"What's Real?": Digital Technology and Negative Affect in Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* and *The Keep*

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Abstract

This article investigates the relationship between affect, digital technology, and neoliberalism in Jennifer Egan's second and third novels: Look at Me *(2001) and* The Keep *(2006). I argue that this relationship is central to Egan's politicized (post-postmodern) understanding of the contemporary subject, whose feeling is overtly conditioned by the new media culture and technology as well as by the aspirational and elitist orientation of neoliberal discourse. Emphasizing these texts' engagement with negative affects, including "cruel optimism" and shame, which dominate their narrative focalizations, I nevertheless consider how these feelings remain open to transformation in these novels, particularly in moments of critique, creativity, and interpersonal care.*

Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* (2001) and *The Keep* (2006) have received a good deal of critical attention thus far, in particular in regard to their creative engagement with postmodern forms and ideas. Pankaj Mishra and Adam Kelly ("Beginning") both underline the ground-shifting importance of *Look at Me* as a response to postmodernism's twenty-first-century legacy: Mishra praising its attention to "the steady disappearance of reality, and its replacement with such pseudo-substitutes as 'authentic' selfhood," while Kelly sees it uncannily reintroducing "resonances and spectres of history into the novel's form as well as its content" ("Beginning" 394). Likewise, *The Keep* has been lauded for its postmodern metafictional innovations on the Gothic genre, Danel Olsen recounting how "Egan both unearths and reinterprets the old Gothic truths for twenty-first century readers" (327), while

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Madison Smartt Bell positions the text alongside those of William T. Vollman and David Foster Wallace in terms of its "infinitely receding reflections and trompe l'oeil effects." Martin Paul Eve also invokes both fictions' counterhegemonic concern "to articulate the fundamentally irreducible experience of art . . . while also being situated within an exploitative and precarious labour situation" (143). In all cases, these appraisals reinforce Egan's politicized response to late capitalist culture, both in critique and in dialogue with postmodern aesthetics.

This analysis further develops this post-postmodern lens on Egan's work, while also taking this in a slightly different direction, namely by recognizing her complex engagement with affect in both of the above novels. Where postmodernism is influentially understood in terms of a "waning" of affect, my reading of these works suggests how feeling may nevertheless play a significant role in Egan's spin on the postmodern, especially in relation to a Jameson-inspired critique of contemporary neoliberalism. Insofar as these fictions reflect (to an extent) Jameson's affirmation of the death of the feeling subject, their relationship to affect best determines their connection to postmodernism, reinforcing ways in which the subject emerges as disconnected from feeling and sentiment and yet is still often driven by (usually negative) affects in significant ways. In this article, I therefore endeavor to come to grips with this apparent contradiction in Egan's writing, exploring the inventive representation of affect in these early novels and concentrating in particular on the negotiation of negative affect repeatedly aligned to a new media culture and neoliberal technologies.

Negative affect constitutes an increasingly influential emphasis within the field of affect studies, resulting in various recent publications on affects, such as boredom, shame, anxiety, envy, and paranoia.[1] By engaging with several of these publications here, alongside recent new media scholarship, and by considering how these together illuminate Egan's response to new media technology and neoliberal culture within the texts, I hope to explain and substantiate these novels' innovatory significance, as they both continue and complicate an affective anxiety begun with postmodernism.[2]

More specifically, focusing on representations of "cruel optimism" and shame, I consider how these novels promote an awareness of negative feeling as a way of responding to the taken-for-granted competitiveness of their respective cultural frameworks, registering the implicit violence of this context on both personal and interpersonal levels. By situating my analysis within an emergent body of "affect theory" writing, I explore how Egan both takes up and complicates Jameson's well-known diagnosis of a "waning of affect" within late capitalism, here instead underscoring the feeling subject's tenuous persistence in forms of often unconscious and pernicious negative affect. Building on the work of theorists such as Brian Massumi, Sianne Ngai, and Lauren Berlant, I argue that while these feelings dominate the narrative focalization in both novels, there nevertheless remains room for hope through an appreciation of affect's transgressive potential, especially as this emerges through creative acts of writing and reading as well as through interpersonal care.

[1] Some examples include works on shame, by Kaye Mitchell, Barry Sheils and Julie Walsh, and Elsbeth Probyn; on paranoia, by Steffan Hantke and Patrick O'Donnell; on anxiety, by Renata Salecl, Sarah Dunant and Roy Porter, and Alex Morden Osborne; on envy, by Sara Protasi and Russell Belk; and on boredom, by Ralph Clare, and Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani. Notably, Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* also includes chapters on envy, anxiety, and paranoia, among other negative emotions.

[2] Two recent scholars, James P. Zappen and Zara Dinnen, have already explored in different ways the importance of affect to Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. In this essay, I extend and modify these analyses to fit the particulars of these earlier novels, which engage with a distinct set of technologies as well as feelings.

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In his seminal *Postmodernism, or the Culture of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson diagnoses the postmodern condition as involving a "waning of affect," a dismantling of expectations in regard to the subject's ability to feel as well as art's capacity to inspire or connote emotion. As he puts it, this experience can be "described in negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality" or alternatively "in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity" (28–29). In either case, central to Jameson's prognosis is a sense that there is nothing beyond surface politics: no historical depth, no complex psychology, and no emotional nuance. In Ankhi Mukherjee's apt summary, Jameson understands the logic of late capitalism as "shattering and dispersing affect into 'free-floating and impersonal intensities.'" (310) Within this schizophrenic condition, "the relationship between the signifier and signified is replaced by 'that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of signifiers among themselves': hyperreality and hyperreflexiveness supplant history in this disruption of temporal moorings" (Mukherjee 310). In other words, for Jameson, under postmodernism, identifiable emotional states and historical locators are superseded by the transient impulses and fleeting energies of late capitalist consumerism.

Contemporary announcements regarding the death of postmodernism often flip this reading on its head, announcing a reinstatement of (often positive) affect, and with this also a reemergence of realist aesthetics and deep psychology. As Rachel Greenwald Smith reflects, referring to writers such as Richard Powers, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace, "To the extent that the prose these writers create is read as possessing greater tonal warmth than that of their postmodernist predecessors, their work tends to be celebrated as indicating a general return to realism as the dominant narrative mode of literary fiction and with it a renewed commitment to representing the emotional lives of real people" (424). Such announcements, sometimes framed in terms of a "new sincerity," are visible both in Egan's own criticism and in that of many of her generation, where the defence of postmillennial verisimilitude has become visibly prominent (see Holland; Leal; Tanenhaus; Burt). In Mary K. Holland's reading, these writers can be read "to bend metafiction into the service of emotion, connection, and human 'need' rather than cleverness or 'art'" (60), in this way supposedly defying the postmodern precedent established by their predecessors.

Nevertheless, as critics such as Greenwald Smith, Madhu Dubey, and Adam Kelly have argued, and as this article will argue in relation to Egan's *Look at Me* and *The Keep*, such assumptions tend to overlook a continued engagement with postmodernist ideals and forms in this writing, "albeit unevenly, provisionally and tactically" (Greenwald Smith 424), often as a critique of realism's humanist assumptions. Kelly argues that the "authors of Egan's generation begin with postmodernism in a double or even triple sense": "by developing a conversation with postmodern fiction," by "inheriting the heavily mediated information society that the earlier generation of American writers had tracked in its emergent phase," and by starting "with the academic construction of American literature and society

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specifically as 'postmodern'" ("Beginning" 394–96). Put differently, this generation engages with postmodernism aesthetically, culturally, and theoretically, often clearly affirming its incredulous or hyperreal perspective on contemporary life, even as it also understands character and narrative as historically situated. As Dubey writes, "Given that the material conditions that gave rise to postmodernism still pertain and, if anything, have intensified," the assumption that "reviving narrative realism" can simply replace or "solve" postmodernist anxieties is deeply problematic (369). In reading Egan here, I agree with this verdict, also holding that for many of these authors, and for Egan specifically, to simply dismiss postmodernism in favor of prioritizing realist morals or mimetic "sincerity" is to ignore a vital element of this writing (see also Kelly's "The New Sincerity").

Recent developments in the field of affect theory further uphold this critical perception, similarly recognizing a view of affect which complicates realist understandings of the subject and of ethical responsibility. These developments also play a key part in my reading of Egan's novels here. As Zara Dinnen expresses it, "Jameson's goodbye to affect was the beginning of a critical turn toward it" (8), especially as contemporary theorists follow Jameson in diagnosing a contemporary shift from emotion to "intensity," in this way positioning affect as a socially transmissible form of "intense" bodily sensation (Massumi 25–28).

This outlook is directly visible in writers such as Sianne Ngai, Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, and Heather Love, who as I read them, take their cue from Jameson,[3] invoking not exactly the "waning of affect," but rather the literary/cultural influence of affects characterized by negativity, dysphoria, and passivity. As Lorraine Sim and Ann Vickery summarize, these scholars "use studies of emotion and affect to explain how 'oppression registers at small scales – in everyday interactions in gesture, tone of voice, etc.' They provide a means to develop [in this case, negative] accounts of what Raymond Williams calls "structures of feeling" (Sim and Vickery 5). Most centrally, these critical writers help to explain the commonly disempowering feelings experienced by disadvantaged communities on account of the dominant global market logic in its artistic, literary, and cultural instantiations.

Situated in contemporary global settings, wherein their characters are often compelled by problematic aspirational fantasies or, alternatively, by addictive attachments to disabling substances, perspectives, or behaviors, Jennifer Egan's novels directly comment on such negative contemporary affects, also aligning these to new technologies and to prominent discourses of global neoliberalism. As Dorothy Butchard puts it, Egan's writing perceptively identifies the "technologised intersections of culture and commerce" (360), especially as these encompass social inequality and discrimination. In the section that follows, I seek to explore this appreciation further through a comparative reading of *Look at Me* and *The Keep*: two very different novels, which nevertheless both emphasize illusory or debilitating neoliberal affects. In *Look at Me*, this emerges through a scathing exploration of modern advertising and television industries, in particular in respect to the affects of "cruel optimism" that these corporations negotiate. The novel underlines the

[3] Ngai and Berlant call on Jameson directly to clarify their arguments on negative affect: Ngai, in emphasizing how "capitalism's classic affects of disaffection . . . are neatly reabsorbed into the wage system and reconfigured as professional ideals" (4), and Berlant, in establishing her desire to track a "waning of genre" rather than a "waning of affect" (6).

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dangerous fixation these attachments produce for the protagonist, as she becomes obsessed, in self-damaging ways, with achieving success as a model, and also as she tries to escape this fixation in order to redefine her aspirations. Likewise, *The Keep*'s postmodern pastiche of eighteenth-century Gothic reveals a more complex reckoning with late capitalist culture, as portrayals of Gothic insecurity and paranoia are here connected to an institutional economy of shame and to incidents of violent affective transfer within this. Both fictions thus prioritize as their focal point the negative affects congruent with contemporary neoliberal discourse, making clear this program's destructive personal and social consequences, particularly at the level of feeling.

Structurally, *Look at Me* combines two parallel plotlines, both concerned with a character named Charlotte from Rockford, Illinois. The text begins with the first-person narrative of Charlotte Swenson, a 35-year-old model, whose career falls apart after a disastrous car accident and who subsequently attempts to build a new profession within a changing media industry. Opening with the car crash, the novel then progresses to explore Charlotte's altered post-surgery life, casting this, from Charlotte's perspective, as a new beginning, a chance to "live an extraordinary life" (Egan, *Look at Me* 35). By contrast, the other Charlotte (Hauser's) narrative, told in the third person, relates a teenager's social and sexual frustration, as she endeavors to escape the established boundaries of her small-town community. The structure of the novel alternates between these two narratives, inviting anticipation of a connection, while also incorporating focalized storylines around Charlotte Hauser's uncle, Moose, and her lover, Michael West (or Z), who turns out to be a terrorist.

As several critics have recognized, the opening accident scene provides a significant insight into the older Charlotte's psychology as well as installing a heightened level of representational self-consciousness (see Kelly, "Beginning"; Wylot). Given this event's considerable physical repercussions for Charlotte, involving major facial reconstructive surgery, what is notable is that she fails to express anything nearing the accordant emotional response and also that she retells the story, immediately after first telling it, in contradictory terms. Recalling the spectacular details of the crash, only then to confess her failure to "remember anything" (*Look at Me* 3), Charlotte seems oddly at home not only with her amnesia but also her physical transformation. It is not simply that she fails to assimilate the event into a larger frame of memorial reception – a common traumatological expectation; rather, she disregards it altogether as insignificant. As David Wylot remarks, Charlotte's disinterested tone pointedly excludes a conventional trauma diagnosis: "She feels . . . indifferent not only to the site of the accident but also to the trauma genre's particular markers of the past's belated return through the inexpressible event" (164). If she is traumatized, her symptoms evade the repetitive structure of reception associated with trauma in its Caruthian conception. Nor does she experience flashbacks, hallucinations, nightmares, or numbing – other commonly referenced trauma indicators (Caruth 4).

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Rather, Charlotte's tone throughout suggests an ironic removal from her own traumatic experience: a wry disinterestedness, recollective precisely of Jameson's idea of a waning of affect, or, in more recent theory, of dysphoric affect. As Ngai explains it, this involves "a feeling which is perceived rather than felt and whose very nonfeltness is perceived" (76). It amounts to "a highly codified feeling that is continually reproduced and circulated even as it cannot be subjectively felt" (77). For Charlotte, this becomes apparent especially in the morbid humor that she uses to address the crash and her present condition; where, for example, a joke about being decapitated had her airbag inflated suggests an overt awareness of the event's seriousness, even as she fails to outwardly grasp this recognition or account for it tonally (Egan, *Look at Me* 3). Likewise, what memories of her past do emerge in this opening section are often notably unanticipated and unprocessed: on seeing her childhood house and recalling "jogging toward it from [her] best friend Ellen Metcalf's house" one morning, she affirms, "The experience of that memory was like being hit, or kissed, unexpectedly. I blinked to recover from it" (9). Such a surprised response reflects the detachment with which Charlotte negotiates her emotions in this opening section, which again echoes Ngai's reading of dysphoric affect as circulating but (at least initially) not felt.

What it also conspicuously reflects is the unconscious, impulsive, and bodily way in which affect is characterized within contemporary theory, as distinguished from emotion's more explicitly conscious and cognitive understanding. As Massumi writes, "emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions," whereas "affect is unqualified," existing "outside expectation and adaptation" (28, 25). If emotion is specific and narratable, affect resists such rationalization, hovering outside the traditional, precise vocabulary of ego psychology. Affect is thus primarily active, rather than descriptive, functioning to energize or arrest the subject unconsciously and in this way to impact upon a larger structure of feeling shared across any given relationship or community. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth explain, affect is "the name we give to those forces . . . vital forces insisting beyond emotion – that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, [but] that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations" ("Inventory" 1). What is especially significant about this portrayal for *Look at Me* is how it loosens the tie between Charlotte's feeling and subjectivity in the text, allowing for a prioritization of affective engagement, even where Charlotte herself is largely unaware of her feelings or their personal significance. Charlotte is so determinedly unaffected by this accident, her narrative suggests, that there is something missing that she *should* feel concerned about. In Ngai's terms, there is a "meta-affectivity" to the narrative, as the "perception of an unfelt feeling produces a secondary, dysphoric emotion" in the act of reading (83). The reader seeks to make sense of the events and sensations that Charlotte cannot, on her behalf.

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For Wylot, building on Catherine Malabou's idea of a nonretrospective, posttraumatic subjectivity, this ostensibly schizophrenic representation can be read to respond critically to the conventional narratives of trauma theory, revealing "a different kind of temporality to the traumatising event" (169), one that is more fragmented than repetitive: unable "to respectively recuperate either the accident or [Charlotte's] new subjectivity into a causal narrative continuous with [her] pre-traumatic subjectivity" (167). In effect, "it is as if . . . the accident never existed" for Charlotte, given her almost total inability to account for it emotionally (167). While agreeing with this reading in part – in particular in its identification of Charlotte's shifting affective state as she does eventually begin to incorporate the event into conscious memory – I am nevertheless interested in exploring the affective dimensions of this representation in more detail, seeking to provide more nuance around this apparently fragmented post-accident temporality.

Given the now common theoretical reading of affect as nonsignifying, and as existing outside or beyond narrative sequencing, it would seem central to the movement of the novel as described by Wylot to identify a teleological trajectory from affect to emotion: as it is narrativized, Charlotte's story becomes less abstract and undefined and more cognitively explicit; her affects shift and transform into emotions. This process mirrors what Massumi describes as an unfolding of "differential emergence," whereby the virtual "leaks into the actual" in such a way as to sculpt new modes of being which impact upon the present (105), shaping a new set of feelings with the potential to alter one's sense of identity or environment. Here, Charlotte's increasing interest in her accident's symbolic value, as a moment of radical but nevertheless somehow *anticipated* change, echoes this analysis, situating the event and its emotional importance as part of a larger chain of affective impulses starting before the accident and leading up to her final name change. As Egan herself puts it, "Charlotte end[s] up virtually swapping identities over the course of the book – [she] is drawn into precisely the sort of life she once viewed with disdain" (Egan, "Author Q&A").

Nevertheless, what is notable about Charlotte's narrative, to my mind, is the way that this (potentially transformative) process is repeatedly highjacked in the novel by neoliberal media discourses, which threaten to reduce her attempted recovery to a mere "make-over" story. Thus, central to the text's structure is a conscious tracking of narrative's capacity to direct and codify affect, in this case investing this harmfully into what Berlant classifies as "cruel optimism." In order to understand this process, I want to take a closer look at how affect first emerges within Charlotte's memories of her pre-accident life. I will then go on to explore how the novel traces this codification process from the scene of the accident into the present.

Charlotte's initial response to the accident involves, as mentioned, a strange acceptance which seems to encompass a complete dissociation of herself from this event. Sitting before the mirror one night, in a self-consciously Lacanian representation, she imagines herself reborn: "a newborn howling in pain and outrage" (Egan, *Look at Me* 35). "This is your Charlotte," she tells herself, "and

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you must take good care of her so she'll grow up to be a beautiful girl" (35). While Charlotte casts the accident as unexpected, then, her response suggests at least partial anticipation or perhaps rather the fulfilling of an existing fantasy of personal reconstruction – a desire to escape the shallow monotony of her life as a "professional beauty" (174).

Given the depressing details of this earlier life, that it should do so is hardly surprising, when what began as a "twisting excitement" at the prospect of fame and glamor quickly flattens out into a dreary tedium of dullness and uniformity (172). Recalling the boredom she feels – "the years . . . passing in clumps" as she moves from one wealthy suitor to the next, "owners of yachts and islands and seventeenth-century castles, of Bonnards and Picassos and Rothkos" (173, 174) – Charlotte diagnoses her resistance to this world first in terms of her "poor concentration" (174), only then to recognize a sense of hazy expectation, a dull awareness that something new and more worthwhile may soon be coming: "I'd compromised, God knew . . . . But what made these compromises bearable was some last expectation I hadn't relinquished. I was waiting. Waiting and watching for a new discovery to refashion my life. A signal. A mystery. Something deeper and more true than anything else" (174). While this "discovery" is never explicitly tied to the accident – instead introduced during the *Vogue* photo shoot, thus making it *this* event that she seems to have been waiting for *post-accident* – the opening section of the novel instead encourages us to see the accident itself as critically more central, acting as the long-awaited "signal" meant to transform Charlotte's dull existence (174). Her undisguised excitement post-accident at then experiencing the glamor she was formerly denied further confirms her continued commitment to this reverie: she appears to have actually desired the crash (at least as she sees this retrospectively), as a means of escaping her life and starting anew. Her post-accident unconcern thus speaks to her continued fantasy of self-reconstruction, a sense that change will come eventually, even if only superficially (through her new face).

Set against the novel's engagement with new media technologies, supposedly offering access to an improved, more "real" social existence, the reader's awareness of this contradiction within Charlotte's narrative is politically significant. Self-reconstruction, as the novel envisions this, however potentially transformative, nevertheless emerges specifically in relation to a neoliberal narrative of conformity and aspiration: an endeavor to match appearance and identity to media expectations, in this way evading invisibility. In other words, Charlotte's narrative suggests that she is patiently awaiting an escape from the boredom of glamor and celebrity, but, in her choice to take up modeling and acting again following the accident, she goes right back to these priorities. As Brenda R. Weber notes, glamor itself can be read "as a neoliberal tenet":

> "In such a regime, the terms of value become profitability, rational entrepreneurial action, and a 'calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction' . . . . Here we might add to those terms the currency that accords to celebrity,

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since the fusion of glamour, identity, and commodity reaches its apogee in the spectacular visibility accorded the After-body" (54).

While Charlotte embraces this "makeover mandate" (Weber 54) as a means of rebuilding her erased existence, then – explicitly situating her recovery against her investment in online "reality" webcasting – the knowledge that she has effectively invited death in her earlier life in order to escape the very same industry haunts this narrative, casting her self-reconstruction as a death-wish or masochistic fantasy.

With respect to affect theory, such a realization recalls Berlant's cruel optimism and the understanding of ongoing personal compromise and recalibration that this implies. As Berlant relates, "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. . . . These kind of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel when the object that draws your attachment [in this case, celebrity or glamor] actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (1), thereby trapping the subject in a vicious cycle of desire and disappointment. Precisely on account of neoliberalism's aspirational model, individuals "optimistically" accept experiences of personal disillusionment, fixatedly convinced that they might reconstruct a failed scene of attainment. The "life-organizing status" such a scene acquires can "trump interfering with the damage it provokes"; despite the frustration these fantasies bring (evident here throughout Charlotte's early narrative), they remain psychologically constitutional and, therefore, persist in provoking damaging attachments and behaviors (Berlant 227).

The consumer capitalist framework for this understanding becomes readily apparent in Charlotte's subsequent meeting with Thomas Keene, the founder and spokesperson of the reality-Internet service Ordinary People, who predatorily constructs her potential online career employing a language of fantastic possibility. "I'm optioning the rights to people's stories," Thomas relates, "just ordinary Americans: an autoworker, a farmer, a deep-sea diver, a mother of six . . . . Childhood Memories. Dreams. . . . Plans/Fantasies. Regrets/Missed Opportunities. . . . And out of that exposure could come incredible opportunities" (Egan, *Look at Me* 245–47). In exploiting dreams of "fame and fortune" under the guise of promoting "ordinariness," the company transforms subjectivity (and aspirational desire) itself into a product, further promoting the neoliberal ideal of competitive individualism (247). Thomas's profit-oriented philosophy shines through in his opportunistic attitude toward product placement, whereby "if companies are willing to pay [people] to use the products they've been using all their lives," this is sufficient reason to compromise on "authenticity" (247). Here, the qualifications set on this goal mirror a similar set of compromises set on Charlotte's labor: she is expected not only to be "real" but also to sell herself as a believable (appropriately damaged) posttraumatic subject.

What Thomas is selling here, then, under the guise of "the ordinary," is a trauma-narrative version of contemporary neoliberal celebrity: an experience "fabricated to imitate or replace unobtainable realities and which, in the process, becomes a reality itself" (Thrift 294). For Nigel Thrift, within this synthetic environment, the

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subject "is neither person nor thing but something in between, an unobtainable reality, an imaginary friend, and an accessory, a mental image that can be conjured up in the imagination, explored, and made one's own" (294). Here affect is manipulated to produce an impression of effortless success, regardless of trauma, in this way "stirring up the proverbial itch of urges, desires, and identifications that we can't help but scratch" (304). As Charlotte accommodates herself to Thomas's proposal, she thus also interpellates his commercial mode of seeing, shaping her life to the profit-centered expectations this program has set for her: "I realised, then, with fascination, with horror," she relates, "that the mercenary part of me was already pacing the confines of my life, taking measurements, briskly surveying the furniture, formatting my thoughts to Thomas Keene's specifications and calculating their price" (Egan, *Look at Me* 258). In other words, her only semi-conscious compliance with the neoliberal goal of achieving celebrity drives her to codify her life financially, seeing her devising ways to market and sell herself in forms that appall her.

Again, the affect most visibly produced by this self-marketization involves an experience of cruel optimism tied specifically to the expectations of fame, aligned to the camera's constant presence, as well as to the financial benefits this recognition brings with it. Despite her better knowledge, Charlotte sells herself in response to the promise of celebrity, thus holding out on her dream of self-reinvention in favor of aspiration.

The transformation of affect into emotion that the narrative traces, then, is one in which an incipient desire for escape and self-remodeling is corraled by emergent new media narratives into compromise and complicity. Immediate pre-accident dysphoric affects shift increasingly, post-accident, into an unconscious cruel optimism, which then swiftly evolves into depression and overt self-fragmentation. In Charlotte's later decision to sell her media identity to her television producers, in an effort to maintain her sanity and to preserve her personal dignity in the face of increasing notoriety, the enormous personal costs of this industry become apparent, tied to her now conscious emotional dysfunction. "The more notorious I became for my transformation," she asserts, "the more gapingly fraudulent this transformation began to feel. I hadn't transformed; I had undergone a kind of fission, and the two resulting parts of me reviled each other" (*Look at Me* 511–12). Here, the doubling of her identity is offered as a commentary on the violence of modern technology in its neoliberal instantiations: Charlotte's final removal from her own persona, while in one sense allowing her to craft "a new private identity in which she is divorced from her representation" (Mass 102), nevertheless involves an experience of self-alienation henceforth permanently inescapable. Rather than facilitating a dream of self-discovery, her fame ultimately forces her personal disintegration: now an anonymous stranger, it is only as she decides to leave this fantasy behind that her life can begin anew.

Egan's third novel, *The Keep*, is also concerned with the affective experience connected to contemporary media technology and with neoliberalism's capacity to hijack and distort this. Nevertheless, this concern emerges rather differently in this novel. On the one hand, the types of affect most clearly visible within *The Keep* are

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those associated with the Gothic tradition: uncertainty and paranoia in particular abound within the characters' encounters as well as shaping the formal structure of the narrative itself. As Smartt Bell relates, the novel "lays out a whole Escherian architecture, replete with metafictional trapdoors, pitfalls, infinitely receding reflections and trompe l'oeil effects," in this way sustaining "an awareness that the text is being manipulated by its author."

This metafictional Gothic aesthetic reaffirms Egan's continued engagement with postmodern forms, foregrounding authorial interventions and representational tricks as a strategic means to challenge readers' expectations about what constitutes "reality." Even so, other affective concerns, especially with guilt and shame connected to the characters' institutional alignments, also offer a second focus of narrative attention, underlining pervasive experiences of poverty, violence, and addiction tied to contemporary neoliberal politics and to the repressive technologies neoliberalism negotiates. In keeping with the focus of this article, it is this latter emphasis I concentrate on here.

The structure of the novel is critical to understanding how affect is presented within this text. Egan uses a story-within-a-story format to situate negative affect specifically within the context of writing and reading, invoking what Barry Sheils and Julie Walsh refer to as "an economy of affective transfer between writer, reader and text, operating in excess of representation" (1). In other words, the novel maps affective shifts taking place in the act of writing and reading, again tracing narrativization's effect upon tone, feeling, and emotional consciousness. The setting for this depiction is a high security prison, wherein Ray, a convicted murderer, attends a Creative Writing program, taught by Holly, herself a recovering meth addict, who receives little remuneration or support for this role. Implicit within the framing of the novel is thus: first, an overt anxiety regarding the affective toll of an exploitative labor scenario; second, a concern with writing and reading's potential therapeutic or rehabilitative capacity; and, third, an interest in how affect transforms and transmutes as it relocates from author to text to reader. As feeling moves from Ray's pen to his story, and later from his story to Holly's imagination, Ray and Holly begin a process of recovery that is both personal and intersubjective. Nevertheless, this too is obstructed at various points in the novel by each character's investment in the neoliberal institutional discourses that define their respective social positions.

For Ray, this involves, on the one hand, a number of shame-laden *authorial* conditions, including what Sheils and Walsh list as "reflective inhibition, intense frustration, . . . [and] useless feelings . . . when confronted with the empty page and the command to write" (1–2). All of these experiences are to some extent visible in Ray's narrative and visibly shaped by his status as convict, as he battles to negotiate the adequate language and form to tell his tale, and as he interrupts his story to reveal and explain himself. For example, we repeatedly see Ray questioning his classmates' potential judgments of the story (*The Keep* 52, 60, 96) or exchanging descriptive language for the derisive vulgarities of what he calls his "word-pit" (57), a tendency that overtly reflects his dejected view of his own creative potential. This

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alternatively offensive or obscene verbiage, including expressions such as "*freak show* and *mama's boy* and *cancer stick* and *fairy*" among others (57), allows him to replace confession with an unstructured, abject language, which gives vent to his low self-esteem, even as he affects to dodge this through displays of aggressive masculinity.

Indeed, Ray's repeated metafictional interventions in the text are as much a measure of his authorial self-consciousness and *embarrassment*, as they are postmodern interruptions of realist verisimilitude; they invoke the tenuousness of his macho postures as actual indicators of confidence. The ease with which his teacher, Holly, sees through such masquerades itself bears witness to Ray's vulnerability within the classroom setup, as he struggles to maintain the dismissive posture that he initially dons. This becomes apparent, for example, when Ray decides to write his first assignment about "a guy who fucks his writing teacher in a broom closet," thus combining an apparent disdain for the task of writing with an implicit threat to his young female teacher (17). As Holly's response identifies, questioning whether Ray sees himself as the "joke" that this story suggests he does (18), this prank reflects more centrally on him than her, itself provoking a visible demonstration of shame on Ray's part, which sees him looking away from Holly disconcertedly: "She's looking at me but I can't make myself look back" (18). Here, Ray's mortification at being exposed as the class laughing stock betrays his struggle to come to grips with own self-loathing.

More generally, Ray's sense of inadequacy as both writer and individual would seem to emerge from three overlapping affective experiences: the act of writing itself, in "the challenge of making the writing equal to the subject written about" (Probyn 72); the sense of shame he feels over past violence and its present consequences; and, lastly, from his stigmatized position as a working-class convict in a society in which "capital and power" function to dictate "the neoliberal dialectic of shame and blame" (Scambler 766), or in other words, from the fact that he is made to carry the burden of capitalism's failure in regard to the working classes. Leaving this last concern aside for the moment, Ray's sense of shame over the past emerges most notably in his choice of focalization for his story, eventually revealed as reflecting the perspective of the man he has murdered. Ray's fiction is thus, rather unusually, autobiographical: his struggle to come to grips with his own identity as Danny's killer recalls Jean-Paul Sartre's interrelational idea of shame, as being exposed and made self-conscious by the gaze of the Other. As Sartre writes, "It is shame . . . which reveals to me the Other's look and myself at the end of that look. . . . In experiencing the look, . . . I experience the inapprehensible subjectivity of the Other directly and with my being" (282). For Ray, the choice to focalize the narrative voice through the imagined perspective of the man he has murdered emerges in the ending as a clue to his extreme regret and shame, a revelation of the self-disgust he feels in imagining this victimized Other.

In choosing Danny as his narrator, Ray thus gives voice to his shame as perpetrator: Danny represents the Other who reveals Mick/Ray precisely through his contemplation. Analogously, Holly also confronts the experience of being

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exposed and made self-conscious, in this case as she reads Ray's story and projects his gaze onto her own traumatic past, seeing herself as "that pretty princess," who has made enormous mistakes, but might nevertheless be found attractive and inspiring if seen accordingly (*The Keep* 216). In her sense of shame over what she has done to her children on account of her marriage and addiction, she too bears witness to affect's transmissible quality as, drawing comparisons with Ray's experiences, she confronts her own tortured memories and gradually learns to forgive herself her mistakes and move on.

From the start, then, in Ray's decision to write his story from Danny's perspective, and in Holly's to champion this project, the novel's concern with the past's affective weight on present relationships is conspicuous, reaffirming recent psychological studies that explore the "powerful emotional effects on self-schema" that shame memories may entail, often including social anxiety or paranoia (Matos et al. 337). Indeed, Danny's recollections of having betrayed Howard as a child add an additional layer to this portrayal, also invoking a sense of being watched and needing "to prove he was still himself, still Danny King exactly like before" (*The Keep* 16). In this way, Danny's self-consciousness regarding his behavior explicitly echoes Ray's own guarded awareness recalling his past, again invoking a feeling of being looked at and examined, as when Ray confesses to "dying of shame" while reading his story (*The Keep* 60). As Ray's prose then likens Danny's emotional situation on reencountering Howard to the parasitic invasion of a cerebral worm, who had "crawled inside . . . and started to eat until everything collapsed" (*The Keep* 10), Danny's discomposure around Howard ultimately reproduces Ray's own memorial disquiet, invoking paranoid feelings which eat away at his confidence and ultimately "blot out everything else" (36).

Nevertheless, it is as much Ray's neoliberal institutional classification as a convict, as it is his past crimes that determine his failed self-confidence – equally for Holly with respect to her working-class background and drug addiction. As Henry A. Giroux writes, "As part of the larger cultural project fashioned under the sovereignty of neoliberalism, human misery is largely defined as a function of personal choices and human misfortune is viewed as the basis for criminalising social problems" (8). Within this blame-oriented context, the shame felt by convict, addict, or working-class mother is in each case credited to his or her behavior, without further attention to social stigmas shaping these classifications. As the comments of the correctional officer of the prison affirm, referring to Ray as "nothing" and "trash," and to the prison itself as "a great big trash can" not worthy of Holly's attention, such individuals are systemically discounted from institutional support and are seen instead as the undeserving detritus of a thriving market (*The Keep* 222–23).

This understanding is key to apprehending Ray's portrayal of Danny's obsessive relationship to digital technology in the novel, which on first sight would seem rather removed from Ray's own experience. The abject corporeal imagery of Danny's paranoid imagination – including graphic scenes of Gothic violence: "a big spinning blade . . . sawing away at his spine," "every part of him hurt or felt bad in whatever way it could" (102) – directly mirrors Ray's likewise embattled relationship

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to his own isolation and imprisonment, where, similarly to Danny, escape becomes an increasingly pressing necessity, ultimately shaping his decision to build a tunnel and flee. Moreover, as Holly reads Ray's story, she reflects on her own sense of incarceration, where meth presented a readily accessible coping mechanism for poverty and exhaustion comparable to the role of digital media in Danny's story. As she relates, explaining her decision to smoke her first pipe with her husband, "I knew the stuff was bad, but I was so tired of being the cop, begging and raging at him, throwing Pampers in his face when he walked in the door. I wanted to be on the same side again. So I smoked with Seth one afternoon . . . . And I was back on top" (230). Addiction, in this way, becomes the tradeoff for matrimonial harmony in a society that offers little support to working-class mothers.

This link between connectivity and addiction is widely recognized within digital media studies, where technology is often identified as having been weaponized to support neoliberalism (see, e.g. Brooking and Singer; Sampson et al.). Tony D. Sampson et al. describe how "the current *modus operandi* of social media design and marketing is . . . resolutely focused on negative emotions that can 'hook' users by way of habit-forming interactions and the addictive checking of notifications alongside relentless anxious desires to 'like' and 'be liked' in return" (3). Such disavowing readings of the digital perceptibly articulate the novel's perspective not only on Danny's obsession but also on a wider experience of social anxiety tied to new communications and media technologies, especially where participation is understood competitively rather than inclusively. Jamie Hakim writes of how "it . . . becomes possible to read these affective contradictions [associated with media discourses of participation and panic] as indicative of broader structures of feeling generated within the conditions of neoliberal austerity" (137). Such deleterious digital commitments, the novel suggests, might thus be seen as yet another instance of Berlant's cruel optimism, where again this emerges when an object or scene of desire itself acts as "an obstacle to fulfilling the very wants that bring people to it" (Berlant 227).

The paradox of contemporary neoliberal triumphalism is thus manifested in this novel in feelings of shame impelled by social blame and exclusion and in masochistic and violent thoughts and behaviors which then attempt to respond to this experience of shame retroactively. The final scenes of *The Keep* answer to this context by exploring alternative, more constructive modes of physical and mental escape, recognizing how the affective transmissions made possible through the acts of writing and reading themselves inspire discrete modes of personal and cultural resistance.

For Ray and his roommate Davis, this entails an actual escape from prison, as the two join forces to build a tunnel and flee. Here, the "opening" of the door to the imagination that Holly ascribes to the act of writing takes on an overt material form (*The Keep* 18), as Ray's creativity allows him also to think of ways of getting out of prison. Furthermore, inspired by reading Ray's story to search for her own escape from daily struggle, Holly finally grants herself the much-needed break from her overworked life that will enable her recovery. Flying over to a castle seemingly identical to that which Ray describes

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and diving into its celebrated "imagination pool," she is "filled with an old, childish excitement," which seems to promise hope of a fresh perspective and a new beginning (*The Keep* 42). In this way, the narrative bears witness not only to the violence of neoliberal society, including the affective obstacles it sets in the way of successful social flourishing, but also to the creatively inspired possibility of resistance to this context, as Ray and Holly both embrace new opportunities for empowerment opened up by their creative commitments. While the ending never spells out what actually happens to Holly or Ray, we are invited to believe that they might now begin anew.

In taking up the topic of negative affect, then, Egan both registers and responds to the postmodern diagnosis of the waning of affect, showing how feeling persists, albeit in often problematic and compromised ways, for the contemporary subject. While directly engaging with postmodern forms and structures, as well as with the information society that these announce, Egan's subjects relate not an absence of feeling so much as affect's "amorphousness" as an object of analysis: its ability to create "uncertainties" regarding its own "subjective or objective status" (Ngai 30). Affects shift from person to person in these novels, as well as transforming into emotions, "leaking into the actual" in ways that shape the characters' thoughts and behavior (Massumi 105). In so doing, they introduce both obstructive and productive potentials, often not only reflecting institutional obstacles to progression but also presenting possibilities to dodge and resist these obstacles.

Ultimately then, Egan's fictions are not hopeless, even if they are often bleak, and in the characters' decisions to change direction and to reject destructive attachments and self-perceptions they have previously maintained, their narratives bear witness to the possibility of resistance and transformation. Perhaps most centrally, her work makes clear how neoliberal institutions depend upon negative affects as the fuel for their successful functioning, such that as the characters recognize and challenge these affects' necessity within their lives, the possibility of also resisting the market and of embracing their own inherent value becomes evident. In effect, these novels make clear both the obstacles neoliberalism sets in the way of meaningful success and the radical sense of possibility that opens up once the subject finally abandons this neoliberal outlook and instead acknowledges an alternate frame of value based outside the market.

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