and their connections to sexual possibility.

Muñoz writes that the queer utopia "permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably constrained by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and institutionalized state homophobia" (*Cruising Utopia* 35). *Call Me by Your Name*, then, clearly foregrounds the utopic capacities of queer possibilities – even if these might be incongruous with actual queer histories. But beyond its erasure of homophobia and the urgencies of the HIV/AIDS crisis, Aciman's novel generically disidentifies with realism through its neo-melodramatic narrative voice. Thomas Elsaesser views melodrama as "failed tragedy" wherein the "values lies in performing this failure" (37). For Elsaesser, this failure suits melodrama to "an age that not only has lost faith in utopias, but has given up on solutions" (38). In the novel's titular scene of sexual passion and identity-swapping, Elio declares to Oliver, "You'll kill me if you stop," noting retrospectively that this was

"my way of bringing full circle the dream and the fantasy […] till he said, 'Call me by your name and I'll call you by mine,' which I'd never done in my life before" (Aciman 134). Elio's melodramatic rhetoric cleverly puns on the cessation of sexual intercourse as death, but beneath the surface of this aggrandizement lies melodrama's capacity, as John Champagne puts it, to "use the aesthetic to rearrange our present affective attachments" (12). Champagne argues that in the Italian context, melodrama "is not chiefly an imitation of reality" but instead uses "certain reality-effects in order to signify a 'something' else that cannot be reconciled in the symbol" (22). Aciman's disidentification with realism and his invocation of the queer utopic come into clearer focus by dint of *Call Me by Your Name*'s melodramatic first-person narration, attuned as it is to the ravages of temporal (im)possibility which unspool across its retrospective plot.

Aciman's relatively conflict-free, neo-melodramatic narrative might skirt the long shadow cast by "hysterical" realism, but Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* more readily – and intentionally – participates in the project of expanding realism's formal capacities. Intending "to marry two unlikely forms – the fairy tale and the contemporary naturalistic novel," Yanagihara wanted there "to be something operatic about the book, in both its structure and its celebration of melodrama" (Cheung n. pag.). Jude St. Francis, the novel's protagonist, is abandoned to the care of a monastery at birth; he 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," and which culminate in injury and a lifelong practice of self-harm (Yanagihara 785). In response to reader complaints that no one could suffer the amount of abuse that Jude does, Yanagihara responded, "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" (Melville n. pag.).[6] But even as Yanagihara locates her melodramatic naturalism within the realm of plausibility, she explicitly fuses it with strategies of the fairy tale, a genre which, according to Muñoz, "need not be a retreat from reality but can be a certain way of facing it" (*Cruising Utopia* 165). Indeed, the novel deploys the conventions of fairy-tale implausibility to more aggressively attenuate its naturalism: Jude gets a fresh start at life when he gains acceptance, on scholarship, to a prestigious,

unnamed university, where he meets a coterie of male friends – Malcolm, JB, and Willem. 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 a famous actor, JB a prolific artist, and Malcolm a renowned architect. And yet, despite these upward trajectories, the novel remains steeped in naturalist tragedy, as Jude turns out to be unable to overcome past waves of trauma and abuse; as Christian Lorentzen notes in his review, Jude, "an adult player in a melodramatic lifestyle novel, in which the point is to observe the way the passing of time affects the cast of characters, is static" ("Sessions with a Poker" n. pag.).

But while *A Little Life* deploys a deep abjection, optimism remains central to the novel's operative functions. Even when those around him – such as his friend and personal physician, Andy – interpret Jude's constant self-harm as acts of self-negation, Jude avers that such negation remains imbricated within a futurist teleology: "But 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" (Yanagihara 164). The novel's structure of feeling is akin to what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism," a "relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic" (24). *A Little Life* also depicts what Jack Halberstam describes as a "new kind of optimism" which "produces shade and light in equal measures and knows that the meaning of one always depends upon the meaning of the other" (5). Even as Jude chastises himself for "his arrogance and stupid hope" (Yanagihara 681), he also reflects upon the utopic trajectory of his life, how he "had gone from nothing to an embarrassing bounty," almost "as if his very life was begging him to forgive it [...] so he would allow it to keep moving forward" (635).

The novel's central queer narrative, Jude and Willem's relationship, further reveals the interplay between the utopic and the realist-naturalist mode. Marked as heterosexual throughout the majority of the novel, Willem's "complicated" feelings for Jude compound, even as he refuses identification: "I don't really think of myself as gay," he claims (532). Willem struggles to accurately describe 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)

Here, Yanagihara's realism becomes self-reflexive, calling attention to the ways in which forms of expression are defined, identified, and expressed through narrative; in this case, not "poetry or song," but the contemporary novel. But despite the novel's renderings of positive queer affect and its forays into the utopic imaginary, tragedy circumscribes the text, and returns its plot to a grimly realized conclusion.

In the novel's final pages, the reader learns from a second-person address (narrated to the now-deceased Willem) by Jude's adoptive father Harold, that Jude "injected an artery with air, and [gave] himself a stroke" (811), taking his own life. But the novel persists beyond Jude's death, ending where it begins: at Lispenard Street, in Tribeca, where Jude and Willem shared their first apartment. By recounting his and Jude's return to Lispenard Street, the novel's genesis point, Harold enacts what Nishant Shahani describes as the "retrospective possibilities of reparation" (15). Harold attempts to relegate the novel's innumerable traumas to "the past, the stuff of stories," pretending "that the time that lay behind us was scary, but the time that lay ahead of us was not" (814). The novel's final lines thus 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. 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 – a recursive way to imagine possibilities of life and narrative, and a distinctly queer one.

Like Yanagihara's novel, Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* was nominated for the Booker Prize, eschews historical references, and depicts a protagonist shaped by religious abuse, sexual trauma, and financial precarity. Wallace, the black, queer biochemistry PhD student at the center of *Real Life*, falls into a relationship with his peer, Miller (who, like Willem in *A Little Life*, refuses to identify as gay). But while Yanagihara celebrates melodrama, Taylor eschews descriptors such as "raw" and "visceral," noting that 'the

work of [B]lack writers often receives these coded, confining labels" (Wheeler n. pag.). And whereas Yanagihara's novel spans decades, Taylor's takes place over a single weekend, narrating Wallace's experiences at an unnamed, predominantly white university somewhere in the Midwestern United States. Taylor interrogates "the ways that an anxious queer black brain is mutilated by the legacies of growing up in a society […] where the body that houses it is not welcome" (Harris n. pag.). As such, Taylor frames *Real Life* explicitly as a campus novel, existing alongside works by Jeffrey Eugenides, Lauren Groff, and André Aciman (Adler n. pag.). Taylor "wanted to address the fact that as a genre […], [the campus novel] tends to exclude black people and queer people" (n. pag.); he intended to "take this genre and this milieu that I really respond to as a reader and to sort of write myself into it" (Franklin, n. pag.). *Real Life* thus functions as a conscious disidentification with the campus novel, a "working on and against," in Muñoz's words, this sub-category of the realist project.

Real Life narrates twinned dramas: Wallace's volatile relationship with the often abusive Miller, and his increasing dissatisfaction with graduate school. Wallace's cohort-mates are shocked when he finally admits, "I guess I sort of hate it here" (Taylor 24); they do not share his desire to "leap out of his life and into the vast, incalculable void of the world" (17). Wallace endures racist diatribes from his cohort-mates, but knows that his advisor, Simone, will do nothing, because "white people have a vested interest in underestimating racism, its amount, its intensity, its shape, its effects" (97). Other members of Wallace's ostensible friend group verbally torment him; others are silent, because "[s]ilence is their way of getting by […]. Only Wallace will remember it" (162). Through what Jeremy O. Harris terms the novel's "accumulation of aggressions – micro, macro, mental, physical" (n. pag.), Taylor's disidentificatory engagement with realism emerges.

Wallace's relationship with Miller occasions another textual disidentification. After a disastrous dinner party at Miller's house on Saturday evening, Miller tells Wallace he is "determined to be unknowable" (Taylor 191); Wallace relents, and finally talks about the past he has been so eager to forget. What ensues is a formal, temporal, and thematic departure from the novel's third-person omniscience: over the course of a single

paragraph spanning several pages, Wallace narrates, in the first-person, his upbringing in rural Alabama, where he was sexually abused by a boy in his neighborhood, and by an adult man. These traumas foreground Wallace's internalized feelings of shame, leading him to declare: "The past is not a receding horizon. Rather, it advances [. . .] marching steadily forward until it has claimed everything and we become again who we were [. . .]. I can't live as long as my past does. It's one or the other" (203). Wallace bifurcates his past from his present self, and his ability to survive. Eventually (like Yanagihara's Jude), Wallace "got the money to go to school and get away" (203).

Expanding notions of disidentification through quare theory, E. Patrick Johnson takes up bell hooks's notion of "homeplace," which hooks defines as "the one site where one [can] freely confront the issue of humanization, where one [can] resist" (qtd. in Johnson 112). In effect, Wallace narratively recounts his "homeplace" to Miller. A shared metaphor connects Wallace's homeplace with a newly disidentificatory, queer perspective of the "real." Wallace declares, of his time in Alabama: "if God wanted nothing to do with me, then I'd take the devil. I'd take him on my knees where I'd taken the men, let him pull me down in a bed of kudzu and fuck me, so long as I wasn't empty anymore" (Taylor 202-03). A hundred pages later, after Miller has sexually assaulted Wallace, and then repeatedly apologized, Wallace reaches the point of disidentification: "I'm bored by it now. I'm over it" (301). Miller responds: "This doesn't feel like honesty, Wallace. It doesn't feel real" (301). Wallace refuses to participate in Miller's constraining affective rubric: "You think that if I hurt you sufficiently, you will feel sufficient guilt to get you through this. Because you feel like a monster. But I don't owe that to you [. . .] I don't owe you any more pain than I've already dealt you. It's selfish of you" (301). Miller falls asleep, and the narrator observes: "The sound of Miller's breathing comes in and out, in and out; to Wallace it seems oddly familiar, like wind moving through the kudzu" (302). The kudzu, in Wallace's homeplace-recounting, functions as the metaphorical site of passive acquiescence to the cruelties that shaped his young life, but here, while "familiar," the evocation of kudzu gestures towards something different. As E. Patrick Johnson asserts, "quare studies

may breathe new life into our 'dead' (or deadly) stratagems of survival" (113).

Having disidentified with the intertwined constraints of racism and homophobia, Wallace applies his queer imagination to step beyond his strictured present: "This too could be his life, Wallace thinks. This thing with Miller, eating fish in the middle of the night, watching the gray air of the sky over the roof next door. This could be their life together" (Taylor 311). The reader might here object that the "thing with Miller" should *not* be Wallace's life, that he should completely evacuate himself from the orbit of Miller's aggression and violence. But crucially, Wallace thinks, this *could* be his life, not that it *will*, or that it *must*. Here, the queer utopia emerges not as idyll or pleasure, but as a steady, slow-building realization of possibility. We don't know what becomes of Wallace's future, because the novel ends with his past: narrating retrospectively the day Wallace arrived from Alabama and met his new cohort, including Miller. Like the end of *A Little Life*, Taylor's novel concludes with a foregone beginning, narrating the past in order to evince a queerly capacious future.

Following his 2016 memoir, *The Gilded Razor*, Sam Lansky's debut novel *Broken People* similarly deploys a realism predicated on the simple hope that things can improve. Both Taylor and Lansky released novels in 2020, and each shares autobiographical traits with their main protagonists; in the latter's case, even the same name, "Sam." After repeated stints in rehab as a teenager, Sam gets sober; he lives in New York, where he falls into a relationship with the wealthy Charles, and successfully sells a memoir of his teen years to a publisher. When his relationship with Charles ends, Sam, a culture editor for a large magazine (like Lansky himself) moves to Los Angeles to start anew. In L.A., he tries to write a novel, and ends an unsuccessful relationship with a man named Noah. The novel opens at a dinner party hosted by Buck, an older, well-off gay man; Sam overhears someone talking about a shaman who can "fi[x] everything that's wrong with you in three days" (Lansky 10). Sam accepts Buck's offer to pay for this experience of "transdimensional intercession" (54), led by a shaman named Jacob. The novel's plot then unfurls at two levels: the narrative present of the three-day shamanic ceremony, and Sam's psychic traversal of the past during the ceremony.

Broken People mediates the gulf between the "real" and the "possible" in part by satirizing contemporary American gay life. Sam pursues admission into the world of "rich gays," where "everything was put in its right place, where there was no dust or lint on anything, where things were expensive and beautiful and fit where they belonged" (132), but recognizes that his desires are "shallow and petty" (122). When Sam and Buck travel to Portland to meet the shaman, the narrator observes that "the whole thing felt so bougie, much more than Sam had anticipated, although given Buck's income bracket it probably shouldn't have come as a surprise that even his shaman would pick a restaurant that had Aesop hand soap in the bathroom" (53). Beyond these ironic deprecations – which temper Sam's earnest self-transformation – the novel remains cognizant of its own participation in the structures of bourgeois homonormativity.

But while *Broken People* narrates Sam's failure to integrate into the gay bourgeoisie, and his concurrent self-loathing and body dysmorphia, the novel also posits the "real" as an ever-shifting rubric: "It wasn't about the specifics – it was about the tenor of it, that rapturous young freedom and desire, this weekend and its honeyed beams of potential, of that luminous thought – *maybe it will be just like this forever*, a tangerine blur of dumbstruck euphoria, that vertiginous buzz as good as any drug" (139). While Sam is unsurprised that his relationship with Noah ends – "They were both addicts in recovery, which had given the beginning the texture of something laced with a speedy euphoria, all crackling energy and empty promises about tomorrows that felt so real in the whirl and spill of the moment" – their time together solidifies that for Sam, reality is most fundamentally something "felt" in "the moment" (32).

And so occurs the novel's utopic disidentification. Lansky uses the conventions of realism – a deep interiority and attention to detail, often modulated through free indirect discourse – to highlight its borders, the places where it seems to careen into moments of desirous, intense affect that align with the Muñozian utopic. But then, Lansky unsettles this arrangement; rather than upholding a normative vision of reality (and thereby, of realism), *Broken People* positions its psychic interrogation of Sam's past within the protocols of a shamanic ceremony which Sam himself questions throughout the text, unsure until the novel's end of its reality.

Crucial to Lansky's revised realism is the repeated embedding of doubt; numerous times throughout the novel, Sam (also voicing the reader's assumed skepticism) tries to deflate any utopic possibilities: "It wasn't possible, this idea that you could completely change in a single weekend" (28); "People did not heal in a weekend through some mystical experience. It did not matter how much money you had to try to buy it. It was not possible" (41).

Broken People thus mediates its realism by alternately puncturing and aggrandizing the possible, the potential. Sam yearns to transcend the strictures of his own reality, but the novel playfully embeds this transformation within the mundane: "He had imagined that everything about this weekend would feel serious, imbued with divine and mystical energy, but instead it was just more of the same" (150). Even when Sam thinks that the ceremony is "colossally silly [...] these three grown men sitting on the floor of a house in the Hills with all their mystical knick-knacks," the novel nevertheless depicts the reality of what seems impossible, implausible: "Sam wasn't altered but he felt weird, in a nonspecific way, like things were different" (145). By the end of the novel, Sam achieves a kind of utopic clarity about his own reality: "He had used [Noah], the way he used everyone. He had made it real, in his body, in the thing he hated most [...]. How strange this was, his ability to make things real. That he could will things into reality by believing in them fiercely enough" (255). Like the novelist he is striving to be, Sam can *make* reality. Recalling Wood's critique of hysterical realism – the unendurability of characters' experiences and lives – one might see a counterpoint in Lansky's hyper-subjective rendering of reality as self-made, possessing deep wellsprings of internal agency and the capacity to catalyze or change the boundaries of the "real" for oneself. Lansky's novel self-reflexively stages and rehearses the improbability, the impossibility, the unendurability of Sam's life, but in these dramatizations, he reveals its gaps, its pockets of utopic imagination – and their connection to narrative.

Early in *Cruising Utopia* Muñoz remarks, "shouting down utopia is an easy move" (10), later cautioning that "utopia is an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward," that it is "not prescriptive," but rather consists of "flux" (97). One might say the same of a post-postmodern

realism; as George Levine posits, "realism has always tended to contain (in both senses of the word) idealism of some form or other" (15). It is thus precisely the qualities Muñoz locates in the queer utopia – critiquing the present, affording an ideal, and refusing prescription – which prove a generative rubric for investigating how contemporary realism narrates the possibilities and potentialities of queer lives. My point is not to offer an already-ossified descriptor for American realism today, or to suggest that these novels render plans for literally enacting utopia. Rather, I hope to have shown that these queer narratives dramatize a persistently *utopic* movement across the possible and the potential; in their heterogeneity, they evince both a post-postmodern sensibility and a distinctly queer one, informing their engagements with the "real," and realism. Much more can and should be said about these novels, as well as the numerous others which take part in the overlapping corpus of twenty-first century American fictions, realist novels, and queer novels. But the temporal and affective valences of the queer utopia, and the disidentificatory ways in which they are encountered by minoritarian subjects – whether writers, characters, critics, or readers – offer enlivening paths forward for how we understand realism today, and into the future.

Notes

[1] In a 2019 review of Zadie Smith's most recent collection of short stories, Christian Lorentzen writes that, twenty years after the fact, we live "in an age that doesn't particularly cherish realist treatments of ambiguity," that "[i]t's time for hysterical realism to return from beyond the pale" ("Press Play" n. pag.).

[2] Lacking the space to re-narrate these already well-documented debates, I recommend James Penney's *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (2014) for a thorough history of recent queer theory.

[3] Unsurprisingly, identity figures largely in Muñoz's conceptualization of disidentification; following William Connolly, he views identity as "produced at the point of contact between essential understandings of self (fixed dispositions) and socially constructed narratives of self" (*Disidentifications* 6). Muñoz also derives these notions from Third World feminists and Chicana feminists, whose notion of "identities-in-difference" informs Muñoz's analysis of "those subjects who are hailed by more than one minority identity" (6, 8).

[4] For further information on Northern Italy during the 1980s, see Bull and Gilbert; Golden.

[5] Miguel Malagreca notes that the "AIDS pandemic affected Italy later than the United States," and that from 1983-84 "there was intense activity in gay groups" who "tried to learn as much as possible about the disease and the means of infection" (132-33).

[6] Numerous critics pointed out – and disagreed over the effects of – Yanagihara's deployment of melodrama. For Garth Greenwell, A *Little Life*'s engagements with "aesthetic modes long coded as queer: melodrama, sentimental fiction, grand opera" enable the novel to "access emotional truths denied more modest means of expression" (*Atlantic* n. pag.). Christian Lorentzen suggests that "as the book plunges on through its ahistorical decades, its style becomes more and more breathless, perhaps a reflection of its swelling romantic theme" ("Sessions with a Poker" n. pag.).

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