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Against Immediacy: Autofiction, AI, and the Decline of Mediation in Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

In *Immediacy: or, The Style of Too-Late Capitalism*, Anna Kornbluh argues that the contemporary cultural logic, which she terms “immediacy,” privileges immediate, unmediated consumption of art and literature. In literature, this manifests in the form of rejections of fiction and style, and in the growing influence of genres such as autofiction and technologies such as AI. Contemporary authors often regard fiction and style as artificial and as distracting from direct access to realities and experiences. Ironically, in the postmodern era, mediative forms such as fictionalization and style were seen as imperatives for communicating realities that could not be accessed through archival sources or direct representation alone. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, for example, fictionalizes the story of the enslaved woman Margaret Garner in order to render the enslaved woman’s lost history visible and to make the traumas of slavery communicable. Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* retells and fictionalizes the experiences of the veterans of Vietnam in order to tell their stories as they were felt rather than as they literally occurred, and in so doing, to forge connections between them and the civilians in the states. This thesis argues that such narrative practices provide an alternative to contemporary forms such as autofiction, which reject fiction and style as inauthentic and misleading. Similarly, the modern era generated styles in response to overwhelming cultural changes, and both made sense of the modern moment as well as situated it in the literary tradition. T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” exemplifies such a relationship to style through Eliot’s allusive method as a means to replicate the fragmentation of consciousnesses and societies in his time. When AI-generated writing is placed in contrast to “The Waste Land,” it becomes evident that AI’s style is not consciously grounded in the present nor in the literary tradition, and thus cannot meaningfully interpret the historical moment from which it emerges. Through examinations of these literary texts alongside theorists of postmodernism, mediation, and literary history, this thesis explores the potentialities for human and historical connection inherent in literary forms that embrace mediation, and argues for a renewed relationship to literary creation and consumption which is consciously grounded in the past, present, and future.

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Introduction

In her book *Immediacy: or, The Style of Too-Late Capitalism*, Anna Kornbluh argues that in the contemporary, society, art, and writing are characterized by a growing turn towards “immediacy,” which she defines as “a burgeoning cultural compulsion...to have done with mediation” (5). In the context of immediacy-driven literature, mediation refers to narrative construction, stylistic experimentation, and fictional invention. Kornbluh writes that “immediacy is a cultural style that imagines itself unstyled” (11). All writing is a representation of reality, and thus mediates, and stylizes the signified which it represents.¹ The turns from style which characterize contemporary literature are thus futile endeavors. Rather than attempt to do away with style, would it not make more sense to embrace style and reshape it in application to contemporary concerns? A text which is influenced by immediacy—and thus rejects its own inevitable mediation—can neither replicate nor substantially reshape the relationship of the reader or author to the world beyond the text. Only through fictionalization can we in the contemporary cultural moment reimagine and reorient our relationship to our individual lives, external experiences, and realities, and situate ourselves within the historical tradition to meaningfully make sense of the present.

In recent years, authors have adopted increasing concerns with authenticity as a result of the increase in mediated consumption, which is a result of a culture embedded in capitalism.² Consequently, many have begun to turn away from fiction, believing it to be inauthentic and

¹ In *The Guardian* article “Does It Matter If Authors Make Up Their Memoirs?” Maunsell cites Leon Edel, who writes that “[a biography] cannot imitate life ... it rearranges its material; it tells a flowing continuous story – something our lives never were.”

² In *Immediacy: or, The Style of Too-Late Capitalism*, Kornbluh coins the term “too-late capitalism,” which she defines as the contemporary stage of capitalist development, which is characterized by an acceleration in production and consumption. In the contemporary cultural climate from which “too-late capitalism” originates, products are produced and circulated at a rapid rate, which encourages forms of expression that are efficient, legible, and immediately consumable. In such a system, literature is increasingly pressured to conform to the demands of speed and accessibility, often at the expense of the complexity and mediation that enable for deeper reflection and understanding.

misleading (Kornbluh 70), and to turn towards alternate forms of literature such as autofiction. This shift is reflected in the work of writers such as Karl Ove Knausgaard, who rejects traditional narrative in favor of more immediate modes of expression. As he explains, “The only genres I saw value in, which still conferred meaning, were diaries and essays...that did not deal with narrative... but just consisted of a voice, the voice of your own personality” (qtd. in Kornbluh 65). For Knausgaard, fiction introduces a distance from lived experience, whereas forms which reject fiction and narrative promise a more direct and authentic access to the self. Thus, autofiction emerged as a literary response to the contemporary desire for immediacy, valuing voice and personal presence over the mediated structures of narrative.

Ironically, many individuals today are reliant on AI when writing academic essays, professional documents, and literature, even though AI is arguably one of the most inauthentic forms of mediation to exist in contemporary society. This irony is accounted for by an additional aspect of immediacy that Kornbluh presents: “The colloquial connotation of immediacy as ‘urgency’ underlines the temporal dimension of this style, a hurry-hurry that compresses time into a tingling present” (Kornbluh 6). Although this also applies to fiction—to “make things up” feels like a waste of time—it is most apparent through generative AI and the near instantaneous production of writing that it affords. This “hurry-hurry” also prevents individuals in the present cultural moment from being historically grounded. Writers and readers alike are too rushed to look backwards and too rushed to meaningfully take in their own historical moment, and, without meaningfully taking in the present, they cannot conceptualize a future. As a result, contemporary writers and readers miss out on many of the insights that the past might provide for making sense of the present moment, and contemporary literature struggles to create a literary style that adequately responds to the present.

The first chapter of this thesis examines *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, arguing that fiction's mediating structures are necessary for reconstructing histories that have been erased or excluded from the archive, and that such mediation enables forms of understanding that immediacy-driven approaches cannot access. The second chapter turns to *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, and suggests that fiction conveys the "truth" of experiences not by directly reproducing reality, but by transforming it, thus revealing the limits of unmediated, factual representation. The final chapter explores T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" alongside AI-generated writing, arguing that style, when grounded in historical context, allows literature to respond meaningfully to its moment, whereas immediacy-driven forms prioritize legibility and instantaneity over historical situatedness, reproducing rather than responding to their cultural moment. The drive towards immediacy in contemporary culture has prompted a growing disfavor of style, in both fiction and poetry; however, examination of literary history—particularly the modern and postmodern eras—suggests that mediation is necessary for faithfully and meaningfully engaging with experience, history, and collectivities.

In this thesis, I note general cultural trends, both those that have been identified by Anna Kornbluh, and those that can be tracked through other texts or through general cultural observations. Although I acknowledge that the things of which I am critical are in no sense "all bad," nor are they representative of literary production or culture as a whole, they are evidence of a growing trend. Autofiction is in no sense representative of all literature, just as not all authors reject fiction, nor individuals treat AI as a substitute for human authorship. Periods can be classified, though classifications are by no means all encompassing—especially in contemporary society, which is notable for the variation in its works of art and literature. However, if postmodernism is in many senses an intensification of modernism, and the contemporary period

is perceived as an intensification of, if not a continuation of, postmodernism, it is reasonable to assume that the trends which exist now will be compounded in the future. Thus, it becomes necessary to examine and critically view them now.

This thesis is addressed not only to critics, but to writers and readers. If immediacy has become a dominant cultural logic, then the question is not simply how literature reflects it, but how it might push back against it. The texts which this thesis will examine suggest that literature's capacity to represent experience, history, and collectivity depends upon the author's willingness to embrace mediation rather than avoid it. Writers must therefore resist the impulse to reject mediation, and instead cultivate forms of mediation which render the present cultural moment intelligible. This argument also assigns a responsibility to readers. In a capitalist society, writers not only create that which brings them fulfillment, but that which sells. If readers choose to only read and purchase texts that claim to provide unmediated access to reality, the texts which effectively make use of mediation, and access that which can only be accessed in this way, will go underacknowledged. Rather, if an author's implementation of mediation introduces fragmentation or ambiguity, the reader must be willing to experience difficulty or discomfort for the sake of understanding.

If the contemporary author does not direct their attention towards the crisis of mediation, writers and readers alike will not be able to meaningfully connect with individuals who have experiences unlike their own, with past eras, or with the present cultural climate. Temporally speaking, a superficial relationship with the present prevents the establishment of the contemporary moment within the domain of tradition, which threatens to detach the future from the past as well. As Charles Baudelaire writes in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life," it should be the aim of the author "to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical

envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory” (6). Baudelaire argues, “In short, in order that any form of modernity may be worthy of becoming antiquity, the mysterious beauty that human life unintentionally puts into it must have been extracted from it” (7). As Baudelaire claims, there lies “eternal” truth and conditions in “the transitory”---in other words, meaningful engagement with the present can provide insights which span across history. Although Baudelaire is often read as privileging the present, his call to “distil the eternal from the transitory” does not reject tradition, but depends upon it: the present only becomes meaningful insofar as it can be preserved and recognized within a historical continuum. In this sense, his project aligns with Eliot’s later formulation of the “historical sense,” in which the present is understood not in isolation, but as part of an ongoing literary tradition. In application to the contemporary moment, Baudelaire’s argument suggests that in order for the present moment to take its place in tradition, and in order for it to be preserved historically, the author must venture to create a literature which fully encompasses its conditions. Just as greater insight into the present is gained through engagement with past tradition, understanding the future necessitates meaningfully capturing and understanding the present. Because we exist in a historical continuum, if any period is not properly interpreted and reflected in the literary tradition, the succeeding periods will have particular difficulty creating a literature which responds to their time.

The literary text has long been understood as a site for connection: a medium through which individual experiences can become accessible to others, and through which readers are able to encounter lives, histories, and emotions beyond their own. This connective function is foregrounded in both modernist and postmodernist writing, which, despite their formal and contextual differences, share a concern with how literature might mediate between individuals and broader collectives. Toni Morrison reconstructs historical memory in order to give those

excluded from dominant narratives an opportunity to be heard, Tim O'Brien attempts to convey the experiential realities of shared traumatic experiences, and T. S. Eliot imagines a shared cultural consciousness in which fragments of the past are held in relation to the present. In each case, literary mediation does not simply reflect reality, but makes accessible realities which cannot be directly represented.

The contemporary turn toward immediacy, however, threatens this capacity for connection. By foregrounding directness, personal voice, and instantaneity, immediacy-driven forms often represent individual experience while rejecting collectivity, most visibly in the rise of autofiction. As a result, literature risks losing its ability to mediate between individuals and to situate personal experience within a broader cultural climate. If literature is to retain its connective function, contemporary authors must seek not to eliminate mediation, but to develop forms that can transform individual experience into something that can be shared and understood by others.

Chapter 1: Fiction and the Afterlives of Lost Histories in *Beloved*

Literature can only successfully forge connections between a reader and a subject through experiments with style³ and fictionality.⁴ As Namwali Serpell writes in *On Morrison*, “Unlike authoritative declarations of truth, fiction has no obligation to dispel ambiguity. It can make use of it—even intensify it—in order to evoke and transform experience” (Serpell 159).⁵

Yet much contemporary literature, influenced by the cultural logic of immediacy, turns away from mediation, style, and fiction itself. Authors influenced by immediacy turn away from style as a mere ornamentation, which obscures and adds a layer of artificiality to representations, and fiction as a waste of time, possessing little real world relevance or difference-making capacities. The loss of “fiction” to the genre of autofiction, which I will talk about in my second chapter, is one example of the fictional being rejected by contemporary authors. The autofictionalist Tao Lin “disdains fiction as subservience to readers, asserting, ‘I don’t want to make stuff up to entertain people. I want the writing to be helpful to me’” (Kornbluh 70).

Notably, this anxiety about mediation and its inability to accurately and practically reflect experience is not unique to the contemporary moment. It has origins in modern⁶ and postmodern

³ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer write in their study of “the culture industry” that style “stashes a ‘promise’ to disclose the general truths of its context and convoke general subjects. Style aims to transmit a “truth” (qtd. in Kornbluh 10).

⁴ Karl Ove Knausgaard writes in *My Struggle*, “Fictional writing has no value...The only genres I saw value in, which still conferred meaning, were diaries and essays, the types of literature that did not deal with narrative, that were not about anything, but just consisted of a voice, the voice of your own personality...Art cannot be experienced collectively, nothing can” (qtd. in Kornbluh 65). As Knausgaard is a dominant writer of autofiction, we will adopt his definition of fictionality as dealing with narrative and stories that are “about things,” as opposed to the genre of fiction itself. We might also add narration, character, plot, and myth to this definition, as Kornbluh categorizes them as forms of mediation which the writer driven by immediacy will avoid (Kornbluh 7), for “distracting” from the direct replication of reality that immediacy aims to capture.

⁵ Serpell likens this “breaking” and “reshaping” of tools and perceptions to Viktor Shklovsky’s concept of “defamiliarization:” “the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception” (qtd. In Serpell 159).

⁶ This is discussed in Chapter 3, in which “The Waste Land” is discussed. T.S. Eliot represents the cultural climate of the modern era, leaving the poem in fragments. In doing so, Eliot acknowledges that as an author, he does not have the power to defragment his time, or to fully correct the issues of his era, but he can represent them in a resonant way.

literature, which confronted similar concerns but responded in a fundamentally different way. The postmodern era was marked by an acknowledgement of the difficulty in representing stories that lay beyond eurocentric grand narratives—the dominant historical frameworks through which we view the past—as a consequence of the limited archives of the literary tradition. As Linda Hutcheon claims, postmodernism was marked by the emergence of works which responded to “those who had been ignored by the grand narratives,” who “demanded to be heard” (120). Linda Hutcheon classifies this genre of literature as “historiographic metafiction.” Postmodern authors had to actively fight against the totalizing influence of the grand narratives, and they acknowledged fiction as the only possibility for representing histories that are excluded from historical archives, or are otherwise not easily translated. Looking to the postmodern era, particularly the literature and criticism that responded to grand narratives, highlights that fictionalization is not untethered to, or a distraction from reality, but rather has a capacity to reveal beyond what reality can.

In her introduction to *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Saidiya Hartman alludes to the potential to create historical “counter-narratives” (xiv) that “counter” grand narratives and reclaim the narratives of the marginal from white appropriated history. Constructing these counter-narratives, Hartman argues, requires one to inhabit the inward lives and voices of the subjects. But how can these be recovered when they are excluded from historical narratives? They must become, as Hartman writes, “a narrative written from nowhere” (xiii)---narratives that pull from truths where they can be found, and that create their own truths when they cannot.

Beloved is one such “counter-narrative” that rewrites the historical narrative of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave that, anticipating capture, killed her baby to keep her from the horrors of slavery. Margaret Garner’s history, and the history of all enslaved black Americans, has been

circumscribed by historical documents written by white people. As Morrison quotes in her foreword, because there was not enough content in Garner's historical story, she decided to "invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues..." (xvii). She likewise suggests that "to render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way" (xix). In other words, such a personal account requires that the constraints and biases inherent in writing must be eliminated. As Namwali Serpell muses in *On Morrison*, "How can you use the very language that has been used to silence and oppress you?" and "how can language get out of the way...in a novel?" (158).

Morrison accounts for her imperfect grasp of the past in breaks from the traditional historical narrative, or the nonfictional. These breaks also reflect the imperfect grasp that the novel's characters have over their own histories and identities as a consequence of enslavement. Yet the novel also presents the potential for the characters to reclaim their identities and heal through relating to others. In this regard, the novel raises important theoretical questions about the relationship between the past and the present. *Beloved* posits the question of whether or not it is possible for an experience to be learned, and whether relating one's past to another through fictional and stylistic experiments can forge an intimate and healing relationship.

When *Beloved* is allegedly resurrected, although she is physically a woman, psychologically, she is still Sethe's baby—and, like a baby, she is lost without her mother. The first chapter which is narrated in *Beloved*'s voice is entirely free of punctuation, with the exception of the first line of the chapter: "I am *Beloved* and she is mine." (248). This, therefore, is the only thing that *Beloved* can say with certainty—as long as Sethe is hers, she is "*Beloved*." The rest of the chapter is narrated from a time when she was apart from Sethe—when Sethe was

aboveground and she was below. The abnormal syntax that characterizes this narration is extremely disorienting, and it makes it difficult for the reader to know Beloved and her true experiences. The reader is forced, instead, to try to piece her together from the fragments they are given. In the next chapter when Beloved succeeds in reaching Sethe, she takes on a physical form and the syntax returns to normal. This substantiates Beloved's claim that Sethe's face is her face (251), or that she has no self without her mother. Although Beloved's experience depicts the extreme, it represents, to some degree, the experiences of all slaves who were separated from their mothers. Babies and children rely on their mothers physically—for milk—and psychologically—for comfort and guidance. Giving this to one's children within the institution of slavery, however, is near impossible. Although Sethe resolves that she will be a proper mother to her children, her milk—her ability to physically care for her children—was taken from her by the white boys on the plantation. Because the enslaved are forced to give all that they have to their “masters,” they have little left to give to their children.

When one's maternal needs are not fully met, those needs pervade adulthood. In her essay “Memory and Mother Love in Morrison's *Beloved*,” Mathieson quotes Freud: “Childish love... is incapable of complete satisfaction and this is the principal reason why it is doomed to end in disappointment and to give place to a hostile attitude” (4). Because she went unmothered for many years, Beloved, in her physical manifestation, is locked in the mentality of a baby—and, like a baby, she will not be satisfied. The past which the novel aims to uncover, in its presentation, is reflected in this image of the unmothered baby. Never read and never acknowledged, the history of the black enslaved American is in desperate need of nurturing; but, because it has grown up without receiving the attention it requires, its needs are infinite. As with

Beloved, no matter how Morrison or the reader attempt to know the slave narrative, it will never be fully uncovered.

Nevertheless, the novel presents language as having the potential to forge relationships and heal. The men in the labor camp which Paul D. was imprisoned in are able to manipulate language to claim freedom from the white men. The men “sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings” (128). In making a secret language that is only their own, the men are able to relate to each other and find comfort in a shared suffering. Baby Suggs, likewise, preaches her “Word” to the black community so that they might untether themselves from the lingering traumas of slavery and its suppression of individuality, culture, history, and joy so that they might forge a new, healing relationship with themselves and their community.

However, even Baby Suggs’s “Word” is not sufficient to overcome the institutional suppression of black voices. Baby Suggs comes to learn the limitations of language when the black community, who she thought had been united by her Word, turn their backs on Sethe for having killed her daughter. As Baby Suggs suggests, “the mouth that spoke the Word, didn’t count” (212). The members of the community condemn Sethe’s actions because given that they had not been forced into her position, they cannot understand the lack of choice that Sethe had. There was nothing that Baby Suggs could say to this. “[S]he could not approve or condemn Sethe’s rough choice” (212), and thus she had no guidance, nor Word to give. As Michel Foucault suggests, cited by Hutcheon, there is a “power that lies inherent in the language we use daily” (121); However, the greater power lies in “the institutions that support and are supported by that language” (121). It is the institution of slavery and an acknowledgement of the powerlessness of her voice in relation to it that ultimately kills Baby Suggs’s heart and her Word.

In the majority of the novel, the narrator functions only as a medium for the voices of the novel's characters. However, in the last chapter of the novel, the narrator seems to take on a presence of their own. This presence comes with its own biases—the most apparent of which is their sympathy towards a certain “girl” (323), who is, implicitly, Beloved. This chapter takes on a sympathetic tone, the narrator repeatedly comparing the girl to a “loneliness” (323). In reading this chapter, the reader almost gets the impression that the narrator *is* Beloved, for all they inhabit her experience; however, it might be more accurate to say that the narrator is one who knows Beloved's situation well. Rody suggests that an omniscient narrator who makes their presence known to the reader does so out of “the desire for a human relationship” (622). However, as with Beloved, the narrator's name is not revealed to the reader—and “how can [we] call her if [we] do not know her name?” The narrator's hopes to be known are therefore futile, and they will remain a “phantom communicator” trapped in the retelling of the novel for an eternity.

The narrator repeatedly states that Beloved's story “was not a story to pass on” (323-324). Ironically, Morrison *does* pass on the story through the act of writing and publishing her novel. The novel also ends with “Beloved,” imparting this word as the most important to be remembered. It is possible that the phrase “It was not a story to pass on” does not mean that this story *should* not be passed on, but that it *cannot*. If Sethe, Denver, Beloved, and the narrator are the voices of the lost history of slavery, the incoherencies in their narration expose the inability of this past to be conveyed. Morrison, quoted by Rody, states in “Rootedness” that “because black people no longer live in places where parents ‘sit around and tell their children those...archetypal stories,’ the novel must take up the traditional ‘healing’ function of African-American folk music and tales.” The unconventional narration of Morrison's novel and

the reader's inability to fully grasp the narrators' language is indicative of the barrier which prevents the present from knowing the past. Morrison's postmodern voice forges its own language in an attempt to communicate with the past. As Rimmon-Kenan suggests, "the stubborn" (or ambiguous) in postmodernism "forces us to renounce a feeling of mastering the experience" (119). The reader's inability to comprehend the narration of *Sethe*, *Denver*, and *Beloved*, and their inability to know the narrator make them unable to "master" the experience of reading. Ironically, therefore, even if readers want to "call [Beloved's] name," or be fully receptive to the history of slavery through the lens of those who were subjected to it, they cannot. The narrator, however, compels the reader to try—they may not be able to "call her name," but they can "rock" and sooth the phantoms of the past if they listen to that which can be heard (Morrison 324).

Just as the inability to master the narrative of works of historiographic metafiction brings the reader discomfort, the postmodern author had to actively fight against the inclination to evade that which could not be known with certainty, and which could only be represented through fictionalization. In order to do this, they had to situate themselves in opposition to the "dead," but normalized languages of the cultural majority. In her 1993 Nobel Prize Lecture, Toni Morrison tells the story of a wise blind woman challenged by a group of children to tell them if the bird they hold in their hands is alive or dead. The woman responds that she cannot know whether the bird is alive or dead, but she does know that the bird is in their hands. Morrison implies that the bird represents language, whose fate depends on how people choose to use it.

Morrison suggests that language can become "dead" when it evades difficult realities or refuses to engage imaginatively with the unknown. She argues that the writer has the responsibility to keep language alive by using narrative imagination to approach realities that

cannot be easily known or articulated. In the contemporary literary moment, however, the language that risks becoming “dead” is the language of fiction itself. Within a culture shaped by immediacy, mediation and fictional invention are often rejected in favor of direct representation, as fiction is perceived as obscuring rather than illuminating reality. Yet Morrison warns that language dies not only through censorship but also through disuse, indifference, and the absence of esteem. When fiction is rejected as trivial or deceptive, literature risks becoming the language “content to admire its own paralysis” that Morrison cautions against.

The writer’s impulse to avoid fictionalization is not unique to the contemporary moment. It is human nature to seek certainty and mastery; when confronted with what cannot be fully known, the impulse is to turn away from it. This results in forgetting, or not acknowledging that which lies beyond the surface of the individual and history. In *Beloved*, Morrison writes, “Disremembered and unaccounted for, [Beloved] cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name?” (323). This “disremembrance” is inevitably produced through circumstances (“they don’t know her name,” as the narratives of the ghosts of slavery are unknown), but also through neglect (“no one is looking for her”).

Although postmodern and contemporary authors face similar challenges in regards to how to faithfully depict a meaningful narrative, they respond in fundamentally different ways. As Kornbluh argues, many contemporary authors consider that to create fiction is to “make stuff up,” or to waste time on writing with no real-world value. By contrast, postmodern novelists pushed back against the urge to avoid aspects of the past that cannot be known. Rather than retreating from uncertainty, postmodern novelists embraced fiction as a means of approaching histories and experiences that could not be directly recovered. Through fictional experimentation

and narrative invention, they attempted to represent the lives and voices excluded from traditional archives.

For postmodern writers, by virtue of fictional experiments, storytelling became an act of preservation and recovery. Fiction allows language to grapple with histories, experiences, and emotions that might otherwise remain unknown. Without such mediation, the most significant gaps between what is known and what remains inaccessible cannot be bridged. Even if immediacy-driven writing can represent certain aspects of reality, it will struggle to engage those experiences which resist direct representation. As Kornbluh observes, the contemporary rejection of fictionality often produces writing in which “the streaming consciousness of open spread continually conjures a revolt against character, form, and fictionality itself, after which liquesces the truth and the real” (71). In other words, abandoning fiction does not bring literature closer to reality, but risks dissolving the narrative structures through which truth can be meaningfully articulated.

Another thing that has turned contemporary authors away from fictionalizing history is the growing concern over the ethics of representation. Writers increasingly question their authority to tell stories that are not their own, particularly when those stories involve marginalized or traumatic experiences. As Leigh Gilmore notes, representing collective trauma raises difficult ethical questions: “Could a survivor of trauma offer a personal history of a collectivized experience—the Holocaust, for example—which incorporated invention? What does the autobiographer owe to history, and who will decide?” (47). These concerns have intensified in recent years, as debates about cultural appropriation and misrepresentation have raised the issues regarding who has the right to tell particular stories. While such considerations are important, as authors inherently gain truth-telling authority over stories that they convert to

text—especially when they are underrepresented in the literary tradition—abandoning fiction altogether would risk silencing the narratives that are not easily accessible.

By foregrounding its own constructedness, historiographic metafiction does not claim absolute authority over the past or the experiences of the marginalized; rather, it exposes the gaps and uncertainties within the literary tradition while attempting to imagine the lives that those gaps conceal. In this way, fiction does not obscure reality as those affected by immediacy may suggest, but it makes perceptible a reality which is all encompassing. As Morrison suggests in her lecture, language has the capacity to show a reader “how to see without pictures,” or to access experiences that resist direct representation. Therefore, rather than surrendering to the cultural impulse toward immediacy, writers must continue to cultivate forms of storytelling capable of engaging uncertainty, preserving language, and sustaining the possibility of collective understanding.

Chapter 2: Autofiction, *The Things They Carried*, and the Limits of Direct Representation

The contemporary literary market has witnessed a growing popularity in memoirs and other forms of life-narratives, reflecting the broader cultural demand for immediacy and unmediated experience which Kornbluh identifies. As Herges and Krimmer write in their introduction to *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, “The memoir forwards a truth claim that is rooted in an identity claim and is, at least in principle, open to verification...memoirs satisfy a ‘thirst for authenticity’ in a cultural moment that is marked by increasing alienation and second-hand experience” (8). Herges and Krimmer allude to influences of postmodernism which are still felt today, such as the idea that individuals do not possess distinct identities and that there is no such thing as a coherent “truth.” These ideologies are intensified in the contemporary literary moment, as are “alienation” and “second-hand experiences.” Kornbluh argues in *Immediacy: or, The Style of Too-Late Capitalism*, that immediacy emerges in response to the growing sense that experience has become mediated and distant, producing a cultural desire for forms that appear to offer direct access to lived reality. Memoirs, and other forms of life-narratives, seem to satisfy this need more so than any fictional narrative might. The avant garde of contemporary life-narratives, autofiction, has developed under similar beliefs. Autofiction originated out of the postmodern concern with representing those whose voices are traditionally excluded from literature—the same driving force behind Morrison’s *Beloved*. However, its direction shifted once it became absorbed into the cultural logic of immediacy, and it has ultimately failed to fulfill its connective potential. Tim O’Brien’s novel *The Things They Carried* provides an example of what autofiction which pushes back against the influences of immediacy—particularly, the rejection of notions of collectivity and the use of fiction—might have been, and what it might still hope to accomplish: a bridge between

those represented within dominant social narratives and those with experiences that have been marginalized.

Autofiction is, as Herges and Krimmer argue, a branch off of memoirs. The main distinction between these two genres lies in their respective relationships to truth. To classify a novel as a memoir is to claim a certain truth to its contents. However, memoirs often contain inaccuracies and fictions which simply go unacknowledged. As Herges and Krimmer write, “we tend to make our memories fit social and cultural expectations; for example, by imposing or increasing coherence or consistency, by altering inconvenient memories to flatter our egos, or by conforming to established plotlines built on an arc of crisis and triumph or youthful error and maturation” (10). Autofiction is in part a response to these inevitable departures from the truth inherent in memoirs: autofictionalists choose to embrace and be honest about fictionalization rather than to reject it. Yet this function alone does not fully account for autofiction’s significance.⁷ In order to access reality in its plainest form, autofiction does away with typical elements of narrative, such as plot and character development. If “we tend to make our memories fit social and cultural expectations...by conforming to established plotlines,” then to do away with plot altogether would eliminate such falsifying mediations. To renounce character development would prevent similar twists to truth for the sake of the narrative arc. Autofiction chooses instead to focus on a narrative “voice,” which transmits “truth” without embellishments.

Autofiction as a genre emerged with the publication of Serge Doubrovsky’s 1977 novel *Fils*. Doubrovsky argues that his novel does not align with any existing genre, and thus coins

⁷ Herges and Krimmer characterize autofiction in the following quote: “the term autofiction remains ill-defined. While some argue that its constitutive element is a conscious decision to introduce fictive elements into a factual narrative, others insist that autofiction is characterized primarily by its use of aesthetic and stylistic devices that are typically associated with the novel, such as stream of consciousness, radical shifts in narrative perspective, a loose or open-ended causality and an open-ended symbolism that renders meaning opaque and elusive...[Autofiction] usefully draws attention to the fictional component inherent in every narrativization of the self, to the kind of truth that adheres to symbolism rather than empirical fact, and to the self-knowledge derived from imagining alternate lives” (7).

“autofiction” as a new classification. In his essay “Autobiography/Truth/Psychoanalysis,” Doubrovsky writes, “Autobiography? No, that is a privilege reserved for the great people of this world, in the autumn of their years and in the grand manner: fiction, from events and facts that are quite real; autofiction perhaps from having entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language ... ” (34). In this essay, Doubrovsky discusses the subject of autofiction, whom he terms “the man in the street.” Doubrovsky writes, “In [the case of autofiction], fiction would be a narrative ruse; not entitled by his merits to write an autobiography, the ‘man in the street’ that I am has to palm off on his readers his real life in the more pretentious guise of an imaginary existence in order to gain their reluctant attention” (34). Autofiction is, in essence, an autobiography about a common, or socially overlooked character that makes use of fictional elements in order to gain the reader’s attention. There is more to fictionalizing an autobiography than engaging a reader, however; as Doubrovsky writes, “the reading of fiction expressly presented as such allows for processes of participation, identification or idealization quite different from those governed by the ‘reality principle’” (38). By virtue of its use of fiction, autofiction enables readers to embody the experiences of the subject, and to gain a deeper understanding of them by virtue of this identification. However, as Kornbluh notes, recently, autofiction has turned away from these elements of fictionality.

Kornbluh characterizes the literary style of immediacy as one in which “[f]iction, narrative, impersonality, and collectivity withdraw; reality, voice, personality, and atomism ascend... Among literati, immediacy as a literary style goes more readily by the name ‘autofiction’” (68). To Kornbluh, autofiction is the literary embodiment of immediacy. She continues, “Redacting fictional construction, duration, and figuration, autofiction delivers identity, instantaneity, it-ness. It moves ‘to get to the things in themselves’” (68). Autofiction is

thus a direct response to immediacy, privileging immediacy over mediation, and in doing so narrowing literature's capacity to represent and connect experience.

One of the most famous works of autofiction is Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, which documents the events of Knausgaard's daily life over the course of three years and six books. As Kornbluh notes, *My Struggle* reads more like a succession of journal entries rather than a novel, as it has no plot nor character development. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Knausgaard remarked, "I had felt for many, many years that the form of the novel, as I used it, created a distance from life. When I started to write about myself, that distance disappeared." Knausgaard thus wrote *My Struggle* in response to the same cultural logic that Kornbluh diagnoses. Knausgaard claims that his reason for writing about himself was "because it gave my writing a more direct access to the world around me"---in other words, out of all literature, autofiction seemed to give him the most immediate "access" to the world. Yet it is worth noting that Knausgaard has since returned to writing fiction. In the interview with *The New Yorker*, Knausgaard was asked, "You're back to writing fiction again. Has *My Struggle* affected how you experience that?" Knausgaard responded, "It has. I feel much freer. The hard thing is to find the sense of obligation. Because you're free---you don't *have* to be true. And it still needs to be." After writing *My Struggle*, Knausgaard became comfortable with what initially had felt like inauthenticity. Although a big part of the strength of *My Struggle*, as Knausgaard acknowledges it, is that it enabled him to write freer fiction, *My Struggle* gains critical attention heavily disproportionate to his succeeding fictional works of fiction. While Knausgaard himself ultimately returns to fiction as a site of creative freedom, the critical and popular reception of his work emphasizes a continued preference for forms that promise direct access to lived experience.

One novel that offers a positive model for what autofiction might have been, and might still become, is Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien's novel was published in 1990, and it relates the experiences of a unit of soldiers in the Vietnam War, calling attention to the fictional aspects of its narrative form in order to argue that fictionalization and stylistic experiments are necessary to bridge the gaps between experience. O'Brien's narrative is not autobiographical; as he notes, "though "a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier, ... [a]lmost everything else is invented" (171). Moreover, like typical autofiction, O'Brien's novel rejects the idea of an absolute "truth," and blurs the line between what is real and what is fiction. In the text, O'Brien suggests that fiction has the capacity to be more real than reality, which is a premise that can be traced through the use of fictionality in additional postmodern texts such as *Beloved*.

Ultimately, O'Brien's novel provides an example of what Kornbluh argues that contemporary cultural production has lost: a connective literature which embraces mediation. O'Brien demonstrates that narrative can serve as a site for connection between a subject and a reader, if the subject is properly conveyed. O'Brien's subject—the Vietnam soldiers—is heavily disconnected from the Americans untouched by the war living in the states. To emphasize this disconnect, O'Brien writes about correspondences the soldiers have with women in the states. One example is the narrator's Lieutenant Cross and his "girl" Martha, whom he is deeply in love with. For him, she serves as a connection to the world back home, and a source of comfort amidst the war. It is implied—and later confirmed—that Martha does not love him back. When they meet up after Cross returns from Vietnam, she tells him that "[s]he didn't understand how men could do those things. What things? He asked, and Martha said, The things men do. Then he nodded. It began to form. Oh, he said, those things" (28). Ultimately, the war becomes a source

of separation between them. Writing, however, serves as a possible redemptive force. O'Brien writes, "I told him that I'd like to write a story about some of this. Jimmy thought it over and then gave me a little smile. 'Why not?' he said. 'Maybe she'll read it and come begging. There's always hope, right?'" (28). Lieutenant Cross is hopeful that the narrator's novel might express the war in a way that makes Martha understand his humanity, and makes her able to connect with him in spite of the barriers of experience.

As O'Brien suggests, however, creating this connection would not be possible had he written the events exactly as they happened. Some experiences, written exactly as they occurred, are not fathomable to a reader. One chapter in O'Brien's novel, "How to Tell a True War Story," revolves around a letter that was sent from the soldier Bob Kiley to the sister of his friend Curt Lemon after he was killed in the line of duty. The letter was a reflection of the love that Kiley had for Lemon and the grief that he felt after losing him. It was intended to connect with Lemon's sister so that they might share the grief, and so that she might know Lemon as he had. However, the way that the soldiers loved, bonded, and expressed love was unlike that of the people back home. O'Brien writes that the letter was "very personal and touching," and Kiley "gets all teary telling about the good times they had together" (64). Kiley writes about Lemon's sense of humor, and how he "made the war seem almost fun" (64). He writes about the ways that the soldiers translated their emotions to behavior, something that would appear crude and insensitive to the average person and could not be understood by those outside of the war. This is supported by the fact that Lemon's sister "never writes back" (65).

If a narrative which tells events as they occurred fails to be understood, it becomes necessary that the narrative be altered. In the same chapter that discusses Kiley's letter, O'Brien writes his own "letter." O'Brien tells Lemon's death to the reader four separate times, each in

new ways. Each retelling of Lemon's death forefronts different aspects of the same event, as if O'Brien writes the events down as they "reappear" in his head. To O'Brien, truth does not lie in the reality of the events as they occurred, but in how they were experienced by the individual; in other words, truth lies in the memories and the "reappearings." When the bounds of reality are disrupted by trauma, loss, and the instability of memory, experiences cannot be told linearly. O'Brien suggests that traumatic events cannot be accessed as fixed historical narratives, but only through reimaginings and repetitions that resemble the workings of memory. These "reappearings" mark the distance between lived experience and communicable narrative, a distance that can only be bridged by fiction.

Yet for O'Brien, memory alone is not enough. O'Brien tells the reader, "Beginning to end...it's all made up. Every goddamn detail" (81). Even memories are not abstract or authentic enough to make an experience digestible—they require conscious fictionalizations and alterations. As O'Brien writes, "All you can do is tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth" (81). O'Brien ultimately does suggest that fictionalizing experiences can make them understood by others. He notes that each time someone hears, and misunderstands his story about Curt Lemon, he tries to tell it in a new way. Whether he believes it sincerely or is compelled by psychological necessity, O'Brien believes that "you can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it" (81).

It is not the exterior reality that O'Brien's novel may or may not refer to that is important—it is the truth that might be found within the text itself. This is where O'Brien's "truth" and "untruth" lies. O'Brien demonstrates that narrative has the potential to do more than replicate reality, as previous narratives attempted to do—it might create something that is more real than reality. Kornbluh claims that this is the very purpose of art. She writes,

“Conventionally, art takes up a discernable medium and takes creative distance from the ordinary communication or banal functionality, making an appeal to the senses that reroutes common sense. A painting isn’t an efficient way to send a message or achieve a goal, but beholding its inefficient indirection can stimulate thought” (5).⁸ By virtue of its “inefficient indirection,” a painting, or another piece of art, has the capacity to make its viewer look at something seemingly ordinary—or easily explainable based on preconceptions—through a different lens. Thus, the “inefficiency” which immediacy-driven individuals so detest is, in fact, that which renders art powerful. Without this “inefficiency,” art loses its transformative potential, and contemporary culture loses a lens through which the complexities of social life can be represented and understood.

Moreover, whereas contemporary autofiction rejects the possibility of collectivity⁹, O’Brien conceptualizes his presence in the novel as a part of a collective subject. Although it draws from O’Brien’s lived experiences, and the narrator shares his name, *The Things They Carried* does not have the clear “I” subject that characterizes typical autofiction. In *The Things They Carried*, the degree of fictionalization that the narrative undergoes makes it unclear whether the narrator, Tim O’Brien, is the author, or if he simply shares his name. This contrasts with typical autofiction, in which breaks from fiction unleash, rather than disguise presence (Kornbluh 72). By so decentralizing himself, O’Brien creates a collective subject which is not just himself, but all Vietnam veterans. O’Brien’s novel thus grounds itself in the idea that collectivity does exist. His distinction between this subject and the “other”---the reader and those “back home”---rejects the postmodern and

⁸ Kornbluh’s discussion of art’s capacity for “inefficient indirection” echoes Shklovsky’s idea of defamiliarization, as discussed on p. 6.

⁹ In *My Struggle*, book 2, Knausgaard writes, “Art cannot be experienced collectively, nothing can” (qtd. in Kornbluh 65).

contemporary belief in the homogeneity of people, suggesting instead that it is precisely the existence of difference that makes mediated connection possible.

By representing a body of “*men in the street*,” O’Brien embraces a collective relationship with lived experience, treating his relationship to the war not as a private autobiography, but as a shared narrative reality. Thus, *The Things They Carried* expands the scope of autofiction beyond self-representation, relating the reader to a dispersed subject united by shared trauma and circumstances. O’Brien’s novel therefore has the potential to forge greater connectivities than other works of autofiction, demonstrating the author’s responsibility to assume, through narrative form and fiction, the voices of collectives whose experiences cannot be directly articulated. By representing a collective identity in his novel, O’Brien also expresses optimism that his reader might be able to adopt some degree of empathy towards his subject. If collectivities exist between people, as O’Brien suggests in the novel’s assumed collective subject of the Vietnam veterans, and if these connections can be forged through shared experience, then a literature which can adequately convey experiences might be able to make those who feel isolated exist in a collective. This possibility of forging such collective connections through literature depends not only on narrative form, but on how authors orient themselves to the historical moment in which they write.

The impulse to periodize is primarily a critical one. Critics attempt to organize literary history into distinct eras in order to distinguish and make sense of the relationship between texts and their contexts. Writers do not necessarily engage directly with periodization. Rather than analyzing texts and tracking historical trends, writers create, and ultimately shape the periods that the critics diagnose. In the contemporary literary moment,

however, the relationship between criticism and creative writing has become increasingly intertwined. Many writers now emerge from academic environments in which literary criticism and experimental writing coexist. As a result, authors frequently internalize the critical drive to define their era and respond to it stylistically.

Although they do not engage with periodization directly, authors respond to the moment from which they write. The anxieties surrounding unique creation, particularly, although grounded in critical conversations, influence authors as well as critics. Given the vast expanse of the literary archives, and the current publishing boom, authors are increasingly concerned with how their work can stand out among the crowd. Thus, originality is not only the concern of the critic, who considers how authors can identify and respond to the contemporary cultural logic through literature, but of the author, who wishes to create a name for themselves in an increasingly saturated publishing market.

Critical conversations surrounding originality often circle around Fredric Jameson's concept of the death of the subject. In his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Jameson characterizes the death of the subject as a condition in which "the writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds—they've already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible; the unique ones have been thought of already. So the weight of the whole modernist aesthetic tradition—now dead—also 'weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living', as Marx said in another context" (4). Consequently, according to Jameson and other proponents of postmodern theory, writers in the postmodern period and beyond face increasing difficulty in producing genuinely original styles, often turning instead toward the imitation and recombination of pre-existing forms.¹⁰

¹⁰ Jameson suggests that for a postmodern author to make use of modernism's stylistic forms is equivalent to "the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language" (3)--what he terms "pastiche."

The death of the subject has ultimately developed into the contemporary rejection of style—or the embrace of immediacy. For one to articulate something original suggests the possession of an individual, consolidated self. The implications of the death of the subject were that individuals no longer possessed unique selves, and thus the writer is themselves a pastiche, or a fragmented blending of identities and voices. To free themselves from this crisis of identity, therefore, the contemporary author attempts to assert themselves as having a unique interiority from which a unique style can be created. Thus, the contemporary author embraces immediacy, forming a new style which eschews stylization itself.

A distinctive interiority cannot emerge from rejecting the forms of the contemporary market or literary archive, but from engaging, internalizing, and situating oneself within the literary tradition. In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot gives an alternative relationship to tradition that is neither nostalgic nor an outright rejection. Although Eliot is considered to be one of the central figures of modernism, his account complicates the modernist emphasis on novelty, arguing instead that literary value emerges through a thoughtful engagement with the past. In fact, Eliot critiques the tendency to overemphasize a poet’s difference from their predecessors. He claims, “if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (36-37). Eliot argues that an individual voice and a modernized literature can still be achieved when engaging with the literary tradition—in fact, he argues that such a literature might be the “best” and “the most individual.” Eliot argues for a “historical sense” which holds a perception “not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (37). Eliot does not claim that this relationship to tradition detracts from one’s sense of the present; in fact, he believes that it is through this

awareness that an author becomes “most acutely conscious of his place in time” (37). In order to have an authentic relationship with literary tradition, then, one must not see one’s era with historical blindness, nor as needing to break distinctly from the past; rather, they should see their present moment as existing on a continuum.

O’Brien exemplifies this approach to narrative in his novel. *The Things They Carried* resists belonging to any single literary era, rejecting previous traditions as wholly capable of communicating the experiences of its subject while simultaneously drawing from them. O’Brien selectively adapts and reworks techniques of modernism, postmodernism, and his contemporary moment, treating them as an arsenal through which to best tell his story so that it might, even in a limited capacity, be understood by a reader. For one, O’Brien’s narrative makes particular use of modernist interiority. Rather than depicting a generalized “soldier-type”---who might be duty-driven, patriotic, and hardened—as a conventional realist war novel might, *The Things They Carried* focuses on the interior and emotionally wrought experiences of individual soldiers. This attention to interior complexity aligns with modernist concerns, especially the effort to represent the complex internal lives of characters.

At the same time, O’Brien rejects modernism as wholly capable of accomplishing his purposes. O’Brien uses Martha and her literature studies at Mount Sebastian to criticize academia and traditional literary form, suggesting that it is not sufficient to address aspects of the present moment—especially the war abroad. The narrator notes, “She was an English major at Mount Sebastian, and she wrote beautifully about her professors and roommates and midterm exams, about her respect for Chaucer and her great affection for Virginia Woolf. She often quoted lines of poetry; she never mentioned the war, except to say, Jimmy, take care of yourself” (2). “Great affection” and “respect” do not denote a great passion for or connection with these

authors, which implies that studying the literature of the past might not have the capacity to move someone in the future without proper mediation to elucidate the relevance of the past to the present. Martha learns about the writers of the past, but she “never mentioned the war,” suggesting that nothing she studies prepares her to have a conversation about her present political moment. In terms of the need for a modernizing style, Martha “wrote beautifully,” but the “pretty poems” and prose of the past are not sufficient to capture the complex beauty and horror of the war. As O’Brien writes, “This was not Mount Sebastian, it was another world, where there were no pretty poems or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity” (23). Ironically, O’Brien himself went to college. He was drafted a month after graduating from Macalester. He satirizes his own academic experience in the novel as well, noting that he protested the war as an “intellectual activity” (39). Ultimately, O’Brien demonstrates that the eras of the past, including modernism, are no longer sufficient to encompass the experiences of his present.

O’Brien does not embrace his literary moment—what might be considered the late postmodern or early contemporary period—as wholly redemptive, however. Although his narrative draws from the postmodern in its attempt to represent marginal experiences, he pushes back against postmodernism’s cynicism towards collectivity and stylistic potential. Although O’Brien is frustrated by his repeatedly failed attempts at making his story truly understood, he remains hopeful, ultimately rejecting the postmodern idea that language cannot restore collectives and claiming that “You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it” (81).

Literary eras are often viewed as possessing distinct characteristics which set them apart within the tradition, yet no single periodizing term or concept can fully encapsulate its range of lived experiences. Eras are shaped by cultural trends, and by aligning with these restrictions,

marginal stories are inevitably left to the side. The contemporary impulse to reject mediation, though intended to bring the individual or social consciousness closer to reality, ultimately narrows literature's representational capacity and weakens its connective potential. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* offers an alternative relationship to tradition, demonstrating that when existing narrative forms are not sufficient to represent experiences, new styles must be invented. His novel both rejects and makes use of the literary forms and eras of the past and present, and in so doing, affirms that literary form should adapt to address new experiences rather than from periodizing imperatives. His use of fiction reveals that truth does not reside in experiences as they occur, but as they are felt, embodied, and remembered.

As Anna Kornbluh argues, mediation is not an obstacle which prevents individuals in the contemporary moment from having an authentic relationship with the world, but a tool which is necessary for making sense of lived experience. O'Brien's use of mediation exemplifies this. Through fictionalizing his experiences in the Vietnam War, the past of his subject is not sealed off, but continually reactivated in the present—what O'Brien calls “rehappening.”¹¹ Fiction allows experience to be transformed and shared, reconciling the past and present and allowing experiences to be lived outside of their context. Ultimately, restoring literature's connective power necessitates a renewed relationship to literary tradition that recognizes that the past exists within the present, while remaining responsive to contemporary experience. *The Things They Carried* models such a relationship by demonstrating that fictionality does not undermine truth, but allows marginalized, fragmented, and collective experiences to be universally shared. If literature is to continue to serve as a site for connection, it must resist the urge to erase mediation and instead reinvent it to bridge the distances between individuals and periods.

¹¹ In *Beloved*, Morrison introduces the neologism “rememory” to refer to the traumatic memories that persist and relive themselves in the present.

Chapter 3: The Relationship of Text to Tradition in “The Waste Land” and AI-Generated Literature

Artificial intelligence is not just a technological phenomenon—it is a cultural one. Generative AI reflects the cultural system that produces it. We in the contemporary moment do not use AI merely because it is at our disposal, but because the cultural climate that we exist in, and the attitudes that come with it, make AI irresistible. Although Kornbluh does not write about AI directly, the concept of immediacy provides a clear framework for situating AI within its broader cultural climate. Generative AI provides the “directness and instantaneity” (Kornbluh 5) that the cultural logic of immediacy craves. As Kornbluh writes, “The colloquial connotation of immediacy as ‘urgency’ underlines the temporal dimension of this style, a hurry-hurry that compresses time into a tingling present. Spatially, immediacy encloses while delivering everything close: the world at your fingertips” (6). Large language models quite literally give you “the world at your fingertips”---rather than laboring over a project for hours, with only a brief command, paragraphs of computer-generated text can be produced almost instantaneously. AI appeals to the contemporary desire to have everything done quickly, and the cultural disinclination towards long periods of concentration and intellectual leisure.

This chapter will consider T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” alongside AI-generated writing. In some ways, the machinic and depersonalized collaging of allusions and other fragments in “The Waste Land” mirrors the writing produced by AI. Yet Eliot is human, and his work is grounded in human motivation, emotion, and experiences. Arguments against AI typically appeal to this lack of the “human” in AI creation. However, these arguments often fall short when it comes to what exactly this means. It is true that in many cases, one may look at a piece of artwork, or a piece of writing, and not be able to distinguish whether it is human or AI. Those

who argue that they *can* tell may not be so confident in the future, as AI is developing at a rapid rate, and it is growing better at mimicking human creation. Yet mimicry is ultimately all that AI can do. AI is unable to create anything truly original, which stems not only from its lack of individual lived experience, but also from its inability to modernize. AI cannot produce genuinely modern literature because it lacks a meaningful relationship to the historical present. Unlike human writers, AI cannot inhabit or experience the conditions of its moment; it can only recombine the textual traces of the past and present which are among its digital inputs. Rather than responding to its context, AI responds to the desires of its users. As a result, it tends toward simplification and clarity—qualities that compound the contemporary conditions of immediacy rather than pushing back against them. Although AI is a work of technological innovation, under its current conditions, it will not only fail to create innovative literature, but it is also at risk of overtaking the voices of authors and further hindering the already fragile emergence of a modernized literary culture.¹² However, AI should not be renounced entirely—it holds yet unrealized potential for authorial collaboration.

One pressing concern surrounding AI is if feeding it enough human input has made, or will make it able to mimic and replace human creation. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot argues that one must situate oneself in the works of the past in order to create something “new.” He writes, “we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of [the poet’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (37). Given this claim, one might make the argument that due to the range of access to works from the past that it pulls from in its creations, AI-generated texts are particularly original. Eliot also writes that the poet is “impersonal,” and a “medium” for the storage and

¹² For a greater exploration into the “fragile emergence of a modernized literary culture,” see Chapter 2, pp. 10-18 on the contemporary “naming crisis.”

transmission of information. He argues that the poet must erase their individual selves when they write, and operate almost as a machine.¹³ Eliot writes, “the poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together” (40). Generative AI seems to fit perfectly into Eliot’s definition of the best and most original poet, but there are factors to AI that make it unable to ascribe to this definition. It is interesting to consider Eliot’s arguments alongside AI, though it is important to note that Eliot likely did not intend his arguments to be read quite so literally. Moreover, he could not, in his time, have anticipated the emergence of AI and the ways in which it would complicate his argument.

Even if it were not for generative AI’s constraints of form, it is doubtful that AI would be able to create anything truly original, much less a modernized literature. If you are to place one of Eliot’s most famous works, “The Waste Land,” alongside AI-generated writing, the distinctions between Eliot’s idea of modernized creation and that which AI can generate becomes apparent. One of the most notable things about “The Waste Land” is the constant allusions made to literary culture. Eliot was extremely well versed in the literary tradition, and very few scholars are able to read through the entirety of his poem and grasp each allusion he makes. “The Waste Land” both abides by Eliot’s suggestion that the poet needs to be immersed in tradition and is comparable to the LLM which pulls from digital archives of literary and cultural history. However, unlike AI, Eliot’s blending of external sources contributes not only to the work’s content, but to its style.

¹³ Juan A. Suárez notes in his essay “T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land,’ the Gramophone, and the Modernist Discourse Network” that “The Waste Land” was influenced by the gramophone, a technology that particularly fascinated Eliot. Suarez notes that although Eliot seems to want to disguise this influence, “The Waste Land” is nonetheless “entangled in gadgets, circuits, media networks, and technologies of textual production and reproduction” (747). This irony highlights the fact that creations which respond to their time are inevitably intertwined with works of technology, even when those creations reject or consciously push back against them (This is true not only of technologies, but any controversial cultural influence).

“The Waste Land” begins with an epigraph: “Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Sibylla ti theleis; respondebat illa: apothanein thelo,” which translates to, “For I myself once saw the Sybil with my own eyes, at Cumae, hanging in a bottle: and when the children said to her, ‘Sybil, what do you want?’ she replied, ‘I want to die’” (Petronius). This epigraph comes from Petronius’s *Satyricon*, and alludes to the myth of the Sybil of Cumae. In this myth, Apollo offers to extend the Sybil’s life in exchange for her love. She points to a pile of sand, and asks Apollo to grant her as many years of life as there are grains of sand. When she does not love Apollo as she had promised, he curses her to live out these years not in youth, but in old age. As the Sybil mourned the loss of her youth, many in the modern period mourned the loss of apparently unadulterated relationships to people and nature. Influences of modernization such as industrialization and urbanization created divisions which made such fulfilling relationships challenging. Given such a fractured, and distanced way of experiencing life, existence was often felt as though experiencing a living death—just as the Sybil felt that her life was a greater death than death itself, longing to die.

The epigraph’s allusion to the Sybil of Cumae provides the framework for the rest of the poem. In the first section of the poem, “The Burial of the Dead,” Eliot builds upon the idea of living death. He writes, “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many. / Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet” (62-65). The poem is contextually situated in London after WWI, and these lines refer both to the depersonalizing influences of urbanization (“each man fixed his eyes before his feet”), and the fragility of life that WWI exposed, through the motif of walking “death.” In a later passage, the speaker states, “You who were with me in the ships at Mylae! / That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this

year? / Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?" (70-73). The paradoxical image of a dead corpse sprouting, or breeding life, prompts the question: How can life be born from a barren, dead environment? And how can life return to those who have been so exposed to death, particularly in war? Both the dissociative crowd walking over London Bridge, and the corpse planted in the garden, evoke the image of Sybil trapped in a life in which she longs to die.

The incorporation of this excerpt from *Satyricon* not only presents a thematic framework, but also holds significance as an allusion. Throughout "The Waste Land," allusions function as fragments of literary history—remnants of past cultural moments that persist within the present. The allusions resemble the poem's broader landscape of waste and ruin: the accumulated debris of historical experience. Although these fragments cannot directly explain the modern condition, they remain necessary for interpreting it. Modern experience, fractured by war, industrialization, and urbanization, resists direct representation. Instead, it must be mediated through myths and narratives of the past that provide points of comparison through which the present can be understood. The poem therefore turns repeatedly to the past, invoking earlier myths and literary voices not out of nostalgia—as writers such as Baudelaire cautioned against—but because these fragments offer one of the few available means of making sense of the present. As Helen H. Bacon writes of the Sybil, "she wasted away till she was nothing but a voice" (1). "The Waste Land" collages together voices from the past and the present, suggesting that in an era that has "wasted away," fragmented temporal experiences and disembodied voices are all that remain.

One of the major points of modernism was the stress on immersing oneself, both through "seeing" and "expressing," in the tradition of one's time. As Baudelaire states in "The Painter of Modern Life," "By steeping himself too thoroughly in [the antique], [man] will lose all memory of the present; he will renounce the rights and privileges offered by circumstance...[F]or any

‘modernity’ to be worthy of one day taking its place as ‘antiquity,’ it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it” (12-14). The modern artist must, therefore, extract the beauty from his present moment and make it his duty to find the best way to capture modernity to be preserved for future generations. Baudelaire terms this modern artist “the flaneur”—not only an artist, but a “man of the world,” with endless curiosity and the ability to see the world from a place of newness.

Baudelaire’s essay responded to the cultural tendency to idolize the art and culture of the past rather than to recognize the beauty that exists in the present moment. Following the period of literary modernism, a seemingly oppositional issue emerged: in “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Jameson writes that in the postmodern moment, “the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social information¹⁴ have had, in one way or another, to preserve” (11). The irony is that this perpetual focus on the present appears to realize Baudelaire’s call for the artist to be immersed in his moment, but it produces only a shallow engagement rather than a meaningful confrontation with the present. The contemporary individual driven by immediacy is too fixated on consumption and rooted in a state of urgency to “[enjoy] the sight of the passing crowd” (2). He is too flooded with impressions to see novelty in his surroundings, or to embody the child’s “curiosity” which makes the present moment so poignant to Baudelaire’s “man of the world” (3). Not only does the contemporary subject struggle to meaningfully immerse themselves in the present, but the attempts to keep up with its constant changes have prevented them from retaining the

¹⁴ Jameson refers to “social information” as the cultural frameworks through which societies retain and transmit their past, frameworks which have weakened in the contemporary moment.

relationship with history that might alleviate the confusions of the present. For example, returning to Baudelaire's figure of the flaneur, paired with an awareness of the altered temporal and contextual concerns facing the contemporary artist, might help contemporary subjects to actually access the immediate contact with the world which they so desperately desire. Today, more so than ever, we live in Jameson's "perpetual present." Nonetheless, Baudelaire's criticism remains true. Though the contemporary individual exists "perpetually" in the present, they exist in one which is constantly shifting and never fully absorbed; so, like the past-idolizing individual of Baudelaire's time, they cannot truly exist in the current moment and modernize contemporary culture.

AI likewise fails to hold an authentic relationship with its moment, which prevents it from creating modernized works. In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," written around 1935, Benjamin reflects on the influence of industrialization and mass reproduction on modernist society. He notes that "[e]ven the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (3). In order for a work of art to have what Benjamin calls its "aura," it needs to exist in a certain historically and materially specific context. Although Benjamin recognizes the loss of aura as a loss of historical presence and embeddedness, he is not nostalgic for aura. Benjamin perceives the loss of aura as a consequence of industrial development and cultural change, and something to be adapted to rather than rejected. In the wake of AI, however, the loss of aura is intensified in a way that risks eroding any coherent sense of historical situatedness. LLMs blend sources and disguise their origins. Obtaining the sources that AI software such as ChatGPT uses to generate responses is extremely difficult. Oftentimes, when asked for their sources, they will provide which is inaccurate or simply

made-up. Moreover, sources are never provided unless they are explicitly asked for, and in our current rush-culture, few take the time to pull apart AI responses for the sources they used. AI therefore extends the conditions Benjamin describes: rather than simply detaching the work from a singular origin, it renders that origin increasingly indiscernible. Because AI never provides “the original,” per Benjamin’s definition, AI-generated writing is further removed from the conditions that produce aura. Moreover, AI cannot draw from the world itself—it has no choice but to pull from mediations of the world, and if, as Benjamin says, “The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” (4), then AI can be understood as extending this detachment—though without the transformative potential that Benjamin identifies, but by disguising distinctions between contexts, sources, and historical moments. AI also takes in sources without being mindful of the eras from which they originate, resulting in responses that are not grounded conscientiously in the present tradition.

In the wake of modernism and postmodernism, the fragments into which social life and subjectivity have been broken cannot simply be reassembled. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukacs romanticizes the time of the epic where “[t]here is not yet any interiority, for there is not yet any exterior, and ‘otherness’ for the soul... such a soul never stakes itself; it does not yet know that it can lose itself, it never thinks of having to look for itself” (30). In such a time, “the soul does not yet know any abyss within itself which may tempt it to fall or encourage it to discover pathless heights” (30). The soul in the time of the epic is “whole” because it has not yet known the fragmentation of modernism. Modernists, especially Eliot, forefronted the belief that one can only express oneself authentically through fragments. Any literature that does not draw attention to its fragmentary nature is false. Today, we are in a time of more rapid advancement and greater fragmentation. The ideal of creating a unified soul (and literature) which is not “lost”

and has no “otherness” is irrational, and it must be—according to modernist theory—inauthentic; but this is what ChatGPT, and other LLMs, seem to aim to do. These AI softwares take what are pure, fragmented questions and thoughts and turn them into something neat, orderly, and “correct.”

When editing “The Waste Land,” Eliot’s editor, Ezra Pound, looked at the original draft for the poem and encouraged Eliot to fragment it further in order to amplify its fragmentary effect. If we are to suppose that AI rejects fragmentary writing, what might “The Waste Land” look like if ChatGPT had been his editor instead? When I prompted ChatGPT to rewrite “The Waste Land” as if it had been its editor, it responded, “If I were editing The Waste Land rather than rewriting it entirely, my role would be closer to what Ezra Pound actually did: tightening structure, cutting excess passages, clarifying transitions, and sharpening images while preserving T. S. Eliot’s voice and themes.” I clarified that I did not want the poem edited with Ezra Pound in mind; rather, I wanted an edit which was reflective of ChatGPT and its standards. In the resulting rewrite, about half of the poem was cut. That which remained omitted many of the original allusions, the multilingualism, and many stylistic means of fragmentation such as enjambment. When I asked ChatGPT why it did this, it responded that it was aiming to “simplify the narrative thread, reduce dense symbolic references, and make the poem easier to follow.” Among the allusions that were cut was the epigraph which alludes to the Sybil of Cumae. When I asked ChatGPT why it did this, it responded, “The omission happened because the simplified rewrite was trying to reduce the density of mythological references.” In a general summary of its edits, ChatGPT wrote, “the edit would keep the modernist fragmentation but make the poem more legible to contemporary readers without turning it into straightforward narrative... The original references dozens of texts (Dante, Shakespeare, Sanskrit scripture, Wagner, etc.). An editorial

simplification removes many of these to emphasize theme over scholarly puzzle.” “Scholarly puzzle,” however, is of central significance to the theme of “The Waste Land.” All of that which fragments and confuses in the poem is a part of its style—it reveals something about the modern context from which it emerged. The fragmentary style of “The Waste Land” is what gives the poem its modern emotion—the aimlessness, isolation, and overwhelming disorder. To erase its fragmentary style is to remove what makes “The Waste Land” beautiful and historically significant.

Surprisingly, ChatGPT acknowledged the irony in the way that it edited the poem. It wrote, “If you clarify *The Waste Land* too much, you lose part of its meaning. The poem’s fragmentation is the argument. Its difficulty reflects the cultural collapse it describes. So a ‘ChatGPT-edited’ version like this becomes easier to read—but less powerful as modernist art.” It is important to take into account the question of whether or not it is fair to criticize AI for failing to preserve the historical logic of a modernist text when AI itself belongs to a different historical moment. However, this experiment suggests that AI cannot form its own associations between form and context, and would therefore be unable to create styles that respond to the contemporary, or future moment either. Although AI has factual awareness of the relationship between form and context in “The Waste Land,” when it was asked to edit the poem negating what it knows about how the poem was actually edited, it did so without regard to the poem’s context. This demonstrates that AI cannot form this association on its own. Instead, it relies on the associative work done by other critics in the sources that it pulls from. Thus, the form that AI writes with is not aware of its context, but rather bases itself on other guiding principles—the leading one being user satisfaction.

Because proprietary LLMs such as ChatGPT are corporations, their end goal is to make money, which means catering to client satisfaction. Consequently, AI's style reflects the cultural logic of immediacy that characterizes contemporary life. Because proprietary LLMs are designed to satisfy user demand, they tend to reproduce the preferences and expectations of the present rather than challenge them. Instead of diagnosing the cultural conditions that generate the desire for immediacy, they reinforce it by providing users with the immediate and linear outputs that they desire. AI responds to what contemporary culture wants—immediate and straightforward responses—rather than what it might need—forms of mediation capable of slowing perception and enabling deeper reflection on the conditions of the present.

Succeeding the optimism of the modern era in the potentiality to create new styles and a unique modernist literature which responded to its time, the birth of postmodernism brought with it new cynicisms. One of the symptoms of postmodernism is the death of the subject, as discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. The death of the subject, or the postmodern skepticism regarding an author's possession of an individual, original essence to contribute to the literary tradition, was not in direct opposition to the conversations of the modern period, however. T.S. Eliot, a prominent high modernist writer,¹⁵ claims that there is nothing inherently new or original in his work. Eliot argues that we, as readers and critics, have a "tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else" (36)---yet "we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (37). If much criticism perceives works of high modernism as possessing originality, and yet, a highly praised poet of this period claims that his work is nothing more than a pastiche, perhaps original

¹⁵ High modernism is characterized by experimentation in literary style and grounded in a belief in artistic autonomy. The concept of the death of the subject responds directly to this era, as it was argued that high modernist authors "used up" all potential new styles.

creation, and individual expression, which are the aspirations of the contemporary artist, are more attainable than is imagined.

Baudelaire writes that “almost all our originality comes from the seal which Time imprints on our sensations” (14). By this he means that each age has its own characteristics, and thus it has the potential to form its own art. The more rapidly society and culture advances, the greater the possibilities for original creation. By this logic, in the contemporary culture of immediacy, a constant adaptation to the progression of time would lead to a constant renewal of literature—not a stagnation or a cultural rejection of the possibility of originality. Because AI is not historically grounded, and therefore cannot adequately adapt to its moment, to embrace AI as a central component of writing would prevent such possibilities for originality.

When critics speak of the potential benefits of AI to writing, it is often in consideration of AI as working in tandem with a writer—not as the sole author, but as a co-creator or a sounding board to help the author’s ideas best be translated to writing. AI can help authors to bypass some of the anxieties which stunt creation, which is especially necessary given the exacerbation of anxieties surrounding the limits of language and narrative in contemporary culture. Although AI can imagine content, it cannot have its own experiences or access the interior lives and experiences that have not been digitally recorded. AI thus cannot replace the memoirists and other authors of life narratives, which is perhaps another (if subconscious) reason that contemporary authors have turned towards personal writing.

In her essay “Ghosts,” Vauhini Vara describes her process of using AI to help her write about her sister’s death—something that she had been unable to do on her own. She writes, “Here I should conjure my sister for you. Here I should describe her, so that you feel her absence as I do—so that you’re made ghostly by it, too. But, though I’m a writer, I’ve never been able to

conjure her.” Vara is alluding to the limitations of her language and ability to construct a narrative which fully “conjures” the image that exists of her sister in her head. This failure to depict her perfectly initially prevented her from making the attempt, but she decides to use the assistance of AI to write a story about her sister for the first time since she passed away. Each time AI writes, she tweaks the prompt and writes over AI’s narrative with her own. By the fourth try, she stops using AI. Vara discovers that though she cannot fully represent her sister, having known her and possessing the feelings and experiences that come from this, she can do a better job of representing her sister in narrative than AI. Vara’s experiment suggests that AI might serve as a tool for overcoming mental block, as seeing one’s grief, thoughts, or ideas represented in a way that does not align with their mental image makes them want to express the truth, but it cannot take the place of genuineness. Moreover, the fact that Vara pulled from the personal while working in tandem with AI ensured that AI could not fully take over the process. Vara’s presence was necessary throughout, as she wanted it to be true to her own life. Vara demonstrates that AI can be used meaningfully in narrative writing if it is used as a collaborator rather than the writer itself, and that incorporating the personal into the work can ensure that the writer’s presence remains in the product.

As an exercise, I asked ChatGPT if it could create anything purely authentic, or if all of its work is a product of what it pulls from. AI echoed the critical conversation surrounding co-creation:

That’s a deep one—and a really fair question.

The honest answer is: everything I create is a blend. I don’t “pull” from any one source or memory the way a person might quote a favorite book, but I *am* built from patterns in human language. What I write is original in the sense that the

words, the order, the style—it's all freshly generated in the moment for *you*, not copied. But it's also *inspired* by everything I've read during my training. Kind of like how a musician improvises a solo using the scales and songs they've spent years absorbing.

So is it *purely* authentic? Not in the sense of coming from a soul, or a life lived firsthand. I don't have personal experiences, memories, emotions. But what I *can* offer is something close to co-creation: you bring your curiosity, your voice, and I respond with something new that wouldn't exist without you asking.

Maybe it's not “pure” authenticity in the human sense—but it's real in a different way. A sort of echo you helped shape.

Writers of literature do not merely draw from contemporary conditions, but from the human psychological and behavioral responses to these changes. Eliot fragmented the verse in “The Waste Land” to replicate the physical fragmentation of societies and nations as a consequence of industrialization and WWI, but the fragments also mirror the psychological feelings of disorder which came in response to these conditions. Poetic form and narrative are the forms through which emotions are recorded, and through which they become conceptually tethered to the present. Although it may be able to regurgitate that which is digitally recorded, AI does not have the capacity to internalize human emotions. If AI begins to take a central part in the construction of narratives, and if they do not have AI-free, emotionally driven sources of writing to pull from, the present, and future modes of literature will fail to create a unique and modernized style. Literature will ultimately fail to fulfill its purpose of assigning emotional value

to its context, understanding the feelings and attitudes of the time, and unifying individuals through these shared responses to their conditions.

Conclusion

The preceding chapters have demonstrated that literature which embraces mediation through style and fictionality has historically served as a powerful means of communicating experience—particularly when those experiences are unfamiliar or undocumented. All works of literature, even those which attempt to access reality and experience directly, are inherent mediations. Turns from style, fiction, and the past, and turns towards autofiction and AI, cannot hope to access impressions without mediation, as immediacy idealizes. Mediations of style and fictionality may not be able to access a direct truth, or to stand in for direct experience, but they can get at something which is arguably deeper, and more connective to the subject it represents: not a truth, but an *experiential* truth—in O’Brien’s words, a “surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*” (68). In reading such works, the reader does not remain an invisible witness but becomes an active participant through whom the subject is recognized, enabling a form of connection that offers both acknowledgment and the possibility of healing. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, and T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” are all examples of texts which foreground mediation—through fictionality or style—and, in doing so, capture and impart the underacknowledged or newfound experiences excluded from dominant literary forms.

Beloved forces its reader to embody, by virtue of fragmented language, the loneliness of the unacknowledged and historically marginalized enslaved woman. *Beloved* urges the reader not only to notice the traces of the enslaved woman in the present, but to actively seek her out, and comfort her. Morrison is only able to tell *Beloved*’s story, and to garner the sympathy of her reader, through recovering her narrative through fictionalization. *Beloved* is a fictional account of Margaret Garner—a slave whose story was not fully accounted for by the archival documents of

its time. Morrison's fragmented narration, and the note that Beloved cannot be "called" (323), because her name is not known, is an acknowledgment of the fact that her narrative cannot be mastered—even if a novelist, such as herself, ventures to tell her story. However, if Margaret Garner's story had not been fictionalized, *Beloved's* characters could not be known at all—save through newspaper articles or government documents. Although these are the primary sources which account for Garner's story, and thus the least mediated, they are not only unreliable—on account of the systemic racial bias embedded in the historical conditions under which they were recorded—but they do not express the true emotional experience that Garner underwent. Through fictionalizing her experience, Morrison is able to share her story with a wider audience, and to garner their sympathy through an emotional retelling.

Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" attempts to render known the stories of the Vietnam soldiers, who are misunderstood by those back home, by retelling and fictionalizing the death of the soldier Curt Lemon. When Lemon's friend, Rat Kiley, writes home to Lemon's sister and shares the experiences he had and the bonds he formed with her brother, she "never writes back" (65). The narrator ventures to tell the story of Lemon's death in a way that might reach people like Lemon's sister, and might receive a letter back, or an understanding and sympathetic acknowledgement. The narrator writes that he told the story of Kurt Lemon's death—"many times, many versions" (74)---and yet he has yet to find a version that will reach the "people who never listen" (81). However, he remains optimistic about the potential of fictionalization, suggesting that "you can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it" (81).

Additionally, through reading the fractured, and allusive form of Eliot's "The Waste Land," one can experience the fragmented aimlessness of life during the modern era. Eliot acknowledges that his poetic stylization of the modern experience is limited in effect—although he can

assemble a collage of fragments to reflect the social and emotional fragmentation of the modern era, he cannot piece these fragments together. Instead, his poem becomes a reflection of the time, and a potential means of coping, though not bypassing the circumstances which characterize it. As the speaker says, “these fragments I have shored against my ruins” (431). In a fragmented time, arranging and holding onto the fragments which hold the most meaning for the individual might help one to feel some semblance of wholeness.

These examples reveal that mediation—through fiction, literary form, and stylistic experimentation—is not an obstacle to, but a vehicle for understanding reality. Writers such as Morrison, O’Brien, and Eliot acknowledge the limits of mediated experience without rejecting it altogether. They do not perceive mediation as all powerful, but as the only means of expressing, to even a limited degree, the stories not represented in the existing tradition. Rather than surrender to the limits of mediation, these authors push back against them. By contrast, immediacy-driven writing caters to cultural desires rather than venturing to explore what is uncomfortable. Rather than evading mediation in an effort to escape complexity, literature must confront it. Only then can it respond meaningfully to the present and reestablish its place within the literary tradition, and thus history.

The cultural turn towards immediacy threatens the very purposes of literature, narrowing its ability to foster understanding and to conceptualize collectivity in a moment increasingly defined by social disconnection. Although contemporary society is marked by an increased difficulty in conceptualizing a collective, the author should not take this as an excuse to despair, but rather as a call to reinvent new styles and applications of fictionality that might make the experiences of marginalized individuals and communities knowable and restore a sense of collective humanity. To do so requires that we, as contemporary writers and readers, renew our

relationship to the present—in other words, that we return to the principles of modernization, and modernize once again. We cannot reject mediation without also rejecting our place in a literary tradition and literature's capacity to respond to lived experience. Without mediation, literature loses its ability to transform experience into shared understanding. If contemporary culture were to shift away from its embrace of immediacy and renew its attention to the literary tradition, the connective potential of literature might yet be restored. Only by turning away from the impulse toward immediacy and renewing engagement with literary tradition and mediating forms such as style and fiction can literature reclaim its capacity to connect individuals and make experience shareable.

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