Predictive Texts: Modern Mysticism and Algorithmic Divination

by

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ii

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Abstract

Predictive Texts: Modern Mysticism and Algorithmic Divination contributes to critical literature on secularism, literary, and digital studies by theorizing algorithmic divination, which is the process of interpreting algorithmic technologies in order to gain insight into one's life and identity. I argue that new media users "read" the algorithms they are subjected to and create a folk mythology of how the algorithm works, narrating the significance of the algorithmically-dealt content they receive. Algorithmic divination betrays new media users' longing for spiritual enchantment in the face of the capitalist mediation on which the algorithm depends.

Taking a literary-critical approach to questions of digital media and identity, this dissertation considers how new media users respond to emergent technologies and represent networks as capable of holding omniscient power or foresight. I explore the modernist novel as an earlier, influential instantiation of this practice. Whereas the modernist works I read outline utopian possibilities, new media foregrounds the limits and failures of algorithmic divination, underscoring the incongruity of capitalism and mysticism. Focusing on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway,* "Manifestation" TikTok, and Netflix's *Too Hot to Handle*, this dissertation seeks to understand a spirituality that is technologically dependent and further considers how identity and belief emerge online.

Chapter 1: Do-It-Yourself Spirituality and Self-Narration

Simone Weil, while grappling with debilitating neuropathy, the second World War, her experience of religious ecstasy five years prior, and questions of whether to join the Catholic Church, wrote an essay on mystic unity as deriving from attention, from waiting and "suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object."[1] Her era was on of political, social, and technological change, and yet, Weil describes this attention as deriving – divining, perhaps – from math, in particular.[2] The negative effort Weil theorizes is not a matter of willpower, but desire.[3] In vacating one's mind, the result is something almost romantic – the divined connection is pure, and though it is incited by math, she describes it as almost unmediated in its simplicity. Her practice is also algorithmic:[4] the act of writing out solutions creates an environment conducive to mystic thought and unity with God.

Although Weil was a Catholic convert, she never was baptized into the church, and her conception of the religion was almost entirely based in her individual feelings.[5] She was

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[1] Weil, Simone. *Waiting for God.* 1951. Harper Collins, 1973.

[2] It's interesting to note that Weil herself was not particularly skilled in math, though her brother was a math prodigy. Weil's mysticism thus arises at the moment of misunderstanding.

[3] As Leslie Fielder in his introduction to *Waiting for God*, "Looking, the mere turning of the head to God, is equated by Simone Weil with desire… Man's 'free will' consists in nothing but the ability to turn, or to refuse to turn, his eyes toward what God holds before him. 'One of the principal truths of Christianity, a truth which almost goes unrecognized today, is that looking is what saves us.'" I note this distinction between willpower and desire here because willpower is often thought of as more agential or purposeful; Weil would consider faith as something given from a higher power. See Weil, *Waiting for God,* 36.

[4] As Lorraine Daston writes in a recent book on algorithms, whereas "[c]ontemporary accounts of algorithms emphasize their abstract generality... historically, algorithms have almost always been couched in concrete specificities: not an arithmetic function defined recursively … but rather a method to calculate the area of a circular field." Daston continues: "...most modern definitions broaden its meanings to include any step-by-step procedure used in calculation or problem-solving. … 'Besides merely being a finite set of rules which gives a sequence of operations for solving a specific type of problem, an algorithm has five important features [finiteness, definiteness, input, output, effectiveness].'" Daston, Lorraine. *Rules: A Short History of What We Live By.* Princeton University Press, 2022: 83, 85.

[5] Weil writes in a letter to Father Perrin: "What frightens me is the Church as a social structure. Not only on account of its blemishes, but from the very fact that it is something social." Weil goes on to note the patriotism within the Church and her fear of "catching" it in Weil, *Waiting for God,* 52-53.

interested in a personal relationship with God, and one that was borne from desire and emerging from an almost disinterested attention. In her letters, she describes herself as having always been a Christian in her "lower self" but notes that she "had never knelt, she had never prayed, she never entered a Church… but she had been all the time waiting, without daring to define what awaited."[6]

To wait and to desire without knowing for what one waits or desires may seem contradictory, but Weil's individualized and perplexing spirituality reflects our current moment well. Her passion for paradox and mythology reflects our contemporary landscape of contextlessness and irony. The introduction for *Waiting for God* notes that Weil's "writing tends always toward the extreme statement, the formulation that shocks by its willingness to push to its ultimate conclusion the kind of statement we ordinarily accept with the tacit understanding that no one will take it *too* seriously."[7] Although Weil was writing in the 1930s and 1940s, one could imagine saying this about any number of things posted on social media.

As I write now, over seventy years after her death, we have no Simone Weils,[8] though we have a distortion of her idea that witnessing and attention can provide us some salvation. But instead of joining factory workers or going on hunger strikes, we gaze into our phones. What we are being called on to witness is not always humanity's suffering, but rather our desires and ourselves. Instead of math problems training us in the way of negative effort, we have social media algorithms, which are both anesthetizing and enticing, encouraging frictionless scrolling and also narration of our place amongst the millions or billions of other random users.

Of course, engaging with social media is far too self-interested of an activity to afford the

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[6] Fielder, Leslie. "Introduction" in Weil, Simone. *Waiting for God.* 1951. Harper Collins, 1973: 23.
[7] Fielder, 29.
[8] As of May 2024, we do have a meme account on Instagram cheekily named @simoneweilfooddiary – an ironic reference to both social media accounts romanticizing eating disorders and Simone Weil's hunger strikes. The account has over twenty-five thousand followers.

witnessing Weil encourages. Our interactions with algorithmic technology tend towards

narration [9]– it's not the disinterested state of mind Simone Weil describes, but something more

suspicious, paranoid, and – crucially – mediated by capitalism and profit motives. And yet, I start

this dissertation with Weil and root much of my inquiry in the prose of Virginia Woolf, arguing

that both writers offer a type of mediated, divined, and individualized spirituality not ruled by

capital, but by a genuine, if often inscrutable, desire.

My interest in this dissertation is in how this witnessing and our access to new

technologies affects how we come to think about spirituality and our spiritual lives even when

the purported spirituality seems bizarre. This project is concerned primarily with self-narration

and enchantment, and how our current political and social shift – characterized by increasing

polarization, precarity and downward mobility, and a general narrowing of options for achieving

"the good life"[10] – has been accompanied by an expansion of individualized, do-it-yourself

spirituality. It's hard to say when this started: COVID-19 and public health measures being

framed as individual choices, sure, but perhaps also the 2016 election and rampant

misinformation, or something before that: the advent of Facebook, the iPhone, the internet itself?

The individualized, half-ironic spirituality that I describe in this dissertation is part of a

longer history of secularization. According to Charles Taylor, our era is one characterized by a

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[9] Specifically, I'm thinking about the way that one might seek to reflect "multiple consciousnesses," as Erich Auerbach describes: "These are the forms of order and interpretation which the modern writers here under discussion attempt to grasp in the random moment – not one order and one interpretation, but many, which may either be those of different persons or of the same person at different times; so that overlapping, complementing, and contradiction yield something that we might call a synthesized cosmic view or at least a challenge to the reader's will to interpretive synthesis"… "It is easy to understand that such a technique had to develop gradually and that it did so precisely during the decades of the first World War period and after. The widening of man's horizon, and the increase of his experiences, knowledge, ideas, and possible forms of existence, which began in the sixteenth century, continued through the nineteenth at an ever faster tempo – with such a tremendous acceleration since the beginning of the twentieth that synthetic and objective attempts at interpretation are produced and demolished every instant." Auerbach, Erich. "The Brown Stocking," *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.* Princeton University Press, 1946: 549. To narrate the algorithm is to do the work of scaling up from the individual into a "synthesized cosmic view."
[10] See Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011.

veritable marketplace of spiritual options[11] in which we have ushered in "a generalized culture of 'authenticity', or expressive individualism, in which people are encouraged to find their own way, discover their own fulfillment, 'do their own thing.'"[12] We are living in an age where one is not compelled to believe in any particular religion, and we have been living in this age for some time. One's choice in religion and spiritual practice therefore becomes indicative of a self. Taylor explains the situation as follows: "'The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development *as I understand this*."[13] This self-conscious spirituality tends towards irony, I argue, because of its mediation – to viewers, it feels performative, false. Taylor's quote raises questions for our contemporary moment: what happens when that spiritual marketplace collides with our economic marketplace, and specifically the technology sector? And what happens when our choice of religion is mediated by algorithms and technologies filtering out content for us? Whose choice is it then? How is it that we come to understand ourselves?

To explore these questions, I root my inquiry in "first media age"[14] and argue that what I describe as algorithmic divination is reliant on narration – as such, looking at literature in particular can help us understand our contemporary moment of do-it-yourself spirituality, which is a reaction against capitalism and is yet dependent on it. I look at random users of social media applications and contend that our current moment of fragmented spirituality is unique for its dependence on and engagement with algorithmic technologies.

The following chapters provide three case studies into this, but there are myriad other examples of contemporary approaches to individualized spirituality, ranging from those

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[11] Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[12] Taylor, 299.
[13] Taylor, 486, emphasis mine.
[14] See Trotter, David. *Literature in the First Media Age.* Harvard University Press, 2013.

reflecting more traditional, religious rituals to fringe or New Age practices. An example of the former are the dozens of bright orange signs I see when driving through parts of rural Southern California, bordered with bald eagles and the American flag, with big, block letters reading "prayer changes things."[15] It's unclear, in this formulation, who is doing the praying or what exactly needs to be changed.[16] On the more eccentric side, self-proclaimed witches regularly "hex" far-right political figures and made headlines a couple of years ago for their practice of trying to curse Donald Trump.[17] I currently live in San Diego, where it is not uncommon to encounter shops selling crystals and potions, which are frequented by progressives and conservatives alike. Surely, you've met someone who has recently got into meditation or stoicism or some other practice of quasi-religious self-improvement. You might, like me, know an atheist who attends church every Sunday or a Christian who loves tarot. We are living in a world of choose-your-own-adventure spirituality, where absurdity and contextlessness abounds.

We might even look to, for example, the popular limited series *Mrs Davis,* which aired on NBC streaming service Peacock in April and May 2023. The show's premise is that there is an eponymous, all-power artificial intelligence algorithm that promises humans across the world "Wings"[18] in exchange for doing enough AI-sanctioned deeds or quests, and that the main character – a nun named Sister Simone, in what I can only hope is a reference to Simone Weil – is seeking to destroy the technology and encourage a true love for Jesus (to whom she is literally

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[15] For more on this, see "Prayer Changes Things Ministry" at https://www.prayerchangesthings.com/.

[16] The Prayer Changes Things website details the founder's struggles with addiction, yet the project itself does not seem primarily concerned with addiction or any particular struggle. Indeed, the main goal of the site seems to be evangelism, as the "Home" page reads "Please consider giving a donation to help us put billboards all across America and spread the message, Prayer Changes Things!"

[17] Stardust, Lisa. "Witches Hex Trump and His Supporters After Capitol Insurrection." *Teen Vogue.* January 12, 2021: https://www.teenvogue.com/story/witches-hex-trump-and-his-supporters.

[18] The ironic twist at the end is that the application from which the AI overlord Mrs Davis originated was designed by Buffalo Wild Wings – the "wings" one can earn are literal coupons for free wings. Though meant to be comical, the grand reveal is telling, betraying larger fears about rogue AI and the power that corporations can exert, and also representing a corporate enchantment arguably also running rampant. The joke is not that a company would do this, but that it's a chicken company; we wouldn't laugh the same way if it were Amazon, Apple, or Google; that would be near apocalyptic.

married). I would be surprised and horrified to find a network television program more explicitly reflecting our desire for enchantment and our trepidation about big data.

Although this dissertation is primarily concerned with spirituality, my focus on self-narration is relevant beyond the religious. The three case studies I describe in this dissertation are part of a larger shift towards expressive individualism and individual epistemology, and the narration the users I describe afford the algorithm might be understood as a toolkit for self-understanding.[19] Indeed, we are living in a "crisis of expertise"[20] in which *feelings* reign supreme. My project considers how these feelings are produced by our imaginings of algorithmic technology.

1.1 Defining Algorithmic Divination

What I term algorithmic divination is a short-circuited mysticism, or what Weil might have termed an "*ersatz* divinity"[21] – that is, a mysticism that seeks to provide its practitioners with enchantment in the face of capitalism and the increasingly networked mediation of everyday living, but which is bound to and in fact dependent on the very forces it seeks to evade. I use algorithmic divination to describe the process of gaining insight into oneself by narrating one's position in imagined networks constructed via algorithmic technologies. These imagined networks pose the practitioner of algorithmic divination in relation to others in the network and create a feeling of transcendence, which emerges as a result of recognizing oneself through or feeling seen via or by a network.

This framework helps me unite two seemingly disparate concepts: the algorithm and the

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[19] We might also think of the myriad "Do Your Own Research" (DYOR) advocates, who stress the importance of individual investigation. This line of thinking tends towards paranoia and distrust of institutions. See Ballantyne, Nathan, Jared B. Celniker, and David Dunning. "'Do Your Own Research.'" *Social Epistemology* 38, no. 3, 2024. doi:10.1080/02691728.2022.2146469.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Weil, *Waiting for God*, 54.

divine. As I detail in my chapters, this awareness of the whole, this awareness of the potential group of other users also interpolated into the algorithm's project, is what affords feelings of mystic oneness. Algorithmic divination recognizes the role of mediation in increasingly[22] online and individualized spirituality, as well as highlights the impossibility of achieving a mystic enchantment so dependent on mediation.

To understand this process better, we must consider the role of imagination with regards to networks and algorithms, and then consider how we're narrating that imagination. First, I'd like to clarify my use of the word "we." Throughout this dissertation, I look at fictional characters, common readers, TikTok content creators and viewers, reality television show contestants and audiences, and other social media users. I recognize that this is a large selection of subjects and also recognize that it does not encompass the whole of humanity. However, my intervention in this dissertation is not only to describe algorithmic divination as a sort of mediated mysticism, but to explore how users writ large come to understand themselves online as a result of their network thinking. Additionally, I contend that it is important to be both sympathetic and credulous when defining and contemplating algorithmic divination, and using "we" acknowledges that anyone could fall into this practice, as we are all implicated in the networks I describe, regardless of how we come to imagine them and whether we find them spiritually informative or not.

Indeed, networks, like algorithms, are everywhere, but because of their ubiquity, this makes "network" a nebulous term in and of itself. As opposed to defining networks by any specific form, I instead am thinking about a network as an orientation towards paranoia and connectivity, drawing on Tung-Hui Hu's assertion that a network is "a product of a system of

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[22] See Alper, Becka A., Michael Rotolo, Patricia Tevington, Justin Nortey, and Asta Kallo. *Spirituality Among Americans*. Pew Research Center, 7 December 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/spirituality-among-americans/

belief."[23] In this sense, a network is a technique or a way of understanding and linking various events and agents, of imagining links between characters in novels, online subjects, companies like TikTok, contestants in a reality show, intended or unintended audiences, and so forth. My focus in this dissertation is namely on imagined networks – that is, networks that are primarily narrated and created by those thinking the networks. Put otherwise, I am less interested in how algorithms place users in relation to each other for their own surveillance and advertising, and more interested in how users come to imagine themselves in relation to other users regardless of whether or not those users actually exist. And, because users are effectively narrating their lives, a literary approach is particularly useful, as is the term "narrative" to describe what algorithmic divination practitioners and users are doing. As opposed to a more neutral "description," "narrative" captures that this is an ongoing process in which events are being folded in, connected. It is fundamentally networked and paranoid.

To theorize networks and their corresponding algorithms, I employ Emily Apter's "oneworldedness," which refers "to a delirious aesthetics of systematicity; to the match between cognition and globalism that is held in place by the paranoid premise that 'everything is connected.'"[24] Whether or not everything is truly connected is not totally relevant; what matters more is how these connections are narrativized. It is perhaps an obvious point to note that the meaning of the networks I trace come from how we write and think about those networks, but, as new media increasingly shapes our daily lives, it can be difficult to step back and see how we (the users) are narrating its effects. And yet, we do this every day, as it is easy for those of us subjected to algorithms to find and narrate connections when networks and their algorithms

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[23] Hu, Tung-Hui. *A Prehistory of* the *Cloud.* MIT Press, 2015: 11.
[24] Apter, Emily. "On Oneworldedness: Or Paranoia as a World System." American Literary History, Summer, 2006, Vol. 18, No. 2: 366.

appear ubiquitous. Spotify, Netflix, Google, Amazon, Pinterest, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, Etsy and other similar online retailers, and myriad platforms collect our personal data to sell us exactly what we'd like. Anecdotally, these algorithms are elegant and often scarily accurate, delivering me exactly what I want, from blue suede sandals to printed sun hats to laptop sleeves to vegan ice cream recipes to extremely niche podcast episodes.

In turn, these ads and their content inform my sense of myself. I can see that the outside world and these mythologized algorithms recognize me as someone with enough disposable income to purchase frivolous sandals, for example, and I am humbled when I learn that what I thought was myself making a uniquely individual fashion decision is in fact my participation in a growing trend. Sometimes the algorithm deals me too-real content or ads that disturb me, as well. It frustrates me, for example, that as soon as I turned 26 I started getting ads for engagement rings, fertility preservation, and anti-aging skincare, and I find myself often trying to think back to what I must have clicked on or liked that would make "the algorithm" think that I would want any of these things while also trying to ascribe blame to the hundreds of thousands of other 26-year old women using these platforms.[25] The agency of self-cultivation becomes muddled by my awareness of these algorithms and the complicated fact of being a person, in general. Is my sense of self really so dependent on my ideas about the surveillant advertising I'm seemingly constantly objected to? How much of my sense of self is then based on my status as a consumer and my cooperation in the capitalist marketplace? Does the algorithm "read" my profile and deduce what I would like? Or do I find myself desiring these sandals (for example, which I now own and wear nearly daily) because the algorithm somehow knows what I want before I do, thus

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[25] Thinking further, I can deduce that these are sensitive, lucrative products – engagement ring companies know this, for example, and I imagine that they are willing to spend a lot of money in order to secure customers making such monumental and sentimental purchases.

creating that want?

Crucially for contemporary and colloquial usage, those subjected to digital algorithms often do not have full access to the parameters of those five important features, and our resulting understanding of content algorithms, for example, tends to be largely imagined and narrated as follows, using the if-then language of algorithms: "if I like a video on my Instagram feed featuring a puppy, then I must like puppies and am thus likely to want more videos of puppies; if I scroll past a video featuring a person lifting weights, then I am not likely to want to purchase dumbbells," et cetera.

And of course, sometimes the algorithm gets it wrong and serves us content that is baffling or otherwise doesn't fit our preferences. These instances, too, get folded into our narrative of how the algorithm works, and further allow us to define ourseves in opposition to the content. It's not just that I know I am like the other 20-something women with blue sandals, but I also know that I am unlike the 20-something women shopping for engagement rings, despite the algorithm thinking otherwise.

So then, I think, "the algorithm" doesn't really *know* me (if it did, it would know that I will never click on many of the aforementioned ads), and this is all a narrative I have spun for myself about the significance of the particular content I'm receiving. It's a narrative about my consumption, and also a narrative that I will then consume in order to further self-narrate and understand myself. I'm falling into the trap that Wendy Chun describes in her article "Big Data as Drama" or that Neta Alexander describes in her article on Netflix and taste. The latter summarizes this phenomenon well:

> *In a narcissistic manner, [Netflix users] confuse the "You" in "Recommended for You" with a unique, complex individual rather than with a group of strangers who all happened to have made similar choices. Ironically, the fact that [Netflix's] criteria for recommendations remain hidden serves to sustain the myth of personalization. Since we*

can't exactly tell why one title was recommended rather than another, we simply assume that Netflix knows us. The god resides in the machine, and it is unknowable and invisible as any other divine and unworldly entity.[26]

Alexander is right to name this as a myth, but I want to push back on the god residing in the *machine*. While the objects I attend to in this dissertation are fetishized and occasionally even deified, the key mechanism here is that we are obsessed with the feelings of personalization and being "known" that these "gods" produce, and we revere our own capacity for having such feeling – in other words, insofar as the algorithm deals us these videos we read it as thus being divine, it's also on us to recognize the mystic feeling. We revere the technology, yes, but just as much, we revere our own ability to interact with and recognize how that technology shapes our lives. We are impressed with ourselves for our paranoid reading of the algorithm, for our imagined understanding of how it affects us.

As such, questions of agency and selfhood are key in my investigations into algorithmic divination, and I'm more interested in what Taina Bucher terms the "algorithmic imaginary," which "is not to be understood as a false belief or fetish of sorts but, rather, as the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible."[27] However, it's worth emphasizing that this imaginary is not so entirely individualized or existing in a vacuum – the material facts of how the TikTok algorithm works, for example, play a real role in shaping how we are able to imagine our lives and selves. Alexander's "groups of strangers" matter. As Chun argues: "Our roles change constantly because of evolving plotlines determined by actions of others like us (people who like us and who are determined to be like

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[26] Alexander, Neta. "Catered to Your Future Self: Netflix's 'Predictive Personalization' and the Mathematization of Taste." *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, edited by Kevin McDonald, and Daniel Smith-Rowsey, Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2016. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=4542879: 86-87

[27] Bucher, Taina. "The algorithmic imaginary: exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms." *Information, Communication, and Society,* Vol. 20 No. 1 (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086: 31.

us). As characters, we are never singular, but singular-plural; I am YOU."[28] Again, we see the importance of recognition and narration here – the "actors" in this "drama" matter to us because we imagine their lives and know them to exist. As noted, our knowledge of the algorithm feeds this algorithmic imaginary in which I conceive of myself as similar to or different from the other mid-20s women also using these sites and applications. And to put a fine point on it, I can't help but think of the YOU in TikTok's "For You Page," with its scary-accurate videos and endless stream of new content.

1.2 Modernism and Stream-of-consciousness Mysticism

This is represented in Modernist literature largely through interiority and free indirect discourse, which, I argue, make us more aware of the YOU. In particular, I locate algorithmic divination's imaginative potential as originating in Woolf's stream-of-consciousness style, which allows a top-down, birds-eye view of a problem, and affords immersion in that problem. I consider Woolf's stylistic innovation as arising from this historical moment of rupture – as she famously wrote in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," "on or about December 1910 human character changed."[29] What Woolf is referring to is a shift in relationships between people, in particular, which entails a new way of *being* in the world and demands a new way of approaching writing fiction, as changing relations lead to a change in "religion, conduct, politics, and literature."[30] Indeed, in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" Woolf explains that modern fiction must capture the fact that the world is fragmented and, it seems, always dependent on the lives of other people. After all, that is the main focus of the essay: how to capture character. The bulk of

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[28]Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. "Data as Big Drama." *ELH,* Vol. 83, No. 2 (SUMMER 2016): 363.
[29] Woolf, Virginia. "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." Hogarth Press, 1924. Project Gutenberg, 2020.
https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/63022: n.p.
[30] Ibid.

the essay is about a woman Woolf meets on the train, whom she names Mrs. Brown. Woolf

imagines her life based on the woman's clothes, mannerisms, and brief interactions with fellow

passengers. The portrait of Mrs. Brown is impressionistic and deductive, and there is no way of

knowing if it's at all true – but that's incidental. Notably, in imagining this woman's life, Woolf

slips into writing from Mrs. Brown's point of view, demonstrating the utility of Woolf's stream

of consciousness for capturing character and offering a rich view of the various inputs and

sensations that comprise an individual.

And indeed, unlike some other Modernist interior monologue,[31] Woolf's stream of

consciousness is singular for the degree to which it allows readers to flit between focalizations of

various characters and contrast their senses of the external world with their interior thoughts,

creating a sense that the individual is both lost in and distinct among the masses, the network.

Stream of consciousness is therefore essential for conceptualizing algorithmic divination, as

stream of consciousness allows for impressionistic representations of a rapidly changing society

and the affective impacts on the individual.

Woolf demonstrates the possibilities of the network for navigating this space through her

novel form. Many of Woolf's characters are represented as imagining themselves as nodes in a

sonically mediated network, often with an orientation towards seeking fulfillment and meaning

in an ambiguous, interwar England. For example, over a handful of pages in *Mrs Dalloway* we

hear from several characters as they walk along Bond Street. A car backfires, and Clarissa

Dalloway hurries to the window of the flower shop to see what has transpired. A woman

working in the shop also rushes over, and the two women (or Clarissa alone – it's unclear from

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[31] I am thinking primarily of Woolf's stream-of-consciousness predecessor, Dorothy Richardson, whose *Pointed Roofs* arguably invented the form, but which remains focused on the novel's main character. Similarly, we might think of Jean Rhys's novels, or William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, which does showcase different viewpoints, but in separate sections and therefore is not nearly as fluid as Woolf's novels.

whose point of view we are focalizing) see passers-by in the street, similarly staring. We learn, from the narrator, presumably, that "rumors were at once in circulation from the middle of Bond Street to Oxford Street on one side, to Atkinson's scent shop on the other, passing invisibly, inaudibly, like a cloud,"[32] thus bringing all of the shoppers into the fold of the story. We then get an impression of the scene from Edgar J. Watkiss (whom we never hear from again) before going to Septimus Smith, our first introduction to him, as he focalizes, "[t]he world has raised its whip; where will it descend? Everything had come to a standstill."[33]

Across this passage, there is a sense of suspended time, largely because so much physical space on the page is used to describe a single moment. The mood of the text is one of waiting, not only because Septimus (perhaps because of his shell-shock) is anticipating future disaster, but because the stream of consciousness connects the characters with a sense of immediacy, of excess, almost as if we are receiving their unmediated thoughts and impressions:

> *Mrs. Dalloway, coming to the window with her arms full of sweet peas, looked out with her little pink face pursed in enquiry. Every one looked at the motor car. Septimus looked. Boys on bicycles sprang off. Traffic accumulated. And there the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him.*[34]

Septimus's wife, Rezia, seems to sense Septimus's panic, and she urges him along. Speculation about who was in the car continues for two pages more, bringing in more minor characters and circling back to Clarissa. Across these pages, the characters' impressions of the world are centered on a shared listening and looking, and yet the stream of consciousness takes us far beyond that sensory input to reveal their unique reactions. We get an oscillation between that which is secret and individual and that which is public.

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[32] *MD,* 14.
[33] Ibid.
[34] *MD*, 15.

Revisiting the basic definition of "algorithm," the "if then" statements produce a sense of contingency and utopianism, and this, I argue, is salient Woolf's novel. Though writing before the advent of computer programs, there is something algorithmic about the way Woolf poses her characters and their relational positionality: we see the "input" of the world, and then the resulting "output" is the various characters' impressions and personalities. The resulting effectiveness[35] of this patterning depends on the reader to recognize the associations that coalesce around the author's representation of themes, personalities, and impressions. As I argue further in my first chapter, this relationality between characters and the larger world is the strength of the novel form, as readers are able to do the unifying work otherwise impossible in the represented world of the novel.

1.3 Networks: Narrative Technologies for Understanding Ourselves

One's algorithmic bubble constitutes their self-understanding, and one's self-narration is similarly constituted by the reach of the algorithm and one's imagination of that reach. Further, because algorithmic technologies are often so opaque, we can only decipher its impacts on our feelings, the narration of which then provides us a way of understanding the world and our place in it. As such, algorithmic divination is fundamentally interpretive and results in a co-agency between user and algorithm. Because algorithmic divination is so interpretive, starting with literature offers a model for networked reading, and one not mediated by capital.

While there have been a few sociological accounts of online divination, taking a literary-critical, close reading approach allows for attention to the affective elements that are a driving force in what I term algorithmic divination. Focusing on affect and user receptivity – including, in my first chapter, on the readers' power of uniting the characters – allows me to investigate the

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[35] To return to Daston's five features of algorithms as outlined in Daston, *Rules*: 85.

feelings and representations of how people *experience* the impact of algorithmic technologies. Algorithmic divination involves reading and imagining, and the experience of algorithmic divination cannot well be captured by investigations rooted in the social sciences. What I am describing is a narrative process, and it is therefore crucial to think about narrative. Moreover, Woolf's interventions offer a glimpse into an imaginative use of the network that isn't mediated by capital. Although Woolf's networks also fail, her representation of their connective possibilities offers a hopeful view of algorithmic divination, which, I argue, has come to be dominated by capital, as we now understand algorithms as largely owned and implemented by large corporations. Further, starting with literature allows for a smaller-scale inquiry: the individual, interpretive model of reading novels mirrors the way that social media users seek first to understand how the algorithm relates to themselves before using that knowledge to narrate their place among other users and the wider world

Throughout this project, I refer to my objects of inquiry using the term "mystic" instead of "magic" or another similar term. As Robert Svoboda notes in his introduction to Connell Monette's *Mysticism in the 21st Century*, "The word mysticism being derived from a Greek word that means 'to conceal', we can call a true mystic someone who has uncovered, for [themselves], that most fundamental Essence of Existence which remains otherwise concealed."[36] As opposed to magical thinking, which occurs when one believes in the power of their actions to effect some change, a mystic tradition or mystical thinking instead involves some belief in ultimate truth. Mystical thinking is much more internal, though often with a goal of larger-scale unity, or at least with a goal of experiencing feelings of oneness. Monette writes that a mystic tradition is one "in which one seeks a direct, personal relationship with the Divine

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[36] Monette, Connell R. *Mysticism in the 21st Century*. Wilsonville, Oregon: Sirius Productions, 2015, vi.

Presence ... without barriers or intermediaries," so that "while religions offer a system of belief, mystic traditions offer a system of experience."[37] This distinction is perhaps also misguided; is it ever possible to communicate (have a "direct personal relationship") without mediation, intermediaries?

This is the tension of algorithmic divination, as users try to gain salvation (whether that be financial stability, surety about their lives and futures, utopian connections, et cetera) through their chosen technologies.[38] Algorithmic divination's purported enchantment is thus somewhat ironic and must necessarily fail, as it misunderstands what media is and can do. Indeed, Lisa Gitelman defines media "as socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice,"[39] and thus, mysticism represents the seemingly impossible: frictionless, culture-less communication. Mysticism is therefore constituted by its seeming impossibility. On the other hand, algorithmic divination represents an impossibility which fundamentally cannot be overcome: communication via media that then can transcend mediation.

Further, the illegibility of some of the practices I describe in the following chapters (such as "praying" to an "artificial intelligence" device and insisting on one's earnestness in belief) echoes William James's definition of a mystical experience, which he defines as immensely impactful for the individual involved, but almost impossible to communicate.[40] Specifically, James writes that

> *(1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come. (2) No authority emanates from*

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[37] Monette. *Mysticism in the 21st* Century, 11.

[38] Here I use the term "salvation" to stress the significance users ascribe to these experiences – they are searching for enchantment, not just benefit.

[39] Gitelman, Lisa. *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture.* MIT Press, 2006: 7.

[40] James writes: "This incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism. Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else." James, William. *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature: Centenary Edition.* Routledge, 2002: 314.

them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically. (3) They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness… They show it to be only one kind of consciousness.[41]

James's first two qualities point to the difficulty of parsing another's mystical experience – it is both something immensely impactful for the one experiencing it and also hard for anyone else to accept "uncritically." Mysticism and performed mysticism share this ineffability. Who am I to say that one's professed belief is not real to *them*, if their actual beliefs are just as difficult for me to truly appreciate or understand? Of course, there are moments when we cannot accept things uncritically, and I detail these moments of rupture in my case studies. Despite the difficulty of putting mystic experiences into words, the meaningfulness of the experiences often warrant sharing. Insofar as Weil calls on us to witness, we also desire to be seen. In the case of algo div, we turn to the weird hybrid language of tech and spirituality to do so. As with increasing secularism, our emphasis on communication and sharing as producing love / bearing out our desires or whatever also has a long history, as Jenna Supp-Montgomerie discusses in her book on religious culture and the origins of network form:

> *We are living in a long cultural era that prioritizes connection as a kind of communication salvation. Today, connection remains the dominant description for relationships of all kinds and appears to be the necessary gateway to a better future: networking is the path to professional success, the hive mind is the new intelligence, and all of our social ills — from poverty to racism to war— could be solved if we could only connect to each other.*[42]

I argue that we are willing to suspend our disbelief because we're so desperate for enchantment, and this is reflected in the language used by the authors in the texts I read. For example, the *Too Hot to Handle* contestants pray to a secular "god" yet are nevertheless careful to maintain a vagueness about their motivations for going on the show. They emphasize

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[41] James, 327.
[42] Supp-Montgomerie, 21.

reciprocity and sharing their struggles with the other contestants, as if their "self" is becoming more open, but this is all in service of crafting a narrative about their personal journey in order to gain a social media following and secure brand deals. Algorithmic divination is the paradoxical move of deferring agency to the algorithm because of its opacity and sublimity while also trying to demystify it – however, this "demystification" involves the perpetuation of new age myths that deify the self, which is then antithetical to mystic experience.

1.4 Ironic *Misenchantments*

Further, the language used to demystify the algorithm and deify the self are mediated by capitalism, which itself often appropriates the language of belief and connection, as detailed in my later chapters. Indeed, algorithmic divination at its most distorted is a type of prosperity gospel, and practitioners use language infused with monetary and religious language alike. Although these algorithmic objects are often enmeshed in capital, algorithmic divination attempts to pose them as outside of capitalist mediation. As Sara Banet-Weiser notes in her book on authenticity online, we must believe that there are things outside of "mere consumer culture" and "crassness of capital exchange"[43] – she notes religion and self-identity as two such things. However, as this dissertation demonstrates, even these two domains cannot exist outside, despite practitioners' desires for an end to mediation.

While writing this dissertation, I have been working on a secondary, related project: a podcast called *Misenchantments*, the name of which comes from Eugene McCarraher's book *The Enchantments of Mammon*. In each episode, my co-host and I discuss influential books or lines of thinking on subjects including theology, philosophy, sociology, and history; topics related to these fields; and online phenomena we see emerging that reflect our misenchanted world – for

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[43] Banet-Weiser, Sarah. Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture. New York University Press, 2012: 5.

example, our most popular episode to date is one on young women who are extremely online and converting to Catholicism, largely, we suspect, for its opulent, aesthetic signifiers. One of our central arguments is that people are desperate for a spiritual outlet and are thus turning to these quasi-religious practices that can scratch a similar community-oriented, mystical, affective itch.

I mention *Misenchantments* because the project has been instructive in framing how I think about spirituality and the internet, and as such it is an extension of this dissertation. Though with different audiences and modes, the two are inextricably linked, and the podcast has been especially instructive in informing the method of this dissertation and my orientation towards the objects I read. While having a far more direct focus on organized religion, my work with *Misenchantments* has opened my eyes to the myriad ways people bring spiritual meaning into their lives. As noted, we've talked about young women converting to Catholicism, but also tech workers who are reviving Stoicism; young men who tout all-meat diets as key to securing their futures, smartphone applications like "Hallow," which offer guided prayers narrated by celebrities; national conservatives' views on technology; and Luddite teens; among others.[44] We argue that all these phenomena fall under the umbrella of what McCarraher calls "misenchantment." Amending Max Weber's notion that we are living in a disenchanted world, McCarraher instead argues that we have plenty of the markers of enchantment – that is, spiritual significance and feelings of wonder – but that they are all dominated, tainted by industrialized capitalism, and thus lack the affective "it" factor that makes enchantment *enchantment*. Through McCarraher's lens, we can see that, for example, the teens on TikTok doing tarot *are* having real, mystical experiences, but also that their enchantment with this process is mediated and tarnished by the market forces that led to the production and circulation of these feelings. Moreover, these

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[44] My cohost, Lorenzo Nericcio, and I root our investigations into phenomena that we organically encounter while being online. All episodes can be found at https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/misenchantments/id1617546671.

misenchantments are necessarily short-lived because they are driven by profit motives. To stick with the TikTok example, since the goal of the app is to accrue "favorites" and other "engagement,"[45] content creators are motivated to continually produce new videos. The feelings evoked by such videos should thus be strong enough to provoke some reaction, but fleeting enough to warrant more scrolling, more engagement.

McCarraher's framework is useful here for a few reasons. First, it is useful to think about capitalism and religion together, and consider how increased secularity is often paired with capitalist motivations. As Pericles Lewis writes in his *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*: "Religious pluralism and the sense that the individual can choose a religion as one among many 'consumer options' seem closely related to this privatization of religion."[46] As we explore in *Misenchantments*, these people are interested in religion as a primarily individual experience, and one that serves to define the individual as such. Indeed, this is the "expressive individualism" Taylor writes on, arguing that the expressivism originated in the Romantic era, with it becoming a "mass phenomenon" in the twentieth century.[47] Whereas conservative critics cite an increasingly progressive culture as the arbiter of expressive individualism, which they blame for increased secularity and eroding "family values,"[48] we work in McCarraher's framework to take an approach that is critical of expressive individualism from a more leftist perspective, and instead consider how material conditions have led to this current moment of DIY spiritualism. My dissertation similarly reflects this orientation, as a main argument in this

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[45] Such as comments, follows, saves, and shares.
[46] Lewis, Pericles. *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 2010: 29
[47] Taylor, 474 .
[48] See for example, Trueman, Carl. The *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. Crossway Press, 2020. Though I find this book to be extremely transphobic and nonsensical in its arguments, it is interesting to note that it critiques much of the self-narration that I discuss in my dissertation, and similarly draws on Taylor, as well as on other ideas about therapizing and secularization that I am more sympathetic to. However, in arguing that we are living in an era in which we see the "relativizing of all meaning and truth to personal taste" (Trueman, 50), Trueman attempts to turn expressive individualism into an all-encompassing metanarrative that explains, for example, why it is now acceptable to have sex outside of marriage, ignoring the material and technological conditions that led to such a shift (such as, in this example, increased access to contraceptives and STI testing and treatment).

project and in the podcast is that the people engaging in these practices are seeking to assert agency over their lives in the face of opaque, increasingly-impactful technological forces, and there is a corresponding fantasy that having such control will allow them to reach enchantment or prosperity or heaven or some other spiritual goal. In this dissertation, I similarly seek to explore how agency and the self is constructed in relation to and with the help of new media technologies. I trace this as beginning in the early 20th century with stream of consciousness and sound technologies, which afforded expanded imagination of one's social networks (namely, as represented in Clarissa Dalloway's networks); to Manifestation TikTokers imagining their future selves as existing concurrently with their present selves; to *Too Hot to Handle'*s emphasis on personal growth as aided by "artificial intelligence." and personal growth. In my conclusion, I consider the political and social ramifications of these shifts.

Further, McCarraher's revision of Weber is useful here for reading scholarship on Weber and Woolf, much of which takes Weber's "disenchantment" at face value. For example, Lewis writes that "Both Weber and Woolf wished to preserve against modern rationality an intimate, imaginative sphere, a remnant of religious life and locus of mystical experience, which Woolf called 'the wedge-shaped core of darkness' or 'the privacy of the soul.'"[49] Just as starting with Woolf informs my view of the contemporary, so too does considering Weber's disenchantment as misenchantment add nuance to Woolfian scholarship, which usually tends to be very biographic and thus often takes her professed atheism as doctrine. In reading Woolf's novels as representing utopianism and mysticism, my work is useful for considering her novels' afterlives and her novelistic interventions as technologies in and of themselves.

I would be remiss if I didn't note that McCarraher's framework, though useful, offers a

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[49] Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*. 146

limited way of performing critical analysis: he roots his critique in his genuine belief in God and God's ability to enchant the world outside of our mediated capitalism. I am sympathetic to this belief, but also recognize how limiting it is for doing critique – if the only way to be enchanted is through God, then yes, everything else will surely fall short. Indeed, once adopting this stance that we are living in a misenchanted world, it's very hard to be anything other than a hammer looking for and finding nails every which way. With such a totalizing view, it's impossible to argue that there is anything that falls outside of our capitalist, modern, and (I would add) digitally-informed ideology. For these reasons, I am skeptical of McCarraher's framework as the end-all be-all for describing modern living, though I have an intuitive sense that he is right to argue that nothing outside of a more "pure" religious experience can offer a purely religious feeling. And though I'm using "religious" here instead of spiritual, that is because I take McCarraher's use of "religion" in his book to largely refer to enchantment and communion with the divine, which is therefore mystical and spiritual. Further, I am interested in how McCarraher brings his own experience and belief to bear on his objects of inquiry, which is something that has been on my mind while writing this dissertation and being subjected to the targeted ads of TikTok and myriad internet trends. In studying spirituality and digital spaces, attempts at empiricism often fall short, as it can be difficult to separate one's lived experience from "objective" observations about things as totalizing as religion and identity.

1.5 Chapter Summaries

My second chapter, "Virginia Woolf, 'the power of sounds,' and the network imaginary," explores how Woolf anticipates our current, networked moment by representing sound as holding connective and transcendent potential. I focus on the shared-yet-separate listening of *Mrs Dalloway,* considering how Clarissa, Septimus, Miss Kilman, and Clarissa's elderly

neighbor are united while still maintaining their individuality. I argue that this sonic network affords us glimpses into something akin to what Woolf describes in *A Sketch of the Past* as the "hidden pattern" "behind the cotton wool of daily life."

Though writing before the advent of contemporary algorithms, I argue that Woolf's writing still fits into my framework of algorithmic divination, as she uses literature to allow us to look at the entire set of characters and how their lives are differently inflected based on class, sex, age, et cetera. Put otherwise, we can read Clarissa and Kilman's varying experiences with the violin as an algorithm of sorts: if one is wealthy, they will hear the violin from across the way; if one is poor, they must make the music themselves. These connections are often illegible to the characters in the networks, so the moment of payoff never comes. Representations of sound in the novel demonstrate both the possibilities of networked connection, gesturing towards a small-scale utopianism while also foregrounding and foreclosing its impossibility given the present material conditions of the novel's London. Working in the framework of Christian mystic Weil's "attention," I put forth a theory of sonic witnessing, arguing that Woolf's sonic networks build on literature's capacity for irony and outside-facing-in perspective, so that readers are able to see potentialities / otherwise presents and futures, even if the characters cannot. These moments of network failure (in that the characters remain unaware of their similarities / shared experiences) should nevertheless be considered mystical.

Whereas my first body chapter takes stream of consciousness as the "technology" of Woolf's novel, my next chapter explores TikTok and its algorithm. Here, I explore Manifestation TikTok, one of the understudied application's niche subcultures, in which content creators repackage tarot practices and new age mantras into 60-second videos, insisting that one's energy determines the direction of their life and that viewers' desires are indicative of a future in which

they have what they covet.[50] Content creators deal in the already and not yet, conceptualizing

users' desired outcomes as just out of reach yet simultaneously extant. This conflated temporality

emphasizes self-narrativization as integral to enlightenment, both inscribing success as

something wholly personal and personalizable, and producing what Coleman calls an

"imperative of transformation" central to neoliberalism.[51]

I consider how the subculture's particular emphasis on energy and "good vibes" serves to

obscure the human agency and power behind the algorithm's code. Invoking sound and

embodied feelings, content creators emphasize the importance of belief above all else, which will

also be a major theme of my final chapter. TikTokers will assert that the algorithm is such that

"if you're seeing this video, it's meant for you," disregarding complaints about TikTok's

intentional erasure of non-white, LGBTQ+, and disabled content creators and reinforcing a belief

in some neutral meritocracy. I argue that these Manifestation content creators are creating a

technological fetish that has the effect of placating TikTok's (largely teenage) user base and

deferring autonomy in favor of a continually premediated, never-to-be-fulfilled narrative.

At the core of this chapter is a question of what it means if a video "is meant for you."

My hunch is that this affective move seeks to convince fellow users of a shared belief in the

ability of networks to create meaning, to make us feel that we should believe in the network and

algorithm and their ability to teach us about ourselves in some cosmic way.

My final chapter takes *Too Hot to Handle* (*THTH*) as a starting point and ends with a

contemplation of how trend cycles, consumerism, and predictive algorithms create flattened,

commodified lived experiences. In this chapter, I consider the significance of the show's

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[50] Morgan (@lordzygote911). 2021. Tiktok. October 7, 2021.
https://www.tiktok.com/@lordzygote911/video/7016458383536426246.
[51] Coleman, Rebecca. *Transforming Images: Screens, Affect, Futures*. Routledge, 2015, 1.

omniscient, "artificial intelligence" host being referred to as a deity, with contestants often

praying to "her." I ask what it means for a device to judge the contestants' humanity and

progress toward increased vulnerability and capacity to love, especially given that participants

are meant to gain these "skills" through a series of flattened, commodified workshops. I argue

that the show's global network aesthetics emerge in these quasi-spiritual workshops and

invocations, and that these aesthetics have real-world implications in presenting success in the

attention economy as something so formulaic.

Indeed, in addition to the fact that male contestants on the reality dating show don the

same fast-fashion button-up shirts and the women the same cosmetic injections and bikini styles,

Lana's "product" (wisdom and guidance) is presumably something that can be commodified and

mass-produced, not only because her instructions are shallow platitudes, but because early in the

show she is shown alone on camera and her chiron reads "Lana: Factory, China,"[52] implying that

she herself is a mass-produced object, and one imported, no less.

What does it mean for an "artificial intelligence" device to teach us how to be human?

And what is presumed about the human experience if it can be reduced to workshops in which

the men scream to release "sexual tension" and the women learn to love their bodies by creating

"yoni" sculptures out of floral arrangements? And again, how are we to read this: as an earnest

attempt at connection, or something more commodified, parasocial?

One answer may lie in how authenticity and the self is enacted on the show, and enacted

with the goal of getting brand deals and internet fame.[53] On *THTH,* one's authenticity is proven

through *devotion* to the process, the devotion to devotion, and with the goal of unlocking one's

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[52] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 1, "Love, Sex or Money." Aired April 17, 2020 on Netflix.
https://www.netflix.com/watch/80240786.
[53] Banet-Weiser writes on this in her 2012 book, and I'm thinking about how brands seeking personal "relationships" with customers also takes on a spiritual quality in how the brand ambassadors, models, and spokespeople often tie their promotion to some aspect of their identity, thus linking consumption and personal fulfillment.

highest, most vulnerable self. Believing in the power of the (social) network to bring prosperity

relies on a conception of personality or personhood as being very different from how Simone

Weil describes the sacred as that which is fundamentally impersonal.[54] As with TikTok

mysticism, influencers engaging with this type of network thinking are encouraged to believe in

their own worthiness, and any failure to find success or happiness is the result of the influencer

for not believing enough. Their engagement with or performance for their imagined, future,

online audience paired with the opacity of the technology creates this belief. The promise is that

one can have autonomy and make money off of "being themselves." But, save for a select few

who are able to capitalize on their difference, this really leads to a global aesthetic in which

everyone looks the same, wears the same thing, etc., thus robbing the individual of their

supposed individuality that, while a construct, persists as an ideal online. What's worse, this faith

in the network is unfounded and doesn't really pay off – most Instagram influencing is a scam.

But the belief in one's individualism, perhaps traditionally put forth by the "American Dream[55]

and made more extreme by the algorithm's resulting mystical affect, leads to the perpetuation of

a culture mediated by trends, in which people are compelled to post (in order to please the

algorithm) constantly, because their livelihoods and sense of identity depend on it.

      Finally, in a brief conclusion, I consider the social and political consequences of

algorithmic divination and whether enchantment is possible as mediated by algorithmic

technologies.

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[54] Weil, "Human Personality."
[55] Thinking again of Berlant's *Cruel Optimism.*

Chapter 2 Virginia Woolf, "the power of sounds," and the Network Imaginary

Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. A child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion–
            Mrs Dalloway[56]

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is a hidden pattern; that we — I mean all human beings — are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art.
            A Sketch of the Past[57]

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is arguably the noisiest of all her novels. It is also arguably the most networked, largely because of its pervasive sense of sound, both in terms of the sonorous prose and the representation of sonic stimuli. Over the course of a single day in 1923, the narrative follows a complex cast of characters around a London still reverberating with the aftershocks of the first world war and the chimes of Big Ben. These urban sounds – ranging from cars backfiring to planes overhead to private violins – link the novel's characters, creating sonic networks that are occasionally legible to these characters, but which are more often than not unconscious, at times even to readers.

Through these soundscapes, Woolf draws attention to the possibilities and affordances of the network imaginary, allowing readers to understand the social factors preventing the

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[56] Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway.* 1925. Harcourt, Inc. 1981: 22-23.
[57] Woolf, Virginia. "A Sketch of the Past." *Moments of Being.* Harcourt, Inc., 1985: 72. Abbreviated henceforth as *MOB.*

characters from understanding one another through representations of sound and networks. In this chapter, I explore one such unidentified, sonic link between Clarissa Dalloway and Doris Kilman. Whereas the former is often discussed in relation to her "double,"[58] war veteran Septimus Smith, I argue that Clarissa and Miss Kilman's relationship is deserving of more critical attention. Despite their disparate social standings and opposing views on religion, both women reflect on life-changing experiences as being aided or catalyzed by sound. My reading of their respective experiences with violins troubles criticism drawing on the characters' more explicitly stated views towards one another and complicates the ever-growing bodies of scholarship on Woolf's religion and class attitudes. I am namely interested in exploring how Woolf's "secular imagination"[59] should be considered quite mystical, and how the sounds of the novel and "the spaces between them" produce an incomplete utopianism that foregrounds the reasons for its impossibility.

Taking a network approach to *Mrs Dalloway*, I argue that the ways in which Clarissa and Miss Kilman approach spirituality bear markers of their respective social standings and their shared historical moment. I compare Clarissa and Kilman's relationship with that of Clarissa and Septimus and argue that Woolf's stream of consciousness represents a technological innovation that is used for spiritual and utopian ends. I pay particular attention to Clarissa's self-reflective, networked thinking as holding spiritual significance. Although an avowed atheist, Clarissa is nevertheless engaged in the same type of thinking as her more religious counterparts in the novel, though she attributes divinity to embodied feeling and chance. What's more, her "religion of doing good for goodness' sake,"[60] proves to be just as hollow and fleeting as Kilman's

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[58] As noted by Woolf in the 1928 edition of the novel. Howard, Maureen. "Foreword." *Mrs Dalloway,* by Virginia Woolf. 1925. New York, Harcourt, 2002.
[59] Sherman, David. "Woolf's Secular Imaginary." *Modernism /Modernity,* vol. 23, no. 4 (2016): 711–731.
[60] *MD,* 78.

professed comfort in her own devotional practices, adding nuance to the traditional reading of Woolf's writing as being unquestionably and fundamentally atheist. Although Clarissa remains unenlightened, I argue that Woolf intends readers to recognize the novel's networks as holding some salvific power. Clarissa's failure to empathize with Miss Kilman when she is so easily able to do so with Septimus reveals Clarissa's biases and the nature of the two women's separation. Further, by linking characters otherwise separated by class or gender via parallel sensations and stream-of-consciousness prose, Woolf creates networks that have the potential to transcend the social and represent a vision of a shared humanity. That these networks are largely sonic is significant, as sound in particular is able to center embodiment and trouble the divide between the public and private – a divide so dear to the novel's eponymous heroine. Yet sound has not been adequately explored in relation to the transcendence represented in Woolf's novels. Instead, Emily Griesinger notes that Woolf's "literary sensitivity to the unseen or spiritual reflects an imaginative response to secularization,"[61] and much of the other existing scholarship on Woolf's spiritual inclinations also examines the visual contexts of her novels, focusing on these transcendental "moments of being" in relation to Woolf's theory of life as a "luminous halo."[62]

Building off of ocularcentric criticism, this chapter seeks to reify Woolf's sonic commitments as being aligned with mysticism and producing utopian moments of rupture. Recognizing this allows us to see the ways that the "spaces between" sounds function as links as well; attending to these spaces demonstrates moments of possible connection. While many scholars are concerned with cognition and *Mrs Dalloway*'s theory of mind, my inquiry is into how networked thinking advances the mystical affect of the narrative by revealing connections

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[61] Griesinger, Emily. "Religious belief in a secular age: Literary modernism and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*." *Christianity & Literature,* vol. 64, no. 4 (2015): 439.
[62] Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction." *Collected Essays, Volume 2* (Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc: New York, 1966): 106.

between characters. The moments in which this affect emerges are – importantly – ordinary, daily experiences aided by an emerging understanding of networked technologies and contingency – that is, the knowledge that things could have been otherwise.

Focusing on sound and divined spiritualism also corrects what Jane Goldman had initially named as the problem with calling Woolf's writing mystical. In Goldman's view, the mystical is necessarily opposed to the rational.[63] This may be true, in the sense that what is mystical is fundamentally beyond language and reasoning: it is mysterious, unknowable, and thus outside of rationality. Indeed, William James goes so far to name "ineffability" as the first condition of a mystical experience.[64] However, to say that Woolf's *writing* cannot be both rational and mystical is to misunderstand what writing is able to do. Simply put: no form of media can represent *pure* experience, because writing is necessarily mediated – it is mediation. Insofar as the authors and content creators I discuss in this dissertation gesture towards mysticism, their works are technologically-aided. Woolf is thus able to engage with both the mystical and the rational because these are just two things represented in her writing; a novel can gesture towards the mystical without itself being mystical. In trying to move beyond Goldman's narrow definition of mysticism, Donna Lazenby, in her recent monograph on Woolf and Iris Murdoch's mysticism, imports a similarly narrow view in focusing so much on "pure experience." Again, I want to argue that there is no such thing as a *representation* of pure experience, and more so, even mystic experience is often mediated. Undoing this distinction between Woolf's mysticism and rationality is important for understanding her lasting impact and contemporary reception. I argue

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[63] Goldman, Jane. *The Feminist* Aesthetics *of Virginia Woolf. Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001 [1998]): 23.
[64] James, William. *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature: Centenary Edition* (Routledge, 2002): 295.

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that technology allows for the erosion of this distinction and that Woolf anticipates this in her stream of consciousness.

This chapter explores one instance of modernist literature's reckoning with experience[65] and focuses on ordinary incidences of spirituality, which are often overlooked in literary criticism. This orientation towards an everyday transcendence is important, because it rightfully recognizes these small moments as having immense spiritual potential, and this in turn more accurately reflects the secularizing modernist era. Whereas scholarship on religion in modernism has largely centered on standout figures engaged in occult practices, my research demonstrates that this secular, spiritual imagination flourished, and further, that it anticipates our contemporary moment of online spirituality, which is itself dependent on contingency, humanism, and embodied affect. In focusing on sound technologies and network form, I want to stress the co-agency at play between Woolf and the readers on one hand and Woolf and new media on the other.[66] I use this chapter as an opportunity to trace what I see as the history of networked thinking and sonic witnessing, starting with its emergence in the early twentieth century. Woolf and literature perhaps seem an odd choice of chapter topic for a dissertation otherwise focusing largely on algorithms and social media, but *Mrs Dalloway* produces the same affect that TikTok does in foregrounding individual perspective and connection.

Where TikTok does this with an endless stream of content, Woolf produces her utopian affect via stream of consciousness. As such, I hope to argue in this dissertation that literature is well-suited for helping us understand the digital. Because literature allows for an outsider

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[65] For other writing on this topic, see Sara Danius's *The Senses of Modernism* (2002) or Angela Frattarola's *Modernist Soundscapes: Auditory Technology and the Novel* (University Press of Florida, 2018).

[66] Melba Cuddy-Keane touches on this, writing: "I am not proposing, then, in any deterministic way, that Virginia Woolf's approach to sound was 'produced' by an emerging technological culture; nor do I suggest that a specific technological influence upon her works. I am interested rather in the way broad currents of thinking circulate and in the possibilities for cross-fertilizations throughout and across cultures," in Cuddy-Keane, Melba. "Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New Aurality," *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* ed. Caughie, Pamela L. Routledge, 2000: 73.

perspective, we are able to see that the would-be utopian networks Woolf sets up must fail, in that the characters' material and social conditions could never allow for true connection – that is to say, Clarissa Dalloway will never truly recognize her similarity with Doris Kilman. This literary irony can help us see the lure of mediated mysticism – we can then apply this, as I will argue in later chapters, to TikTok and influencer culture, which similarly promises an outside to mediation while also foreclosing the possibility of such an outside.

2.1 Failed Connections

It matters, too, just for understanding *Mrs Dalloway*, that Woolf's networks often fail. After all, Clarissa's salvation – here in the form of genuine connection with Septimus – is fleeting, as she ultimately remains misenchanted[67] with her silly party and social concerns and is unable to muster sympathy for anyone else. However, there are several other moments of incomplete connection aided by sound, and I explore their consequences in this chapter.

The main reading of this chapter focuses on two passages focalized by Clarissa and Miss Kilman, respectively. At separate points in the novel, the two women reflect on key moments in their lives. Both remember the sensation tied to the memory, and both memories are written with similar cadence and language. First, Clarissa reflects on her attraction to women:

> *And whether it was pity, or their beauty, or that she was older, or some accident--like a faint scent, or a violin next door (so strange is the power of sounds at certain moments), she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough. It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores![68]*

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[67] McCarraher, Eugene. *Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity.* Harvard University Press, 2019. Pushing against Max Weber's thesis that secularization has created a disenchanted world, McCarraher argues that we are instead "misenchanted" and seeking enchantment from institutions and social forms that cannot satisfy us.
[68] *MD,* 32.

In this passage, Clarissa attributes her attraction towards women to external stimuli: a violin, a scent, "some accident." This momentary feeling is destabilizing, in turn animating Clarissa and the larger world. The language she uses to describe her feeling is vibrant, teeming with embodied sensation ("gushed and poured") and implementing superlatives ("the farthest verge"). The world itself is personified, the feeling overflowing out of its "thin skin," implying a sort of precariousness requiring only the slightest impetus to break – in this case, something as fleeting as a violin across the way. Shortly afterward, she notes her kiss with Sally Seton and its similarly destabilizing power:

> *The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it – a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling!*[69]

For Clarissa, the integrity of the feeling is in its secrecy, in its "wrapped up" nature (repeated twice). When Peter interrupts in the following sentence, the feeling is like "running one's face against a granite wall in the darkness."[70] But why is this kiss a "religious" feeling for Clarissa, staunch in her atheism?

Notably, Kilman's religion is also a sensual one. Jane de Gay reads Kilman's faith as being tied to Mr. Whittaker, her preacher, who, as an "agent of God" attempts to convert her, though in actuality, de Gay argues, "Whittaker's views feed her low self-esteem and prayer does nothing to improve her poor body-image as she finds herself 'struggling…with that violent

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[69] *MD,* 35-36.
[70] Ibid.

grudge against the world which had scorned her.'"[71] It is ironic, then, that Kilman focalizes and believes that her own "turbulent feelings" are quelled by sound, that for her the religious is aligned in her mind with gaining inner peace:

> *Bitter and burning, Miss Kilman had turned into a church two years three months ago. She had heard the Rev. Edward Whittaker preach; the boys sing; had seen the solemn lights descend, and whether it was the music, or the voices (she herself when alone in the evening found comfort in a violin; but the sound was excruciating; she had no ear), the hot and turbulent feelings which boiled and surged in her had been assuaged as she sat there, and she had wept copiously, and gone to call on Mr. Whittaker at his private house in Kensington. It was the hand of God, he said.[72]*

In both passages referencing the violin, there is a sense of deferred responsibility. Clarissa attributes her attraction to women as rooted in external things and facts: the other woman's beauty and youth, a scent, a violin next door. Even "pity," the one "feeling" in the explanation, is one that always needs a direct object: Clarissa cannot feel pity unless she feels it *for* someone else. Her passion must be incited, divined, and Kilman's conversion can also be traced to an external force causing her to have this emotional response. Further, in her focalizing of this event, Kilman uses similar language, describing embodied sensations much like Clarissa does ("boiled and surged").

Not only is the mechanism the same for both women, centering on the violin (the only two times the instrument appears in the novel); it is also structured the same way grammatically. The passages "echo" each other in form and content. Woolf mirrors their experiences, with both women listing the potential reasons for their "conversions" and both being unable to pin down

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[71] de Gay, Jane. *Virginia Woolf and Christian Culture*. Edinburgh University Press, 2018: 91: "Whittaker's certainty that he has been the agent of God [in converting her] means that Miss Kilman struggles to distinguish between them" … "This act of self-aggrandisement keeps Miss Kilman in thrall: Whittaker's views feed her low self-esteem and prayer does nothing to improve her poor body-image as she finds herself 'struggling…with that violent grudge against the world which had scorned her… the infliction of her unlovable body which people could not bear to see.'"
[72] *MD,* 124.

the singular cause. Woolf's repetition of "whether" in each passage is followed by a similarly-rhythmed list and an eventual parenthetical. To put a fine point on it:

Clarissa's passage reads: "Whether it was pity, or their beauty, … or a violin next door (so strange is the power of sounds at certain moments)."

Kilman's passage reads: "Whether it was the music, or the voices (she herself when alone in the evening found comfort in a violin; but the sound was excruciating; she had no ear)."

Both women go on to describe these experiences as sensual and embodied. Kilman's is explicitly religious in nature, whereas Clarissa's is less so,[73] though still with the word "rapture," and still describing an almost-mystic unity – if not with the other woman, then with men, as she is able to recognize that this must be how they feel towards women. Clarissa is thus involved in William James's "mystic achievement" described in my introduction, in which the practitioner "become[s] one with the Absolute and … become[s] aware of [their] oneness."[74] Clarissa is aware of herself but imagines that she is allowed access into the minds of men. Kilman similarly mistrusts her own feelings and turns to Reverend Whittaker, who cites her feelings as being from "the hand of God."

Crucially, sound allows for this mystic move and the linking of Clarissa and Kilman, both in terms of the literal sound of the violin and the rhythm of their respective streams of consciousness. Later, Kilman reflects on her own sublimated feelings, and, as with Clarissa's attraction to women, Kilman's religiosity is catalyzed by sensation: "The Lord had shown her the way. So now, whenever the hot and painful feelings boiled within her, this hatred of Mrs. Dalloway, this grudge against the world, she thought of God."[75]

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[73] Though in the second passage cited, Clarissa uses the same language to describe her kiss with Sally and goes so far as to call the feeling "religious."
[74] James, *Varieties:* 324.
[75] *MD,* 124.

Kilman's sublimation of her anger towards Clarissa into a religious feeling stymies the possibility of connection with Clarissa. Her anger can never be rooted out or resolved, and Clarissa similarly refuses to understand her own feelings. Although this psychological move is conscious and agential (in that Kilman *tries* to think about God instead of her hatred for Clarissa), it still seeks to defer. I argue that these gestures towards connection are utopian, as they aid the readers in imagining the possibilities afforded by networks. In linking Clarissa and Kilman but keeping them unable to reconcile, Woolf gives readers a glimpse of the possibility of connection and the conditions under which it could be possible.

This deferral is common in Woolf's fiction. A notable feature of her stream of consciousness is that it allows for several characters, ideas, motifs, themes, et cetera to be – as I have come to think about it – suspended, held in relation to one another. It is through these networks and connections that Woolf's sense of reality as "fundamentally external, inhuman"[76] emerges. Although definitively not Christian or religious, I argue that Woolf's sympathetic, networked thinking is best understood as analogous to Simone Weil's theory of "attention," which holds that concentration on a neutral activity or object (Weil uses the example of geometry problems) teaches us how to receive the divine. For Weil, attention is not passive, but formed as the result of an intense desire for union with God.[77] At the same time, though, this attention should not be actively seeking, but instead should involve "suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object… our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it."[78] Weil's goal is a perceptual and connective one:

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[76] Banfield, Ann. *The Phantom Table.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, cited in Mutter, Matthew. *Restless Secularism: Modernism and the Religious Inheritance.* Yale University Press, 2017: 75.
[77] Weil, Simone. *Waiting for God.* Harper Collins: 107.
[78] Weil. *Waiting for God,* 111-112.

[The love of our neighbor] is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled "unfortunate," but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way.[79]

Because, according to Weil, one's willingness to witness reflects their desire to apprehend the truth and unity with God, to see another as they are is good in its own right. Although the focus of this chapter is largely sound and Weil instead uses the visual "looking," her framework is still useful, as she foregrounds recognition above social norms, even arguing that social categories, which for her are not natural but given, "labeled," can impede human connection. Further, waiting for Weil does not entail deferral, but extreme presence, with this presence creating a mystical connection. Woolf has a similar goal in using sound to connect characters, with the resulting networks allowing for a new type of attention, a sympathetic (sonic) witnessing.

Mrs Dalloway is not the only novel in which Woolf models this sympathetic witnessing, nor is it the only one utilizing sound. We might also remember the witnessing in *To the Lighthouse* with Mr Ramsay showing his boots to Lily, as if begging her for sympathy (which she refuses, in a truly devastating scene).[80] *Between the Acts* is also quite sonic and also foregrounds connection, with sound and color coming together,[81] or with sound connecting the past and the present,[82] or, notably, with all of life being imagined as a sonic network, even if not a network apparent to ourselves: "Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves – all are one. If discordant,

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[79] Weil. Waiting *for God,* 115.
[80] Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse.* 1927. Harcourt, Inc., 1981: 152.
[81] Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts.* 1941. Harvest, 1988, 120: "Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken. Look and listen. See the flowers, how they ray their redness, whiteness, silverness and blue. And the trees with their many-tongued much syllabling, their green and yellow leaves hustle us and shuffle us, and bid us, like the starlings, and the rooks, come together, crowd together, to chatter and make merry while the red cow moves forward and the black cow stands still."
[82] *BTA,* 140: "From cow after cow came the same yearning bellow. The whole world was filled with dumb yearning. It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment. Then the whole herd caught the infection. Lashing their tails, blobbed like pokers, they tossed their heads high, plunged and bellowed, as if Eros had planted his dart in their flanks and goaded them to fury. The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion."

producing harmony – if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head … all is harmony, could we hear it. And we shall."[83]

Woolf poses this network as both "discordant" and harmonious. The network is represented as existing but also being beyond us at the same time; I will go so far as to argue that Woolf imagines a world that we are still waiting for. It is thus utopian insofar as it is both imagined and also presently impossible, though with the hopefulness of "we shall," which is inflected with a religious tone, as well. The "we" of the novel are the characters and the world within the novel, but there is also the "we" of the readers, who in some way *have* this "giant ear" – we are able to see that everything is connected.

Woolf also uses the term "discordant" to describe a moment of connective failure in *The Years*, which similarly relies on sound, as the party guests listen to children singing in Latin: "Nobody knew what to say. There was something horrible in the noise they made. It was so shrill, so discordant, and so meaningless."[84] What should be a moment of connection and shared wonder is decidedly not. Eleanor Pargiter, one of the novel's protagonists, is especially disturbed as she looks to connect with another character over the moment:

> *"But it was . . ." Eleanor began. She stopped. What was it? As they stood there they had looked so dignified; yet they had made this hideous noise. The contrast between their faces and their voices was astonishing; it was impossible to find one word for the whole. "Beautiful?" she said, with a note of interrogation, turning to Maggie.*
> *"Extraordinarily," said Maggie.*
> *But Eleanor was not sure that they were thinking of the same thing.*[85]

In this passage, Maggie and Eleanor are themselves discordant, figuratively out of tune with one another. This is a moment of network failure in which the connection between characters fails, though its possibility is apparent to readers. Indeed, we the readers have the

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[83] *BTA,* 175.
[84] Woolf, Virginia. *The Years.* 1937. Oxford University Press World's Classics. 1992: 408. Henceforth abbreviated *TY.*
[85] *TY,* 409.

ability to witness the possibility of the connection, which in turn gives us the power to unite the characters, even if only perceptually.

Readerly attention to *Mrs Dalloway* allows us to see these connections. In the case of Clarissa and Miss Kilman, it's an easy connection to miss, and only exceptionally careful reading and attention allows us to think something like, "wait, the rhythm of this passage seems familiar." The experience of noticing this minor connection is similarly transcendent, shocking, and feels almost mystical. Similarly, the characters' occasional attention affords a rare transcendence that allows them to break through their daily routines and respective classes. That Clarissa is able to form a connection with Septimus but not Kilman is significant: as I will detail, Clarissa is unable to be neutral, unwilling to move beyond "the idea of" Kilman,[86] though Woolf makes clear their similarities. Woolf's mysticism wasn't motivated by theology, but was a result of exploring network forms, and ones arguably influenced by emergent technologies, namely, I argue, the novel itself and the development of stream of consciousness.[87]

Regardless of whether or not these networks "succeed" – that is, whether or not the network form leads to some connection, otherwise opaque characters are thrown into relief against others, revealing the nuances of their respective material conditions and resulting realities. Focusing on individual points of "auscultation" (as opposed to sensation's visual counterpart, "perspective"), I consider how sound – represented throughout the novel in characters' hearing, but also in syntactical echoes – works in a tension of public and private, and creates a resonating, embodied mystical affect. What's more, focusing on sound and links between individual characters and the resulting mystical feeling changes the scale of inquiry, allowing for careful attention to what everyday spirituality does at the level of the individual.

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[86] *MD,* 126.
[87] See again Cuddy-Keane's assertion that this is co-agency, not technological determinism.

2.2 Sonic Interventions

Focusing on sound also adds a new dimension to the conversation on Woolf and religion, which, as noted, has largely taken a biographical or ocularcentric approach, mostly focusing on light. For example, several scholars have written about Emilia Stephens, Woolf's Quaker aunt, and Woolf's shared views on peace, or on her father's agnosticism.[88] Many note Woolf's avowed atheism, too, reminding us of her horror upon learning of T.S. Eliot's conversion.[89] Most of the scant criticism that does directly consider mysticism still tiptoes around naming Woolf a mystic. Jane Marcus rightly notes that Woolf shares an affinity for silence and privacy with Walter Benjamin and Weil,[90] but she only gives Weil's waiting and attention a cursory nod and, further, stops short of naming Woolf a mystic writer out of fear that the author's place in the canon is too precarious to bear spiritual affiliations. I, admittedly writing forty years later and in an era where Woolf is arguably more central to the "canon," reject this claim and further contend that Woolf's mysticism is not something to fear. Not only is there a growing interest in mystic thought, as detailed in other chapters, but also, Woolf's mysticism is so focused on intermediaries, on an understanding of sonic technologies as being able to produce these transcendental moments, and is thus is about media situatedness as much as mysticism. As Kristina Groover notes, Woolf "blurs the distinction between art and theology, between secular and sacred. And the sacred that she gestures toward is not fixed, but is continually being created."[91] I take Groover's claim one step further, and would add that the sacred Woolf gestures to is not only being created, but mediated. Specifically, I argue that Woolf's sacred is sonic and grounded in her stream-of-consciousness style.

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[88]See de Gay, Jane. *Virginia Woolf and Christian Culture.*
[89]Lewis, Pericles. *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 2010: 154.
[90] Marcus, Jane (ed.). *Virginia Woolf, A Feminist Slant.* University of Nebraska Press, 1983: 13.
[91] Groover, Kristina (ed). *Religion, Secularism, and the Spiritual Paths of Virginia Woolf.* Palgrave MacMillan, 2019: 34.

Further, it is arguably this stream of consciousness that has solidified Woolf's place in the canon in the years following Marcus's writing. Erich Auerbach specifically writes that Woolf's "reflection of multiple consciousnesses"[92] is pervasive in contemporary literature, and this remains the case today. I further contend that this reflection of multiple consciousnesses represents a type of mysticism and anticipates our obsession with networks and connection as being salvific. This comes through in *Mrs Dalloway* explicitly as well, as I will discuss with Dr Holmes stressing "communication" as "health."[93] Our obsession with connection as salvific has been explored in scholarship regarding networks and mysticism[94] but has been less explored in modernist scholarship.

As such, my exploration in this chapter builds upon recent ideas regarding Woolf's mysticism and resituates Woolf in media history. For example, Lazenby's thesis is theological, with a goal to establish "the irreducibly mystical contents of everyday life,"[95] and Woolf's recognition and representation of transcendence is thus simply evidence for this fact. As noted, Lazenby seeks to reify "'pure' experience,"[96] or moments of transcendence that cannot be attributed to existing religious frameworks. Put differently: if an atheist such as Woolf is committed to mysticism, life must indeed be mystical. Lazenby rightfully asserts that Woolf's mystical aesthetic is about how we *see* the world, noting that "what the imagination, what the artist reveals to us, is knowledge,"[97] making representational art into something with divinatory potential. However, in seeking to distance Woolf's stance from "materialism" and Bertrand

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[92]Auerbach, Erich. "The Brown Stocking," *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.* Princeton University Press, 1946: 549.

[93] *MD,* 93.

[94]See Jenna Supp-Mongtomerie's *When the Medium was the Mission: The Atlantic Telegraph and the Religious Origins of Network Culture.* New York University Press, 2021; also John Durham Peters' *Speaking Into the Air.*

[95] Lazenby, Donna. *A Mystical Philosophy: Transcendence and Immanence in the Works of Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2014: Ii.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Lazenby, 6.

Russell, focusing instead on the "irreducible," Lazenby remains dependent on a religious and philosophical framework. While I contend that Woolf *is* exceptional in her ability to represent the everyday mystical, framing this spirituality as emerging from "pure experience" misses that these experiences are always *divined* and incited by external stimuli, and thus fall somewhere between the material and the spiritual. It is for this reason that thinking about sound as mediating the spiritual is so productive. In Woolf, sound is used to trouble the subject-object divide between characters, creating an internal awareness in the character of their own objectivity (that is, their position in some imagined narrative), such that they are able to recognize themselves as being acted upon or existing in regards to other characters.

This self-narrativization and self-situating is catalyzed by technology – in this case, again, sonic in form and representation – and allows for a greater degree of witnessing than Lazenby's "pure experience." Reading Woolf's novels in this way allows for what I see as a crucial re-situation in media history. Woolf's style and affect anticipate our current, digital moment. Specifically, her representations of sound analogize the work of the platform and anticipate our own contemporary interest in deferral and impossible utopias.

Despite her innovation, Woolf's networked thinking is constitutive of her era, which was not as secularized as popular narratives might suggest.[98] I am less interested in whether or not there was, in fact, a quantifiable step away from organized religion and more interested in how spirituality was and is shaped by emerging technologies. Critics have often located Woolf's work as being primarily rooted in the psychological rather than in the religious, as Pericles Lewis notes in his study of religion in modernist novels.[99] While such a focus is perhaps warranted, hesitation

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[98] See Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age.* Harvard University Press, 2007; Pecora, Vincent P. *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity.* University of Chicago Press, 2006; Walsham, Alexandra. "The Reformation And 'the Disenchantment Of The World' Reassessed." *The Historical Journal*, 51, 2, Cambridge University Press, 2008.
[99] Lewis, Pericles. *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*: 143.

to approach religious questions in Woolf's work has led to a major gap in scholarship on the author and in modernist studies more broadly, given spirituality's relevance to the study of experience and sensation. Additionally, the rare scholars focusing on Woolf and religion have often taken an entirely sociological or biographical approach, avoiding Lewis's psychological question altogether. In focusing on the psychological *or* the sociological, critics miss out on the oscillation between individual and collective afforded by a more spiritual framework. Few scholars beside Alex Owen recognize the emerging "immanentist spirituality"[100] as being informed by a "new aurality"[101] and other innovations.

Stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse are particularly primed for such an investigation because the former (working in tandem with the latter) is so embodied and physical: it bridges the affective split between subject and object, making the external internal and demonstrating that the religious and psychological are not so clearly distinguished. Woolf further uses sound as a reflexive tool that enables characters to reflect on mystical feelings, namely ones incited by networks. Individual reflection on mysticism, which should be understood, at its most basic, as a feeling of oneness, thus creates a private collectivity, in which characters are kept distinct and yet also are presented as united, even if only to readers.

We might think of this as the relation between individual notes and the whole of a song – indeed, Woolf theorizes her "philosophy" of "the hidden pattern"[102] this way, writing in "A Sketch of the Past" that "we are the words, we are the music."[103] This is how the characters in *Mrs Dalloway* function: as an ensemble, aided by Woolf's stream of consciousness and representation of sound. That this hidden collective consciousness is only legible to readers is a

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[100] Owen, Alex. "The 'Religious Sense' in a Post-War Secular Age." *Past and Present*, Supplement 1, 2006: 161.
[101] See Cuddy-Keane, Melba. "Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New Aurality."
[102] *MOB,* 72-73.
[103] *MOB*, 72.

major feature of literature as a medium; indeed, our "outside looking in" perspective is the basis

of dramatic irony, and in this case the irony is that the characters are indeed connected, their

mystical feelings validated.

Recognizing this irony as producing the spiritual adds an important contribution to a

longstanding debate in modernist studies: that of the purpose of textual difficulty. As I will

detail, the connections between characters are often subtle and arguably opaque, but these

connections also reward careful attention, and I don't find Woolf's use of them to be

exclusionary. Rather, I'm drawing on Melba Cuddy-Keane's argument that Woolf sought to

elevate "common readers"[104] in order to add to the scholarly conversation around secularization.

The popular narrative is one of binaries and replacement: as the story goes, technology and

"rationality" have been gradually supplanting religion, superstition, and tradition.[105] This account

is both historically inaccurate – in fact reflects the academy's feelings about what is worth

studying and taking seriously – and fails to consider how media are fundamentally religious.[106] I

don't take secularism to mean a step away from religion or the absence of religion, but a spiritual

landscape in which organized religion is one option among many.[107] This definition of the

secular is important for understanding that there is no neat binary between belief and disbelief.

Mrs Dalloway engages with this thorniness, and Woolf in a "secular imaginary" as termed by

David Sherman.[108]

However, there is an important distinction to be made here between secularism in the

religious and mystical senses. Woolf's imaginary is not *religious*, I argue, in that it doesn't

engage with institutional forms of belief; but it is nevertheless mystical. Like Sherman, I am also

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[104] Cuddy-Keane, Melba. *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere.* Cambridge University Press, 2004.
[105] See Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* and Eugene McCarraher's *The Enchantments of Mammon.*
[106] For more on this, see Supp-Montgomerie, Jenna.
[107] Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age.*
[108] Sherman, David. "Woolf's Secular Imaginary."

interested in "the secular [as] a condition in which faith and skepticism are not fixed stances or identities, but reciprocal transactions" … "exchanged in increasingly mediated ways."[109] In *Mrs Dalloway,* these transactions are often sonic and networked. Similar moments of being have been described as sublime, as pushing against Max Weber's thesis that the modern world is disenchanted,[110] and I echo those sentiments in this chapter. However, the scholarship reading transcendent moments in Woolf's writing tend to focus on light and on *To the Lighthouse* in particular for its consideration of Mr Ramsay's atheism. While these readings are helpful for establishing a mystical framework in Woolf's novels, I wonder what a reading of *Mrs Dalloway* as sonically mystical can do to clarify Woolf's myriad imaginations – secular, social, and mediatic. For example, Julie Kane argues that Woolf used "moments of being" in place of "mystical experiences,"[111] writing on the aura, sight, and the body becoming boundless. This type of oceanic feeling, I argue, is just present (if not more) in the sonic networks of *Mrs Dalloway.* Moreover, paying attention to sound – its embodiment in particular – allows us to attend to Woolf's utopian model of witnessing.

2.3 Possible Utopias

Woolf is writing in a time where these technologies and the possibilities they afford are nascent, and she is gesturing towards a utopianism that cannot be realized in the novel's London. Ben Moore discusses this utopianism in his recent article on Walter Benjamin and advertising in the context of the skywriting scene in *Mrs Dalloway*, arguing that the shared viewing in Regents Park tends

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[109] Sherman, 718, 713.
[110] Lewis, 143.
[111] Kane, Julie. "Varieties of Mystical Experience in the Writings of Virginia Woolf." *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 41, No. 4. Winter, 1995: 332.

towards both the proliferation and the annihilation of meaning, evoking a world where either everything signifies or nothing does; a doubleness already inherent within utopia, which is typically both the dream of a world where everything fits together, hence from which meaninglessness is excluded, and a no-place, where history itself has been abolished.[112]

Although not working in a religious framework, Moore is describing something that has spiritual characteristics – namely, a shared salvation, albeit one that couldn't possibly exist. As I detail in a later chapter on TikTok, there is something akin to religious salvation in this promise of an "outside" – on TikTok, this promise relates to an eventual end of both online mediation and desire, and in *Mrs Dalloway,* an end to (paradoxically) meaninglessness and history. Crucially, the promise of a utopia, first, can never be fulfilled, and two, is dependent on the network form, as everything must, paranoically, fit together. Because the possibility of a utopia will always remain primarily imaginary, it is also dependent on and often related to technologies that allow for expanded sensory perception and change our ideas about what is possible.

In *Mrs Dalloway* and the time in which Woolf was writing*,* the literary affordances of the network form were only just emerging. Moore is referencing Jameson in describing the skywriting scene as a "utopian moment," which "describe[s] historical periods when politics is suspended from daily life, so that impetus towards social change is not fully developed into action but remains largely unconscious."[113] While there *is* a type of utopianism represented in the novel, it operates on a different scale from Jameson's: Woolf's utopianism is even more pre-conscious, focused on individuals rather than a societal-wide "political change." For Woolf, the possibility of salvation is mostly personal, with the crux of the novel revolving around personal relationships, personal networks. Clarissa's triumph at the end of the novel, for example, is in her

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[112] Moore, Ben. "Walter Benjamin, Advertising, and the Utopian Moment in Modernist Literature." *Modernism / modernity,* volume twenty seven, number four, 2020: 770.
[113] Moore, 779.

ability to understand Septimus, specifically. The others are not necessary; it is Mrs Dalloway herself who is implicated and affected by this utopian gesturing.

However, I still use Moore and Jameson's "utopia" for its suitability for describing network failure: "[Utopia's] function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future."[114] The moments I read in this chapter highlight the social hurdles preventing the utopian future that is nevertheless gestured towards. Yet attending to the individual moments of almost-connection and reading these instances as spiritual robs Jameson's utopianism of its cynicism. That these moments often fail or are outside of the characters' awareness (in a dramatic-ironic way) is significant – Woolf is training us to be networked and perhaps slightly paranoid readers. In *Mrs Dalloway,* political change can never be realized, but individuals are still able to transcend, and that includes us readers who are able to recognize these would-be connections and their significance.

It is here that we should return to Simone Weil and consider her mysticism alongside the utopianism Moore describes. Specifically, Moore describes utopia as a place outside of history or meaning, which is strikingly similar to Weil's conception of the void.[115] As utopia gestures towards death, so does attention to the void tend towards ego death or mystic oneness.[116] As noted in my introduction, for Weil, the sacred lies in the impersonal and that which is beyond the individual. Woolf similarly uses representations of sounds and networks to oscillate between the universal and the individual, creating Moore's utopian space that cannot exist. In linking Clarissa and Kilman, for example, Woolf both highlights the disparities and similarities of their respective experiences, demonstrating the potential of the network form and its limits. Weil's

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[114] Moore, 780.

[115] For example, Marcus writes: "Simone Weil was equally enamored of silence, and her concept of the inner void that must be experienced to achieve spiritual purity is remarkably like Woolf's room of one's own." In Marcus, Jane (ed.). *Virginia Woolf, A Feminist Slant,* 13.

[116] Weil, Simone. "Detachment," in *Simone Weil: an Anthology,* ed. Sian Miles. Penguin Press, 2005 :278

mystic attention allows for consideration of the *present's* imaginary,[117] about what is possible when attending to networks. Utopianism, by contrast, is largely about deferral and the promise of a better future, although that future nevertheless exists in the present by dint of the imagination.[118]

The purpose of this dissertation is to consider how these technologies and the network form invite us to think differently about ourselves, especially in relation to others. In my later chapters, I describe this awareness of oneself as subject or node in a network as a knowledge of contingency: I know of my community (imagined or otherwise) and can thus read myself in relation to them. This, paired with embodied sensation, produces a feeling that we think of as mystical – indeed, on TikTok users even name it as such – and that using a spiritual framework allows us to better understand networks and the mediated nature of belief.

2.4 Networked Sound

Sound is exceptional in *Mrs Dalloway*. Although Woolf links characters by way of other sensory stimuli, sound is the most pervasive and affective, traversing the entire city and transcending class barriers. While I seek to avoid essentializing the senses and upholding the audiovisual litany,[119] it is important to consider sound as being more immersive and bodily-oriented than vision, given that this is how Woolf represents listening in *Mrs Dalloway*. That being said, sound is significant in the novel in part because of how it is represented in relation to vision. Where vision is involved, sound often follows, and vice versa, creating a "synesthetic aesthetic"[120] with a greater effect than vision would have alone. While the two senses are often

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[117] This is also Jagoda's thesis advanced in *Networked Ambivalence,* that we must sit with networks to understand them.
[118] See also my next chapter on TikTok for more discussion of this phenomenon.
[119] See Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction.* Duke University Press, 2003.
[120] Earl, Holly. "Woolf's Synesthesia." *Twentieth Century Literature*, 66, no. 4, Dec. 2020: 463.

paired, I don't see sound and vision as working together in the way Earl describes. In *Mrs Dalloway,* sound is rather amplified by vision. Listening becomes a stand-in for seeing, with listening being important because of its emphasis (in this case) on perspective and orientation towards sonic stimuli, or what Cuddy-Keane terms "auscultation."[121] Woolf nevertheless maintains a focus on sonic immersion in the novel, and it is the resulting affect that must be recognized as mystical. Sound allows for the oscillation between the private and public, with sound waves traveling across the city but taking root and finding meaning in individual characters, all of whom experience these sounds differently based on their distinct lived experiences and personalities.

Writing against ocularcentrism, Steven Connor argues that we must attend to the "auditory self" to understand subjectivity in modernity, and that this auditory self "is an attentive rather than an investigatory self, which takes part in the world rather than taking aim at it."[122] Here, "attentive" is used passively in contrast to the active "investigatory," but in *Mrs Dalloway,* attending to sonic links allows readers *to* investigate. Immersion is a way of orienting oneself, an opportunity to take part in the world and come to *know* about oneself and the larger world, to understand rather than – or before – seeking to change. Connor's auditory self is one thus primed for imagination and the utopianism Moore identifies in the novel's skywriting scene.

While recent scholarship has considered the "holy connectedness" of *Mrs Dalloway*[123] or has described the novel's networked sonic as having political potential,[124] there has yet been a study of the novel's sound in particular as producing mystical or spiritual feelings. My reading of

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[121] Cuddy-Keane, Melba. "Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New Aurality."
[122] Connor, Steven. "The Modern Auditory I." *Rewriting the Self : Histories From the Middle Ages to the Present,* ed. Roy Porter. Routledge, 1996: 219.
[123] Dirks, Rita. "Mrs Dalloway and Dostoyevsky: The Sacred Space of the Soul." *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* ed. Caughie, Pamela L. Routledge, 2000: 151.
[124] See Sutton, Emma. *Virginia Woolf and Classical Music: Politics, Aesthetics, Form.* Edinburgh University Press, 2013; Frattarola, Angela. *Modernist Soundscapes: Auditory Technology and the Novel.*

Mrs Dalloway considers Weil's framework of attention to develop a theory of Woolf's sonic witnessing, which has the potential to bring in otherwise forgotten or marginal characters. Emma Sutton argues that the novel is set up like a fugue, with Septimus, Clarissa, and Peter forming a contrapuntal trio.[125] This sonic metaphor works at the level of plot and form, with the musical "subject" introduced early on and transposed into different "keys" – in this case, Sutton writes, Clarissa's party and memories are the theme, Peter's own memories and views on Clarissa form the "correlative," and Septimus's mental illness and memories of the war comprise the "counter-subject": "initially an 'accompaniment' to the subject or its answer, but also their 'foil,' used in 'alternation' with them."[126]

Sutton's framework is a useful starting point, and I use it to consider how other characters also stand in relation to the main ones Sutton identifies, given that more peripheral characters such as Miss Kilman have similar "echoes" to Clarissa, for example, as Septimus does. These "patterns"[127] in the text and between the novel's characters produce a mystical affect, a paranoia that everything is connected, and the confirmation that it is. Sound also allows for oscillation of scale. Citing Connor, Angela Frattarola argues that Woolf's soundscape "connect[s] people in a chorus, while preserving their individuality."[128] Collective looking does this as well, but focusing on auscultation instead of visual perspective is important because of sound's vibrational quality, its embodiment. Indeed, the violin passages focalized by Miss Kilman and Clarissa teem with sensation. As opposed to visual stimuli, which remain physically apart from viewers, sound waves must literally enter the ear, making hearing an apt metaphor for embodied sensation and

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[125] Sutton, *Virginia Woolf and Classical Music:* 99.
[126] Sutton, 98.
[127]"A Sketch of the Past" in *Moments of Being:* 70.
[128] Frattarola, Angela. *Modernist Soundscapes: Auditory Technology and the Novel:* 70

the interplay of public sensation and private interpretation.[129] Woolf's representations of sound

thus creates indeterminacy, which Leah Toth argues is one of the key features of Woolf's novel

and fiction. This indeterminacy, "Woolf suggests, is born within the most private listening

space—between the ears—for it is here that a broadcast message mingles with the interference of

personal consciousness."[130] Indeed, sound turns characters into "transducers," which "turn sound

into something else and that something else back into sound."[131] Though she doesn't use the

term, Toth is arguing that sound makes characters into mediums or media. Sound is therefore

uniquely situated to produce mystic and connective feelings, as characters are immersed yet

standing apart, such that their class differences become apparent.

2.4.1 Septimus Smith

I started this chapter with a passage auscultated by Septimus Smith because of his

strange positionality in the narrative. A shell-shocked World War I veteran, Septimus spends

much of the novel hallucinating visions of his dead friend, Evans, and narrating – or rambling –

his impressions of the world. At once central and peripheral, he is a "border case" (in many

senses of the word): only "half-educated, self-educated," so that he "might end with a house at

Purley and a motor car, or continue renting apartments in back streets all his life."[132] His

madness manifests in synesthesia, in a move that Earl further argues "works in dialectical

opposition to the 'objective' hegemonic power of the social, political, and medical elites that the

novel critiques."[133] For Earl, Septimus is all feeling and no reason. He is trapped in modernity's

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[129] Although light particles similarly enter the eye, I contend that sound remains more embodied because of the lack of agency involved in hearing. As McLuhan notes, there are no "earlids." McLuhan, Marshall. *The Medium is the Massage: an Inventory of Effects* (Gingko Press): 111
[130] Toth, Leah. "Re-Listening to Virginia Woolf: Sound Transduction and Private Listening in *Mrs. Dalloway.*" *Criticism*, Vol. 59, No. 4, Fall 2017: 576.
[131] Toth, 566.
[132] *MD,* 84.
[133] Earl, Holly. "Woolf's Synesthesia": 473.

imperative to find a scientific explanation for his feelings, and to explain why or how it is that he feels "Heaven was divinely merciful."[134]

While other characters are linked by sound, Septimus is consumed by it, unable to differentiate between the external and internal. In this sense, he exemplifies the "crisis of the senses" Sarah Danius names as the "problem that so many modernist texts and artifacts stubbornly engage: how to represent authentic experience in an age in which the category of experience itself has become a problem."[135] Danius further argues that modernism was marked by a move from technological prosthesis to aisthesis,[136] from external to internal, so that what is recast by new media is the body itself. I argue that we should consider spirituality as undergoing a similar shift, with church authority waning and becoming a more personal matter, with Septimus further exemplifying this change. We are meant to read Septimus's fleeting moments of religious fervor as stemming from his madness: "Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes.) Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down). He waited. He listened."[137] His fervor is psychological and directly attributable to his shell-shock. In Septimus we see the psychologization of religion, which anticipates our current moment of highly individualized spirituality, as I discuss more in my chapter on *Too Hot to Handle.*

Septimus's relationship with sound demonstrates "the loss of stable perspective that was so common an experience of the chaotic, crowded and cacophonous conditions of the First

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[134] "Heaven was divinely merciful, infinitely benignant. It spared him, pardoned his weakness. But what was the scientific explanation (for one must be scientific above all things)? Why could he see through bodies, see into the future, when dogs will become men? It was the heat wave presumably, operating upon a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution. Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock." *MD,* 68.

[135] Danius, Sara. *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics*: 3.

[136] Ibid.

[137] *MD,* 23.

World War," which "did much to reorganize its participants' psychological lives in terms of

sound rather than sight."[138] Despite sound's potential as a mediating agent, Septimus's sonic

excess largely prevents him from connecting. His illegibility, failure to communicate, is his

primary sin in the eyes of the upper class and perhaps also himself – it's unclear whether he is

ironic in reminiscing on Dr Holmes's frequent visits and in his repetition of Holmes's imperative

that "[c]ommunication is health; communication is happiness, communication–".[139] Indeed, he is

even partially illegible to the readers. It's ironic, too, when Septimus reflects that he "could not

feel,"[140] given that he has this sonic, this sensuous excess. His synesthetic imagery animates the

world around him, and though this leads to his death, we are not meant to think that he is at fault

or wrong. Rather, his early episode of madness in the park primes us for sympathy. That his

delusions are so embodied, so graphically described and yet so beautiful, demonstrates the power

of sound to evoke strong feelings both in himself, though he doesn't recognize these feelings as

such, and also in us, who are afforded a wider view of the situation:

> *"It is time," said Rezia. The word "time" split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white, imperishable words, and flew to attach themselves to their places in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time. He sang.[141]*

Here, sound (the word "time" and the other "imperishable words," as well as his singing)

becomes something concrete (in the shells). The words have their "places," unseen by the other

characters or ourselves, in some grand scheme. Though perhaps a bit absurd, the description is

nonetheless utopian and mystical, oscillating between Septimus's individual body and the whole

of Time. He is not in control of the words pouring from his mouth, and we recognize that this

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[138] Connor, Steven. "The Modern Auditory I": 209.
[139] *MD,* 93.
[140] *MD,* 88.
[141] *MD*, 69.

unseen pattern is only visible to him. Woolf makes it clear that Septimus feels that this failure to communicate is not rooted in his own mind: "his brain was perfect, it must be the fault of the world then – that he could not feel."[142] Yet here too there is a question of how accurate that is, given that Septimus is arguably all feeling, all sensation. However, his failure to connect is perhaps "the fault of the world," as no one is able to occupy his point of view, his point of auscultation.

2.4.2 Who is Clarissa Dalloway?

That is, except Clarissa. Woolf writes in the introduction for the 1928 Modern Library Edition of Mrs Dalloway that Septimus is Clarissa's "double," though even without her note this is apparent. Indeed, much scholarship has investigated the significance of the links between the veteran and housewife. Their lives echo one another, with Clarissa and Septimus both reflecting on the *Cymbeline* line: "fear no more the heat o' the sun"[143] – significantly, a line from a funeral song.[144] Specifically, Septimus locates this instruction as coming from the "heart in the body,"[145] further connecting he and Clarissa, who similarly ruminates on death ("until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all."[146]).

His joy is in small things: watching a leaf "quivering in the rush of air,"[147] and Clarissa similarly takes pleasure in "exquisite moments," though ones that demand to be repaid to "the servants, yes, to dogs and canaries, above all to Richard."[148] Though rejecting religion, we might consider Clarissa's insistence on noticing a type of ritual in itself. They both hate interruption

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[142] *MD,* 88.
[143] *MD,* 9.
[144] As noted in Ferrer, Daniel. *Virginia* Woolf *and the Madness of Language*. Routledge, 1990: 26.
[145] *MD,* 139.
[146] *MD,* 39.
[147] *MD,* 69.
[148] *MD,* 29.

and value privacy, as well.[149] And there are significant differences, too (outside of their class status and lived experiences), that run parallel but opposed to one another, namely that Septimus believes in his "new religion" of mixed sensations,[150] whereas Clarissa disavows both "love and religion."[151]

Considering Clarissa and Septimus as subject and countersubject allows us to further explore the characters in relation to each other and the larger world. Septimus' relation to Clarissa and his position in society makes him peripheral to the rest of the characters although he is central to the novel's plot. It is his own indeterminacy and peripherality that allows Clarissa to eventually witness his suffering; that he is outside of her world has somehow allowed him to make it past her defenses. At the novel's climax, Clarissa learns of Septimus's death and imagines how he must have done it, somehow understanding that he threw himself from the window and even visualizing it from his point of view.[152] We assume that she intuits this and that Dr. Holmes has not given her any details, though we can't be certain. Although the novel revolves around Clarissa's network, with Shirley Panken going so far to argue that her network is the source of her "power" and "control,"[153] Clarissa's connection with Septimus is different, founded not on material or political connection, but something more mystical and impersonal.

In this moment, we get a better sense of Clarissa than at any other singular point in the novel. Otherwise she is largely opaque to the readers. There are few things we know about her for certain, most of them the most basic facts of her life: she is middle-aged, married to Richard Dalloway, has a daughter named Elizabeth, had the flu in recent years, and – in the novel's short timeframe – is preparing for a party. As the narrative progresses, we slowly learn more about

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[149] Sutton, *Virginia Woolf and Classical Music:* 99.
[150] *MD*, 22-23.
[151] *MD, 127.*
[152] *MD,* 184.
[153] Panken, Shirley. *Virginia Woolf and the "lust of creation."* State University of New York Press, Albany, 1987: 124.

Clarissa and her opinions, though these eventual impressions are often fleeting, contradictory, or ambiguous. We find that she doesn't know the difference between the Armenians and Albanians, that she is an atheist, that she hates her daughter's tutor, detests "love and religion," and values her privacy above all. Or so she claims; none of these examples are so straightforward, and we have plenty of reason to doubt their veracity. Nevertheless, while some of these more subjective facts and others are focalized through Clarissa, many others are instead impressions from other characters. The "facts" as narrated by Clarissa are only given meaning from her positionality with regards to others: for example, that she is ignorant on the "Armenian problem" is significant given that her husband is a member of parliament and on a committee concerned with the issue.[154] Her atheism is described by Peter as being the result of her sister's death. Elizabeth often ponders her mother's hatred of Miss Kilman, fleshing out the nuances Clarissa is blind to. While this is true of any novel, any person – indeed, we find meaning through our relationships with people, objects, events, feelings – Clarissa takes it to the extreme, having very little self-awareness. And even these "outside" impressions are muddied, often incompatible, giving her personality a "relative quality."[155] It is no surprise, then, that critics also are unsure how to approach this problem of Clarissa, especially given her material similarities to Woolf and a general cult of personality surrounding the author. Some consider Clarissa profoundly empathetic, given her intimate understanding of Septimus's suicide,[156] whereas others find her quite selfish, noting her dismissal of the Armenian people. She is anxious, eager to find values,[157] but in this anxiety creates a world for herself, others write.[158] Clarissa "hardly seems to

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[154] Emre, Merve. *The Annotated Mrs Dalloway.* Liveright, 2021: note 411, page 226.
[155] Gelfant, Blanche. "Love and Conversion in "Mrs. Dalloway."" *Criticism*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Summer 1966, pp. 229-245.
[156] Spitzer, Jennifer. "I Find My Mind Meeting Yours": Rebecca West's Telepathic Modernism." *Studies in the Novel*, Winter 2018, (Vol. 50, Issue 4), Johns Hopkins University Press.
[157] Gelfant, Blanche.
[158] Lipka, Ceylise. "Making a World of Her Own: Affect and Womanhood in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway." *The CEA Critic,* 83.1 (March 2021): 65.

be a protagonist," for Vereen Bell, "but instead is a unifying device around which other characters' thoughts cohere (insofar as they do)."[159] She is, as noted, not self-aware: her party that she loves so much is not "transcendent," but full of people she doesn't see as they are.[160] And this is ironic, given that we learn so much about Clarissa through others, despite her inability, by some accounts, to understand others.

Again, this is not unique to *Mrs Dalloway* or Clarissa. Auerbach notes that "[t]he design of a close approach to objective reality by means of numerous subjective impressions received by various individuals (and at various times) is important in the modern technique,"[161] and this is borne out by new media user's awareness of the self as multiple and refracted through various points of view, as I will discuss in later chapters. Understanding how Woolf synthesizes Clarissa is thus essential for understanding Woolf's role in media history and how the self and time come to be understood online.

For other critics, though, Clarissa sees people as they are because she literally sees *as* they do. One article on the topic seeks to answer the question: "is Clarissa Dalloway special?" Here, R. Lanier Anderson claims that Clarissa is a panpsychist who can distribute her cognition across various types of objects, including trees and other people, and that this ability is extraordinary (indeed, superhero-like), though we are surprised to find it in a mere housewife.[162] I bring up this example because by many accounts, Anderson gets it right: in one close reading, he notes that Woolf uses sound to signal when the narrative shifts between focalizers or consciousnesses.[163] However, his insistence on importing panpsychism into the novel undermines what I find to be his most salient point: that Woolf is training "the reader in a mode

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[159] Bell, Vereen. "Misreading Mrs Dalloway." *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 114, No. 1 (Winter, 2006): 94.
[160] Bell, 98.
[161] Auerbach, 536.
[162] Anderson, R. Lanier. "Is Clarissa Dalloway Special?" *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 41, Number 1A, July 2017.
[163] Anderson, A238.

of attention that is needed to appreciate the work."[164] In painting Clarissa's empathy or ability to think as Septimus as a "superpower" instead of something divinatory, aided by tools, and always incomplete (given her unwillingness to empathize with others), we miss out on the social critique of the novel, and also that Clarissa is (as noted at times by Anderson) fundamentally ordinary. Her normalcy isn't meant to be ironic, as Anderson contends. We are rather, I argue, meant to sympathize with Clarissa and be critical of her shortcomings; we can only do this by paying attention to her myriad networks. For even Clarissa herself feels that she has an "instinct" for knowing people.[165] Her "atheist's religion of doing good for goodness' sake,"[166] though perhaps a bit ironic here, is not only dependent on networks, but also finds meaning in the network – it is the network. However, this network is almost never "completed," fulfilled, and it's important to look at the network failure in the novel. Crucially, I argue that stream of consciousness as technology enacts the network's potentialities and limits.

So, what would a networked reading focused on Clarissa accomplish? First, I argue that we should not be seeking to figure out Clarissa, but we should instead lean into this relativity, considering her relationships with and to the other characters. Clarissa is interesting as a focalizer, given that so many of her internal feelings seem to be rooted outside of her, formed via impressions outside of her awareness. She often misunderstands the true nature of things and especially misunderstands herself, her desires, and her motivations. Yet Clarissa has a redemptive moment that sets her apart from the rest, in that she has an uncanny ability to connect with Septimus after his death. At this moment, the connections set up throughout the novel (the *Cymbeline* song and other parallels) are revealed to have amounted to something that defies logic

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[164]Anderson, A239.
[165] *MD,* 9.
[166] *MD,* 78.

and the material world. Their connection transcends death, and I argue that we must consider this a type of mysticism. To understand why this is mystical, we must first understand how and when exactly Clarissa is able to tap into this network. I argue that her capacity for networked witnessing is a sort of secular imagination.

Although Peter notes early in the novel that Clarissa has this connective power (remembering their "queer power of communicating without words"[167]), it's only with Septimus that we see it enacted. There are a few possible reasons for this selective connection, and one must wonder if Clarissa exercised her empathy and network thinking more readily in her youth. Indeed, that's how Peter makes it seem in his reminiscing.[168] But she is also imperfect and often cruel, "hard on people,"[169] as Sally and Peter note; she teases a woman who had once been employed as a housemaid by a man she later married, though she still bore the marks of her former class: dressing poorly and not understanding social cues.[170] This scene is telling, even more so given that Peter remarks on it so casually. Clarissa's offhanded cruelty is again mirrored later in the novel when she dismisses the plight of the Armenian people.[171] It's arguably Clarissa's worst moment, revealing her to be "spoilt."[172] There is something almost satirical about how dismissive Clarissa is. Here, the irony or absurdity calls our attention to the fact that we're reading a narrative; it reminds us of our position as readers and invites us to reflect upon that position.

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[167] *MD,* 60.
[168] *MD,* 60.
[169] *MD,* 191.
[170] *MD,* 59.
[171] *MD,* 120. "She cared much more for her roses than for the Armenians. Hunted out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice (she had heard Richard say so over and over again)--no, she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? but she loved her roses (didn't that help the Armenians?)--the only flowers she could bear to see cut."
[172] Ibid.

Yet Peter's comment and Clarissa's opinion on this political issue is important for understanding that Clarissa has agency in maintaining or creating these networked connections. Because clearly, Clarissa is capable of sympathy and puts much effort into maintaining her connections with people of her class. As Peter reflects again: "behind it all was that network of visiting, leaving cards, being kind to people; running about with bunches of flowers, little presents… all that interminable traffic that women of her sort keep up; but she did it genuinely, from a natural instinct."[173] So how is it that "she could feel nothing" for the Armenians? This juxtaposition is more striking when considering Clarissa's youthful idealism, which also punctuates the narrative. In fact, in her youth, Clarissa and Sally Seton "meant to found a society to abolish private property, and actually had a letter written," and spoke of marriage as some tragedy.[174] For Clarissa, Peter, and Sally, their youth at Bourton is described as the most vivid time of their lives, and there is thus something melancholic about this loss of youth that permeates the novel. Their friendship is replaced with romantic love – at least for Clarissa – and the intensity of her feelings for Sally are replaced by a cool regard for privacy. Clarissa is shocked, in retrospect, by "the purity, the integrity of her feeling for Sally," the depth of which caused her to stand electrified, clutching her hot-water can and exclaiming "[Sally] is beneath this roof!" She continues, back in the present: "No, the words meant nothing to her now. She could not even get an echo of her old emotion."[175] It's worth noting here that she uses the sonic term "echo" to capture the embodied fervor of this feeling, and also worth noting that it's the words themselves, exclaimed aloud, that hold the emotion's meaning. Indeed, Clarissa's political

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[173] *MD,* 77.
[174] *MD,* 33.
[175] *MD,* 34.

radicalism is catalyzed by her intense feelings, and it seems as if this sensation must precede any

chance of sympathy.

We should remember here that the connection she feels with Septimus is fulfilled by her

literally imagining embodying him as he flings himself out the window. Clarissa is able to tap

into the embodied sensation of Septimus's suicide, and this allows her a knowledge of why he

did it,[176] in the same way that her feelings for Sally informed how she came to understand the

world when she was at Bourton. Importantly, this seems to be at least somewhat agential for

Clarissa: she has an affinity for both Sally and Septimus and chooses to recognize this, whereas

she allows other connections to subside. Furthermore, this sensation opens up the world and its

possibilities to Clarissa. She is more imaginative when focalizing these embodied feelings; as she

has aged, that sense of possibility and imagination wanes, but we see them opened up when she

encounters Peter. This sonic imagination tends towards transcendence.

2.4.3 Clarissa's Unnamed Neighbor

We see this most saliently at the end of the novel when Clarissa embodies Septimus and

is then able to connect with the woman across the way. As with the final revelation of her

connection to Septimus, Clarissa's connection with her neighbor is gestured to over the course of

the narrative. Importantly, Clarissa considers this woman to be tied to the sound of Big Ben,

which she considers a "string":

> *How extraordinary it was, strange, yes, touching, to see the old lady (they had been neighbours ever so many years) move away from the window, as if she were attached to that sound, that string. Gigantic as it was, it had something to do with her. Down, down, into the midst of ordinary things the finger fell making the moment solemn. She was forced, so Clarissa imagined, by that sound, to move, to go – but where? Clarissa tried to follow her as she turned and disappeared, and could still just see her white cap moving at the back of the bedroom. She was still there moving about at the other end of the room. Why creeds and prayers and mackintoshes? when, thought Clarissa, that's the miracle,*

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[176] *MD*, 184.

that's the mystery; that old lady, she meant, whom she could see going from chest of
drawers to dressing-table. She could still see her.
And the supreme mystery which Kilman might say she had solved, or Peter might say he
had solved, but Clarissa didn't believe either of them had the ghost of an idea of solving,
was simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?[177]

Here, sound works as an associative tool, allowing Clarissa to jump between the

"gigantic" clock to her neighbor, to Kilman and mackintoshes to Peter, to religion and finally to

love. Clarissa arrives at her conclusions through intuition and feeling alone. She associates

"creeds and prayers and mackintoshes" with a type of false knowing, as if Kilman's identity and

faith are wrapped up in a "choice" to wear such a cheap article of clothing. Clarissa's brief

comment here at once seems to distance herself from a type of materialist obsession – after all,

she's dismissing the importance of commonplace rituals or objects such as "creeds" and

mackintoshes – and yet betraying her own material obsession. Even in this moment of

transcendence, she's concerned with what Miss Kilman wears, and we might again recall

Clarissa's comment about caring more about roses than political issues. She names this problem

of connection a "mystery," marking another instance of her invoking religious language, and

imagines how Kilman or Peter would approach it, inserting them into a context they would not

otherwise be. Clarissa's insistence on imagining their responses in order to validate her own

stance demonstrates a simultaneous self-awareness and lack thereof. Her thinking is self-

reflective in that she's defining herself against them. In having characters define themselves

through their networks, Woolf opens up space for irony and discordance, as aided by her writing

style. Because we the readers stand outside of this network, we are able to see how Clarissa

misreads Kilman, undermining Clarissa's authority on solving the "mystery."

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[177] *MD,* 127.

Nonetheless, Clarissa's question at the end of the passage is answered later on in the novel, perhaps, when she's finally able to "see," to witness the woman across the way after embodying Septimus. Connection somehow begets further connection, and it's described rather mystically:

> *She parted the curtains; she looked. Oh, but how surprising! – in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her! She was going to bed. And the sky. It will be a solemn sky, she had thought, it will be a dusky sky, turning away its cheek in beauty. But there it was – ashen pale, raced over quickly by tapering vast clouds. It was new to her. The wind must have risen. She was going to bed, in the room opposite. It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window. Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed. She pulled the blind now. The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! the old lady had put out her light! The whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun.[178]*

Though we don't learn definitively whether love or religion solves the questions of "rooms" (and arguably neither do), we are nonetheless confronted with evidence that she has – somehow – been in this other "room," as she knows it would be incorrect to pity Septimus. And, although sound is not the main sense present here, it has prepared Clarissa for this moment, primed her for understanding. As with the other passage featuring the neighbor, we again get an oscillation between presence and absence, and with scale, as well. Around Clarissa is a bustling party, and despite this she witnesses a solitary moment. (Again, we remember the "cotton wool of daily life" being pulled back.[179]) Moreover, this is one of the few instances where nature comes into play, further juxtaposing the elements of the scene; it is also reminiscent of the scale of mystic unity invoked in *Between the Act*'s "giant ear." The woman across the way is seen and possibly seeing, but a moment later Clarissa wonders if the woman indeed notices Clarissa. The

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[178] *MD,* 185-186.
[179] MOB, 72.

mysticism of Clarissa connecting with Septimus isn't just that the two connect, as striking as that

is alone, but that, in understanding Septimus, Clarissa is finally able to see the woman across the

way staring straight at her, and it's as if she unlocks some self-knowledge that comes from her

own mind reflected in Septimus's. Returning again to Weil: in connecting (mystically?) with

Septimus, it is as if Clarissa has been able to transcend her own self and reach Weil's void,

Weil's impersonal center. Her attention to Septimus and her ability to witness his suffering

enables her to finally turn and see her neighbor across the way. A similar plot progression is

mirrored at the end of *The Years*, as well, when, immediately after the children's "discordant"

singing, Eleanor gathers her belongings and prepares to leave the party:

> *The room was full of a queer pale light. Objects seemed to be rising out of their sleep, out of their disguise, and to be assuming the sobriety of daily life. The room was making ready for its use as an estate agent's office. The tables were becoming office tables; their legs were the legs of office tables, and yet they were still strewn with plates and glasses, with roses, lilies and carnations.[180]*

Just as Clarissa's connection with Septimus has allowed her to see her neighbor and

appreciate the beauty of the "dusky sky," the music has similarly knocked the partygoers out of

their slumber, and the novel itself ends shortly after with Eleanor watching everyone leave and

then looking up at the sky, which "wore an air of extraordinary beauty, simplicity and peace."[181]

In both novels, there is an emphasis on silence and the sky, and this changed state after

the witnessing is revelatory, surprising, and disruptive. This ability to witness is posed almost as

something that just happens to each of the protagonists, but in *Mrs Dalloway*, at least, we know

from an earlier conversation with Peter that Clarissa both feels she has a power to "[feel] herself

everywhere," and that this is something that one must "seek out" – the ability to connect is not

random, but agential, much like Weil's choice to wait:

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[180] *TY,* 409.
[181] *TY,* 413.

It was unsatisfactory, they agreed, how little one knew people. But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not "here, here, here"; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places.[182]

Crucially, Clarissa frames this networked connection as requiring effort, with "seek out" being the main thrust of the passage. For Clarissa, there is a fantasy that people can indeed "know her, or anyone," should they choose to investigate. There is a utopian bent, too, in the idea that people can be "completed;" there is a finality in this word that resonates with the fact of the very impossibility of utopianism. Yet I want to also foreground the mysticism inherent in how Clarissa thinks about learning about others and one's self, in that it is an active process, similar to how Weil describes attention as being action-based. Focusing on mysticism instead of utopianism alone is particularly relevant for literature: mysticism is process-based and rooted in feelings and the body, and this scale maps onto the nature of Woolf's collected-yet-individual narratives.

We should think of Clarissa's feeling that she is "everywhere" as an example of network thinking; she is arguing that one can only be understood from a holistic perspective and approaches mystic revelation in acknowledging this. Yet she's also admitting that she doesn't actually know people (otherwise it would not be so unsatisfactory). Because of this acknowledgement, we can read this passage as Clarissa further gesturing towards the utility of networks as making Clarissa feel better about her inability to truly connect with others. We should think further of her parties as being networked as well, as manifestations of her cultivated social networks. She describes her parties as "offerings"[183] – such a spiritual term, and also having a mystic quality, in that they are blatant attempts at connecting. Woolf is demonstrating

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[182] *MD,* 152.
[183] MD*,* 121.

the mystical potential of networks, and also we should remember Weil's witnessing is about waiting, as attention as a form of action. It is passive, in some ways, but necessitates focus. Woolf is modeling something similar for the reader when she links her characters, even if the links are short-lived or incomplete.

Additionally, the passage with Clarissa and Peter in their youth is helpful in contextualizing an earlier instance in the novel in which Clarissa thinks about her parties as a way of communicating even after death: "it must end; and no one in the whole world would know how she had loved it all; how, every instant…"[184] It is for this reason that Clarissa throws her parties, so that she may transmit her feelings towards life itself, "loving it as she did with an absurd and faithful passion,"[185] a love that she allows despite her belief in the danger of love and religion. Importantly, Clarissa reflects on this youthful conversation with Peter shortly after she learns of Septimus's death. She reflects further about the intensity of her and Peter's relationship in its "mystery" and intermittent meetings – something about Septimus's death has reminded her of this ability to feel herself dispersed. She clearly has this great capacity for witnessing and attention, but she wastes it, rarely allowing herself to see it through to its conclusion. She dismisses love and religion, but engages with both, though to love "life" is much more abstract, safer somehow, than truly connecting with another.

2.4.4 Doris Kilman

So, it matters that Clarissa is willing to follow up on her impulse towards connecting with Septimus, when she routinely insists on criticizing Kilman and not connecting with *her*. While she further remains unaware of this disparity, the mirrored listening experiences of Clarissa and

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[184] Ibid.
[185] *MD,* 5.

Kilman reveal it to the readers. There is still a transcendence produced, despite the fact that the connection is incomplete; we are able to see the wholeness that could be possible.

As Woolf wrote Clarissa dismissing Kilman, critics have largely followed suit. There are several reasons this may be the case, including Kilman's general unlikeability, her ugliness, or Clarissa's disdain for her when we can't help but sympathize with Clarissa. But we also overlook Clarissa and Kilman's similarities because their main, major link, I argue, has been unexplored: their parallel experiences with the violin. As with Clarissa, almost all that we learn about Miss Kilman is refracted through others' thoughts, and in criticism she is largely approached metaphorically. Pericles Lewis, in his study of religion in modernist novels, spends a chapter writing on Woolf and disenchantment, arguing that Kilman has an "attitude [akin to that of] the modernist tourist churchgoer,"[186] though also admits that she still has "a complex, if demanding, spiritual life."[187] Lewis contends that Miss Kilman is a way for Woolf to play with "perspectivalism… [Kilman is] designed to explore the possibilities of sympathy."[188] We see this reflected in criticism – whereas Septimus is a straightforwardly sympathetic character, Kilman is not. For many, Kilman is only a metaphor. Michael Lackey argues Kilman represents a whole "socio-political reality," as the narrator "notes the degree to which religion works in tandem with the English political agenda." Citing England's continued imperialism, Lackey writes: "Woolf 's point is not simply that religion is a powerful force within the culture; it is that England's political agenda presupposes a religiously committed citizenry."[189] For Jane de Gay, Kilman represents the Christian social conscience, whereas Clarissa represents the conservative camp, driven by "a desire to improve life in the present rather than hoping for redress in the

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[186] Lewis, 16.
[187] Lewis, 17.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Lackey, Michael. "Woolf's Mrs Dalloway," *The Explicator,* 57:4, 1999: 59.

hereafter."[190] Some go so far to consider Miss Kilman a "monster" who nonetheless "is a metaphor for reality."[191] She is noted to have more capacity for "raw feeling" than anyone else in the novel,[192] but this feeling is often overlooked in favor of these metaphors. Reading Kilman as holding such abstract significance misses her complexity and tends to rely on imported ideas about Woolf's spiritual beliefs, when we should instead be attending to stream of consciousness as a technology.

Even readings sympathetic to Kilman acknowledge how hateable she is, and most positive readings argue that we should respect Kilman mainly because she is a "feminist."[193] This too, flattens Miss Kilman to little more than a metaphor. We should instead pay more attention to her "raw feeling,"[194] and how she, similarly to Clarissa, is refracted through the feelings of others. Indeed, Kilman is not an insignificant character. And, over the approximately twelve pages of the novel focalized by Kilman, we learn several things about her. In recent years, she has undergone a transformation similar to that of Clarissa twenty-odd years ago at Bourton, when the latter rejected Peter in favor of Richard. Whereas Clarissa perhaps does not recognize this moment as pivotal, Kilman identifies her own transformation as instant: "She had seen the light two years and three months ago. *Now* she did not envy women like Clarissa Dalloway; she pitied them."[195] This reflection is an ironic one, seemingly self-aware but nevertheless defensive, condescending. Such a clear delineation of selves could perhaps be attributed to the fact that other means of transformation are not available to her. Woolf reminds us often that Kilman does not meet standard conceptions of feminine attraction, that "[n]o clothes suited her… for a

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[190] Lackey, 69.
[191] Primamore, Elizabeth. "A Don, Virginia Woolf, the Masses, and the Case of Miss Kilman." *LIT*, Vol. 9, 1998: 129.
[192] Bell, 103.
[193] Griesinger, 449.
[194] Bell, 103.
[195] *MD,* 123, emphasis mine.

woman, of course, that meant never meeting the opposite sex."[196] Despite her professed

superiority and religiosity, she is nonetheless consumed by sensation and the intensity of her

desire: "Sometimes lately it had seemed to her that, except for Elizabeth, her food was all that

she lived for; her comforts; her dinner, her tea; her hot-water bottle at night. But one must fight;

vanquish; have faith in God."[197]

Scholars have often considered Woolf to be quite tough on Miss Kilman, with Lewis

writing that "Woolf gives a special viciousness to her portrait of Miss Kilman, the character who

most often speaks for love."[198] Additionally, Kilman is also the most outwardly religious

character, making her the representative of the very "love and religion" that Clarissa condemns.

Kilman is also, in my opinion, the most unfairly left out of scholarship exploring *Mrs Dalloway.*

Perhaps this is because, as Lewis notes, that "[s]cholars of Woolf's work have generally taken

her declaration of secularism at face value, ignoring her interest … in alternative forms of the

sacred,"[199] or perhaps it's because Kilman is easy to hate. But Woolf, although portraying

Kilman as a holier-than-thou, ugly, jealous woman, and moreover one hypocritical and driven by

sensual desires, uses sound to link Kilman and Clarissa, the latter of whom "common readers"

would likely be more likely to identify with.

More than simply ignoring Kilman as a character in her own right, critics have neglected

to adequately explore the links between Clarissa and Miss Kilman. Vereen Bell notes that their

consciousnesses overlap only once, briefly, when the two literally meet in the presence of

Elizabeth.[200] Yet Clarissa and Septimus never meet; their consciousnesses never overlap. Instead,

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[196] *MD,* 129.
[197] Ibid.
[198] Graham, Elyse, and Pericles Lewis. "Private Religion, Public Mourning, and Mrs. Dalloway," Modern Philology, Vol. 111, No. 1 (August 2013): 101.
[199] Lewis, 143.
[200] Bell, 101.

Clarissa and Septimus are united in their "echoes." So why hasn't the same been the case for the two women? Though less extreme than the connection Septimus and Clarissa share, the links between Clarissa and Kilman denote a certain orientation towards sound and allow us to understand these two characters better. Moreover, exploring this connection reveals how Woolf was thinking about transcendence, networks, and networked feeling, which almost takes the place of religion in the narrative. Their shared love of violin is an overlooked link, and works in the same fugal structure Sutton describes.

Comparing the two passages centering on the violin is especially productive for teasing out the nuances of Woolf's social critique, as the women have vastly different experiences due to their class. Whereas Clarissa's violin is one heard from across the way and beautifully played by someone else, Miss Kilmans' music is harsh, dependent on her own production. It is no wonder, perhaps, that Clarissa feels that she is experiencing, in these moments, simply "what men feel,"[201] not recognizing the feeling as something that could be uniquely hers. Conversely, Kilman is able to identify her own feelings as "hot and turbulent,"[202] taking ownership of the sensation while nonetheless trying to sublimate it, thinking of God instead. Reading these differences casts light on their other similarities throughout the narrative, namely the intensity of their desires. Whereas Clarissa romanticizes "this moment in June," Miss Kilman longs for Elizabeth and, in a particularly sensuous and upsetting scene, an eclair.[203] Yet there is something indeed repulsive about the nakedness of Miss Kilman's desire, which Clarissa is better equipped to tamp down in herself.

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[201] *MD,* 32.
[202] *MD,* 124.
[203] *MD,* 131-132.

Kilman's religion is both her comfort and the thing she struggles against: she often feels

guilty for her material desires. Woolf is both critical and sympathetic in her representation of

faith's potentialities. Much like the network form itself, Kilman's religion holds the possibility of

transcendence, though often fails. There is perhaps meant to be some irony in the women's

similarities. At the least, there is a dramatic irony in that we readers are able to recognize it while

the women would have no way to in the confines of reality – this is what makes Clarissa's

connection with Septimus so stunning. Yet Clarissa is aware of the possibility that things could

be different, that she and Kilman could have been allies instead of enemies:

> *For it was not her one hated but the idea of her, which undoubtedly had gathered in to itself a great deal that was not Miss Kilman; had become one of those spectres with which one battles in the night; one of those spectres who stand astride us and suck up half our life-blood, dominators and tyrants; for no doubt with another throw of the dice, had the black been uppermost and not the white, she would have loved Miss Kilman! But not in this world. No.[204]*

Part of the irony in this passage is that Clarissa, avowed atheist, engages in the same type

of religious thinking she denounces, attributing her hatred to divine intervention, here

represented as a dice throw. In imagining how the world could have been different, Clarissa is

engaging in utopian thinking, and this imagining helps to solidify and almost justify her hatred.

Further, it's interesting that Clarissa acknowledges that her hatred for Kilman is located more in

the imagination than in reality, when so much of the focus on Kilman throughout the novel is on

Kilman's body and her ugliness. We should consider this emphasis on embodiment as

demonstrative of the auditory self, as priming us to notice connections, especially given those

connections' often sonic nature. This is key for understanding modernist spirituality as

responding to an increasingly atomized world, and one rooted in technological change. As

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[204] *MD,* 12.

Connor writes, "the control which modernity exercises over nature depends upon that experience of the world as separate from myself, and my self-definition in the act of separation, which vision seems to promote."[205] Therefore, Woolf's emphasis on embodiment is constitutive of the time of the novel and its urban setting, both of which lend themselves well to the networked form. Woolf thus uses sound to blur boundaries between characters.

Additionally, sound is used to disrupt Clarissa's insistence on maintaining a private inner life; in her interactions with Septimus and the old woman, for example, she is revealed to be quite mentally porous. Moreover, sound and networks are well-suited for troubling the split Clarissa sets up between one's inner and outer life – a split, I should note, that seems to have developed as she's grown older and more entrenched in social norms (we might remember her youthful conversation with Peter about "seeking out" a person's networked connections).

Further consideration of their respective violin listening raises the question of why Clarissa claims that Miss Kilman's religion has "dulled [her] feelings"[206] when Clarissa is first, very concerned with her own claim to privacy and holding onto her own feelings, and second, Kilman has quite strong feelings. There is irony in Clarissa's inability to recognize this, to recognize her own strong feelings as the same as Kilman's. Clarissa is obsessed with privacy and believes more in the individual, whereas Kilman is concerned with the collective. Sonic networks trouble this by revealing that Clarissa and Kilman are actually more similar than we think, and both of them are wrong. Kilman's purported belief in the collective leads her to sublimate her own desires and claim this false righteousness; Clarissa claims to be against love and religion while discarding this commitment for a number of impulses; Clarissa is also the most mystical character (other than Septimus), and her only moment of transcendence or

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[205] Connor, Steven: 203.
[206] *MD,* 11.

redemption is mystical in quality. Instead of thinking of Septimus as the sole countersubject, we should also remember Miss Kilman.

2.5 Conclusion

Though writing nearly one hundred years before the advent of TikTok, the questions and possibilities Woolf poses in her sonic networks are still relevant for thinking through how the self is refracted online today. My intervention in this chapter is considering Woolf's networks as producing spiritual-like feelings via stream of consciousness and representations of sound. This pushes back against existing scholarship on Woolf's religious commitments and explores how to approach the novel form as a medium for network representation, in enacting those networks' possibilities and limits. And indeed, those networks have limits, as demonstrated by Clarissa and Kilman's inability to reconcile or recognize their similarities.

Nonetheless, I have argued that even this failed connection constitutes sonic witnessing, which is neither wholly religious nor wholly utopian, but which expresses some mysticism, the likes of which we still see today online. However, I do not necessarily argue that Woolf set out to express the mysticism of the network – rather, Woolf is gesturing towards this feeling and anticipating our current, mystic moment. These failed and partial connections still offer insight into Woolf's characters and political commitments. For example, with Clarissa and Kilman, we get a failed connection, in that the women remain enemies despite their obvious (to us) similarities. Yet their inability to communicate and "see" one another reveals the depths of their differences, as do the differences in their experiences with the violin.

With Clarissa and Septimus, we get a successful connection, albeit one with limited salvation – Septimus remains dead, though in sacrificing his life he's able to communicate with

Clarissa, ironically flipping Dr Holmes's argument that "communication is health."[207] Clarissa's

ability to connect with Septimus transforms her, or at the least, makes her more porous, more

primed for noticing, so that she sees the old woman living across the way and is struck by the

beauty of the sky. All of these partial or failed connections then finally help readers to

understand Clarissa, creating what Auerbach calls "reflected consciousness,"[208] which is similar

to Charles Taylor's "politics of recognition," which Jessica Berman notes "is grounded in a

dialogic notion of identity whereby self-understanding is constructed and perpetuated in common

with others. It thus incorporates the private community into its attempt at the universal."[209]

Indeed, Woolf is not the only author who does this. I do not contend that she poses these

networks intentionally or uniquely, even. Rather, I argue that the reflected consciousness and

politics of recognition are aided by Woolf's use of sound (we might remember the chorus, or

Sutton's fugue), but also that these devices are typical in their literary-ness, being dependent on

dramatic irony and our privileged standpoint as readers. Auerbach's reflected consciousness is

dependent on the dramatis personae,[210] and we might further remember Chun's YOU as

discussed in my introduction.[211] Clarissa is her own character, but we can only come to know her

in her relation to others.

Again, this is not unique for Woolf. This passage from Auerbach might easily apply to

content creators, Instagram users, contemporary readers trying to navigate the news landscape, or

any number of people we have personally met:

> *Many writers have invented their own methods-or at least have experimented in the
> direction-of making the reality which they adopt as their subject appear in changing
> lights and changing strata, or of abandoning the specific angle of observation of either a*

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207 MD, 93.
208 Auerbach, 545.
209 Berman, Jessica. *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community*. University of Cambridge Press, 2001: 11.
210 Auerbach, 534.
211 Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. "Big Data as Drama." *ELH*, Vol. 83, No. 2 (SUMMER 2016).

seemingly objective or purely subjective representation in favor of a more varied perspective.[212]

There is a sense of doubtful agency here, as the narrator loses their power in favor of a more global view. The facts of the world are made more variable, more dependent on one's own point of focalization – or auscultation, if we're sticking with the sonic. This is picked up by TikTokers and social media users, more broadly, as one thinks about the algorithm and their place in the millions and millions of agents online. The resulting "synthesized cosmic view" poses a "challenge to the reader's will to interpretive synthesis,"[213] which is what creates the mystical affect emerging both online and in *Mrs Dalloway*, as we struggle to understand Clarissa and yet see her mind reflected in so many other characters. This is network form, though an aspect of it understudied in both modernist scholarship, which tends to focus on connections between characters or locations, and digital scholarship, which tends to focus on user data on a larger scale. Exploring this oscillation of scale is crucial for understanding both literature and the digital.

Such reflection – refraction, we might call it – is similar to what gets enacted on TikTok, as I will detail in my next chapter, as the seeming omniscience of the algorithm can never be pinned down and users instead place the onus on the viewer to understand themselves. Indeed, scrolling TikTok is also a "challenge to the reader's will to interpretive synthesis," to repeat the phrase from Auerbach, as one has the option to endlessly scroll and endlessly defer their own agency in "manifesting" their dream lives. In manifestation we see remnants of Woolf's utopian gestures, as well. I thus use the framework developed in this chapter to inform my next two

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[212]Auerbach, 545.
[213] Ibid., 549.

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chapters' thinking on agency, deferral, the digital, and irony, demonstrating literature (and

Woolf's) lasting relevance in media studies.

Chapter 3 "If You're Seeing This, it's Meant for You": Deferred Desire on TikTok

A woman in glasses shuffles a deck of tarot cards and looks into the camera, presumably that of her phone, propped up on the table she sits at. "If this is on your For You Page," she waves a hand, "baby I fucking swear this message is for you. That's how I work, so let's play." She smiles. "Hmm, what do you need to know? The next 48 hours. Take what resonates, leave what doesn't." She leans forward, shuffling the cards in her hands with more urgency, less care. "Use your own intuition, the game is to use your own intuition. You want to connect to everything around you and outside of you… and then use it to … fucking... build your own inner world." A card flies out due to her aggressive shuffling, and Jordan Ashley (@jordanashley17_), picks it up, notes that it's the Hanged Man, and places it on the table. There is a thud offscreen and she turns to react, leaning down, incredulous, telling us that a different deck of cards fell off of the bookshelf, and that the Fool card fell out face up. She pauses, looking wordlessly into the camera for a literal seven seconds. "There's a very strong beginning coming for you right now," she asserts, eyes wide and serious, a far cry from her cheery start – this is no longer a game. She spends the rest of the almost-three minute video explaining the significance of the cards, drawing several more, at one point asking, "what do we do, Spirit?" Jordan ends her reading by encouraging viewers to take control of their lives and this opportunity for a new start. At first glance, it's difficult to know how seriously we're meant to take this video. Jordan is almost comically genuine, and the cards dropping behind her could be construed as a joke. The caption offers little by way of indication, reading simply: "very specific message #FYP." The video has

1.1 million views, 165,000 likes, and 2300 comments.[214] Some of those comments are mocking, with a user writing "that long pause.....," but most comments are grateful and, perhaps surprisingly, quite earnest. One user writes "Instant tears. From the bottom of my heart, thank you [big eyes emoji][face surrounded with hearts emoji]" and another, "I claim this with positive vibes and light [prayer hands emoji][stars emoji]."[215] The latter comment is emblematic of this genre of video and an incentive for content creators to make more videos with narratives that commenters want to appropriate; after all, positive engagement is the goal on TikTok. But what, I wondered, did it mean to claim someone else's message as your own?

   Like many faced with threats of an impending pandemic lockdown, I first downloaded TikTok in March 2020, and I started encountering videos such as Jordan Ashley's shortly after. My first-year students had been chatting about the application for months, and I, feeling five-ish years older but wildly out of touch, wanted in. For a few weeks I scrolled through the platform without an account until I was hooked and wanted to bookmark videos and follow content creators.[216] Even before I could interact with (like and save) any of the content on my aptly titled "For You Page" (FYP), I was struck by how much the app was learning about me. Some of this was obvious: my phone's location services were enabled, so I was getting videos made by users in my area; my sister and I were on the same Wi-Fi network, so her favorited videos were making their way to my page; my phone knows my basic demographic information, so I got videos other white, mid-20s women liked. But there were minutiae that felt uniquely "For Me." How, for example, could TikTok have known I was working towards a graduate degree in

[214] As of March 2024.
[215] Jordan Ashley (@jordanashley17). 2021. "very specific message #fyp." TikTok, July 21, 2021. tiktok.com/@jordanashley17_/video/6987483714783612165.
[216] It's worth noting that there is something intense and quasi-spiritual in referring to one as a "creator" – the term is vague enough and carries a certain mystique.

English or that I am the oldest in a two-daughter family? How could it know which rare medical condition I have?

The rest of the internet wasn't sure, either, and this uncanny specificity has led many, to consider TikTok a threat.[217] The uncanniness of scrolling TikTok and the speed with which it comes to "know" one is veiled behind the proprietary "algorithm," which some users have said is a reflection of one's inner self,[218] as the videos can feel so individualized. It is this specificity that allows for the development of hyper-niche subcultures such as the one I discuss in this chapter, Manifestation TikTok, and it is this very uncertainty that allows users to interpret TikTok as being somehow divine. This divinity is especially at play on Manifestation TikTok, which engages with astrology, visualization, and other future-casting practices. For example, when Jordan Ashley and others say "if you're seeing this, it's meant for you," they're speaking as if the algorithm is a divine object, and in this chapter I am interested in how viewers react to this type of surveillant advertising and use it to narrate their own experiences and lives. In particular, I am interested in how one reacts to being named as the "you" of these future-casting videos, and how the algorithmic divination that results is at once an assertion of one's own agency and a deferral of this agency.

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[217] Although TikTok was the most downloaded social media application of 2020 and reached over one billion users in September 2021, there have been lasting questions about TikTok's data collection as related to national security. In July 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced in July 2020 that the Trump administration was considering censoring TikTok "and other Chinese social media apps" and grimly stated that downloading TikTok would place Americans' "private information in the hands of the Chinese Communist Party" (Shepardson and Beech). As of May 2024, TikTok's future is still uncertain, as the United States Congress passed a bill in April 2024 requiring Chinese-owned, TikTok parent company ByteDance to sell the company to an approved buyer. If ByteDance refuses, TikTok will be banned in the United States, though it is yet unclear if this bill will hold up, as it will almost certainly be challenged by ByteDance (Wile and Wong). See Williams, Janice. "TikTok Is the Most Downloaded App of 2020, Beating Facebook." *Newsweek.* 09 December 2020. https://www.newsweek.com/tiktok-most-downloaded-app-2020-beating-facebook-1553611; Bursztynsky, Jessica. "TikTok says 1 billion people use the app each month." *CNBC.* 27 September 2021. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/09/27/tiktok-reaches-1-billion-monthly-users.html; Shepardson, David, and Eric Beech. "Trump orders ByteDance to divest interest in U.S. TikTok operations within 90 days." *Reuters.* 14 August 2020. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-tiktok/trump-orders-bytedance-to-divest-interest-in-u-s-tiktok-operations-within-90-days-idUSKCN25B00K; Wile, Rob, and Scott Wong. "Congress approved a TikTok ban. Why it could still be years before it takes effect." *NBC News.* 23 April 2024. https://www.nbcnews.com/business/tiktok-ban-bill-why-congress-when-takes-effect-rcna148981.
[218] Spiritualityu (@spiritualityu). "#manifestinghelp #spiritualbeginners #spiritualitytok." 31 July 2022, TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@spiritualityu/video/7126594390532885802.

Manifestation TikTok, which we might instead call Mystic TikTok or MysTikTok, is an active subculture on the platform, encompassing – in my view – several smaller sub-subcultures,[219] with creators exploring topics including astrology, tarot, visualization, sonic meditation and incantation, and generally any form of divination or future-telling put forth on the platform. I use "manifestation" as a catch-all because it's a term used often across all of these topics, and because the "manifestation" hashtag is among the most active of the relevant terms for the phenomenon I seek to describe, with 10.4 billion views as of mid-October 2021.[220] The term is rooted in New Age thought and the law of attraction and centers on positive thinking and having a "vision" for your life being key to attaining success.[221] TikTok takes it one step further, focusing on the embodied *feeling* of fulfillment that users say they get when viewing manifestation videos: it's this feeling that users "claim." However, it's important to note that hashtags may not be the best metric for gauging popularity, as many content creators will omit hashtags from their captions in order to heighten the feeling of predestination or good fortune a user might get when happening upon a video. Perhaps *because* many aren't aware of how TikTok's program works, happening upon a highly-specific video without a hashtag can feel especially transcendental. This feeling, paired with the self-narration and emphasis on "claiming" gives us our first glimpse into what is so attractive about Manifestation TikTok: users

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[219] I use the term "sub-culture" here, but "micro-community" or "taste cluster" is perhaps also fitting: TikTok is such that users are often part of several taste clusters, and it can be hard to delineate where one ends and another begins.

[220] As of March 2024, TikTok no longer shows total views on videos, nor does it show total views to hashtags. It is likely that the views noted in this paragraph for hashtags have increased significantly in the past two and a half years, but it is hard to be certain. However, the number of posts is still visible: there are over 4.7 million posts with the "manifestation" hashtag as of March 2024. While hashtags "#astrology" and "#tarot" have more views on TikTok, at 26.2 billion and 13.5 billion, respectively, both of these hashtags refer to far more specific subcultures, while "manifestation" as a term encompasses both astrology and tarot. It's also worth noting that I'm not talking about "witchtok," which is a massive, adjacent subculture on the app that engages with a logic that's more magical than mystical, and which, in my experience, isn't necessarily dealt alongside videos that comprise Manifestation TikTok. As noted in my introduction, I focus on mysticism (as opposed to magic) due to its orientation towards knowledge; in this case, Manifestation TikTok presumably reveals something about the algorithm and the user's personality or conscious – or unconscious – desire.

[221] Fournier, Denise. "Manifestation: The Real Deal." *Psychology Today.* 27 December 2018. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mindfully-present-fully-alive/201812/manifestation-the-real-deal

can be their own "wizard of Menlo Park," embodying the magic of technology despite not being its inventor or even understanding its exact workings. Manifestation TikTokers are not manipulating the algorithm, but using it to further the embodied affect of their analog practice. The co-evolution and co-agency of user and algorithm affords new narrative possibilities and ways of imagining time; members of this subculture tend to characterize the future as immanent in the present and accessible through virtual – that is to say, imagined and unstable – images. Narrating time like this is useful for providing feelings of stability and control, albeit a control limited to one's own life; in this way, the virtual becomes equivalent with the future and also the political. This quest for knowledge and agency over one's life and future leads to the proliferation of a logic wherein the algorithm is almost worshiped. Yet this is a self-centering worship of one's own desires, and moreover a desire always deferred or displaced, due to the way that time and the future are conceptualized in this subculture as already extant yet necessarily out of reach – were we to *really* already have our desires, we would not need to manifest them.

At first glance, TikTok seems much like every other social media app. The main feed, called the "For You Page" presents an endless stream of video content. As with Facebook or Instagram, users have profiles, in-app messaging capabilities, and the ability to favorite, bookmark, comment on, or share content as it materializes on the feed. When swiping through the app, a user might be inspired by a meme format, caption, filter, or sound on the video they're viewing and choose to remix the content, lip-sync over the sound, or "duet" the video, creating a side-by-side view of the original content and the viewer's reaction. Unlike Facebook or Instagram, though, the content on the FYP is mostly from creators the user doesn't follow, as opposed to friends. The communities that form as a result of the application tend to be wholly

virtual, contained within TikTok, atomized, and extremely niche, though in a way that can be hard to pin down. Manifestation TikTok, for example, spans age and race, but has a specific orientation towards class – when abundance is a mindset, it's a moral failing to be poor. Common aesthetic signifiers include minimalist clothing, especially athleisure. It's hard to know the exact gender breakdown, but in my anecdotal experience, the majority those most engaged with the logic of Manifestation TikTok identify as women, and there's a lot of overlap between Manifestation TikTok and other wellness-focused subcultures on the app. Yet these contours are nebulous, as the algorithm obscures and defies categorization. It's possible that there is a large subculture within Manifestation TikTok of men, for example, but it would be hard for me to know, as I get dealt videos that other women find compelling. For this reason, it is vital to focus on individual users and attend to specific videos circulating on TikTok.

While apps such as Instagram provide visual filters that users can lay over their own photos and videos, TikTok's sonic filter and circulation affordances are unique and especially shareable and search-optimized, which heightens a feeling of community.[222] ByteDance launched TikTok internationally in September 2017 and in November 2017 purchased musical.ly, a social media platform on which users mostly posted lip-sync videos.[223] The user base of musical.ly was adept at making sonic memes, and the app's folding into TikTok transferred those users and exploded the sonic circulation possibilities. Remixing is one of the most straightforward ways to garner views on the app, with creators going viral for creating and recreating dances, and sounds or songs themselves going viral and being sampled or altered. In addition to searching or clicking on usernames or hashtags, users can sort by sound, easily

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[222] Instagram does have sonic effects in-app, but they are secondary and not searchable.
[223] Russell, John, and Katie Roof. "China's Bytedance is buying Musical.ly in a deal worth $800M-$1B." *TechCrunch.* 09 November 2017. https://techcrunch.com/2017/11/09/chinas-toutiao-is-buying-musical-ly-in-a-deal-worth-800m-1b/

finding all other videos with the same dubbed song or sample. As I will discuss further, this emphasis on sound is a way for content creators to center embodiment and produce affective responses.

After a user films, edits or alters, and uploads their video, the "algorithm" indexes as much content as possible. The details of this are unclear. In June 2020, TikTok' issued a press release titled "How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou," which vaguely stated that they collect "video information."[224] Their June 2021 privacy policy goes further, noting that they have the right to collect data[225] to identify "the objects and scenery that appear, the existence and location within an image of face and body features and attributes, the nature of the audio, and the text of the words spoken."[226] Other social media companies collect the same type of data on the content uploaded to their sites, but that TikTok deals exclusively in videos (as opposed to text or images alone) means that they're able to index a lot more data from each piece of content, and the brevity of this content plus the massive user base means that the company is able to very quickly parse what an individual user is interested in.

Generally, a user's viewing experience is one of watching however much of an automatically-played video and swiping to the next at some point. The entire process is designed to be frictionless and addictive; one isn't meant to think about how they're getting videos, what data is being collected on them, et cetera. That TikTok operates in the background and doesn't make it clear that it's "learning" from its vast data collection makes it all the more jarring when you get served a video foregrounding how much the application indeed "knows" about you.[227]

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[224] TikTok. "How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou." 18 June 2020. https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/how-tiktok-recommends-videos-for-you/

[225] It's unclear how this data indexing works.

[226] TikTok. "Privacy Policy." Last updated 02 June 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/legal/privacy-policy-us?lang=en

[227] Some "meta" videos even call attention to how spooky this process is, with users theorizing that the app is literally listening to their conversations with friends, etc.

The data collection isn't limited to users' conscious engagement, either. In addition to tracking whether or not a user interacts with the content via like, share, etc, TikTok also tracks *how long* a user watches a video, and then uses the information on at what point they stopped watching (or possibly at what point they liked the video) to tailor recommendations with a more fine tune than other sites. So, for example, if I'm watching a video about cooking and scroll away as soon as a dairy product is added to the recipe, and if I do this consistently enough, then TikTok might deduce that I have an allergy or aversion and show me vegan recipes instead.[228]

Or at least, this is what many internet users hypothesize, as there is little academic literature or technological documentation on TikTok's algorithm or the application at all; instead, much of what we know comes from popular journalism, blogs, and forums such as Reddit. One notable report comes from the *Wall Street Journal*, which created hundreds of bots with different "interests" to crawl TikTok and gather data on how users receive content. Journalists found that bots were initially dealt the most popular videos and that recommendations became increasingly specific as the would-be-users interacted with content based on their programmed interests. "@kentucky96," for example, had a Kentucky IP address and was designed to prefer content about depression and heartbreak. After only a few hours programmatically "scrolling," 93% of the videos TikTok dealt to @kentucky96 were about depression. This number is perhaps surprising; Guillame Chaslot, one of the experts interviewed, indicated that other social media apps deliver 70% of content via recommendation algorithm, whereas on TikTok it's closer to 90-95%.[229] Such specificity has many effects: first, it forecloses a user's ability to experience different subcultures, and it makes it impossible to know what other users are being dealt, as

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[228] Similarly, users will comment on content they like variations of "commenting to stay on [subculture] TikTok," recognizing that engagement shapes the algorithm's view of the user.
[229] "Investigation: How TikTok's Algorithm Figures Out Your Deepest Desires." *Wall Street Journal.* 21 July 2021. https://www.wsj.com/video/series/inside-tiktoks-highly-secretive-algorithm/investigation-how-tiktok-algorithm-figures-out-your-deepest-desires/6C0C2040-FF25-4827-8528-2BD6612E3796

there is less shared content between users from different demographics or with differing interests, for example. Or, if users are keen to imagine what other viewers see, they may be more likely to assume others are getting the same videos as they are. It also means that the only way we can get a broader idea of what users who are different from us are seeing is through larger-scale, bot-centric investigations like those conducted by the *WSJ.*

But then there are several issues with bot-centered approaches to demystifying human users' experiences on TikTok. As danah boyd and Katie Crawford assert, "Big Data" is never neutral, and instead relies heavily on mythology purporting that large data sets are more objective and insightful than smaller scale inquiries.[230] One problem with such lore is that many social media sites are in fact poorly archived; for example, boyd and Crawford point to Twitter's APIs allowing indexing of only a fraction of tweets.[231] It's hard to know how much of TikTok is accessible to bots and how much old content users delete. Additionally, TikTok has come under fire for "shadowbanning" content creators discussing politically controversial subjects. After months of speculation, in March 2020 a memo leaked in which TikTok employees were being encouraged to suppress content that was "ideologically undesirable" or created by "unattractive, disabled, or poor users."[232] Many Black users have also spoken out against the app, claiming that their content about Black Lives Matter has been hidden or shadowbanned.[233] Moreover, there is little insight to be gained about TikTok's broader effects simply by deploying "measurable types."[234] First, this approach cannot measure the unanticipated ways in which algorithms

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[230] boyd, danah, and Kate Crawford. "Critical Questions for Big Data." I*nformation, Communication & Society*, 15:5 (2012). DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2012.678878, 663
[231] boyd and Crawford, 669.
[232] Biddle, Sam, Paulo Victor Ribeiro, and Tatiana Dias. "Invisible Censorship." *The Intercept,* 15 March 2020. https://theintercept.com/2020/03/16/tiktok-app-moderators-users-discrimination/
[233] Elassar, Alaa. "TikTokers stand in solidarity with black creators to protest censorship." *CNN*, 19 May 2020. https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/19/us/tiktok-black-lives-matter-trnd/index.html
[234] Cheney-Lippold, John. *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Makings of Our Digital Selves* (New York: NYU Press), 19.

interact with unanticipated or variable data,[235] as the constructed user or bot will always be far more one-dimensional than a human and with no room for unforeseen interactions. This method is fine for gleaning general information about how much of the content served is related to programmed keywords but insufficient for determining effects on the user. The *Wall Street Journal* reporters acknowledge that their inquiry is only a "partial view of the universe of TikTok content,"[236] and while I agree that this is the case because any inquiries into algorithms that look just at code are missing the point, it is also the wrong partial view, as it takes source code as its top-down starting point.

3.1 Decoding the fetish and its algorithmic afterlives

Instead, I put forth a reading of TikTok and the user experience that originates from my own partial view as mediated through the algorithm, which is necessarily narrow. My method is thus to look at a subculture of TikTok that I have been subjected to – albeit unconsciously and occasionally unwittingly – in order to think critically about algorithms, agency, and time. As scholars, we need to better inhabit and describe the user space, focusing on the individualized effects of new media technologies as they pertain to embodied affect. Of particular interest for this project is how sound is centered on Manifestation TikTok and how the subculture uses sonic and embodied practices to create and disseminate spiritual feelings. Such analysis cannot be conducted at a distance, as focusing on sound and embodied responses requires careful attention to users at the level of individual. Specifically, I am not interested in how the algorithm actually works, but in how viewers come to think about the algorithm. Similarly, I am interested namely in the affective experience of being recognized by one of these videos.

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[235] Seaver, Nick. ""Algorithms as culture: Some tactics for the ethnography of algorithmic systems." *Big Data & Society* (July–December 2017). DOI: 10.1177/2053951717738104, 3
[236] "How TikTok's Algorithm Figures Out Your Deepest Desires." *Wall Street Journal*.

In this chapter, I look at Manifestation TikTok – a subculture engaging in algorithmic divination – which encourages viewers to create and perpetuate self narratives that, among other things, provide comfort, allow for optimism and feelings of solidarity and individuality, and purport an outside to the mediation that is in fact integral to the narratives' creation. This fetishizing of the algorithm as a mystical agent naturalizes dangerous, contradictory logics proliferating on the app and elsewhere in this moment of late capitalism. I explore how the practices of the subculture produce feelings of getting closer to some truth or grand narrative and recast the body as medium and site of change, while also fetishizing the algorithm in order to displace user autonomy.

Manifestation TikTokers theorize the algorithm in a particular way, and it is thus important to clarify my use of "algorithm." Following media ecology approaches, I am referring to the entire host of technical processes that occur behind the scenes of TikTok, in addition to the ways in which these processes are taken up and integrated into daily life.[237] I am not referring to the algorithm as being equal to its source code, as many have critiqued this conflation of code with program[238] and have written on how this straightforward view of algorithms tends to inscribe them as neutral, thus "launder[ing] the perspectives of dominant social groups into perspectivelessness."[239] It is more accurate to say that algorithms are cultural objects[240] that evolve alongside the user.[241] Recognizing the contingency and variability in user experience is

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[237] See Seaver, 3.
[238] Dourish, Paul. "Algorithms and their others: Algorithmic culture in context."
Big Data & Society (July–December 2016). DOI: 10.1177/2053951716665128, 1-11.
[239] Green, Ben, and Salomé Viljoen. "Algorithmic realism: expanding the boundaries of algorithmic thought." FAT* '20:
Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency (January 2020).
https://doi.org/10.1145/3351095.3372840, 22.
[240] See Seaver.
[241] Just, Natascha and Michael Latzer. "Governance by algorithms: reality construction by algorithmic selection on the Internet."
Media Culture and Society, 2017.

crucial;[242] as I will demonstrate, users are certainly aware of this contingency, and the gap

between their experience and the imagined experience of other users contributes to their

fetishization of the algorithm and the subsequent production of mystical affects. While Wendy

Hui Kyong Chun has argued against fetishizing algorithms and code in her influential article on

"sourcery,"[243] not enough critical attention has been paid to instances in which users and online

subcultures *themselves* fetishize algorithms. Such fetishization operates somewhere between Kris

Cohen's "group form" – which "gets assembled in the space between automatic data production

and self-conscious group production"[244] – and Chun's "singular-plural" YOU that emerges from

big data.[245] In the former, data generates populations (and this certainly happens on TikTok's

myriad subcultures), and in the latter, this generated population shapes the individual, who is

always both one and many. Though unnamed as such, TikTok users are aware of this tension and

ascribe the feeling that it produces as something mystical. This oscillation isn't unique to

TikTok: Cohen cites Foucault in naming it as a condition of neoliberalism, with people

> *reconceive[d] of… as hyperindividualized entrepreneurs, almost infinitely diverse and all in productive competition with one another, competing precisely on the basis of their productive diversity, where diversity becomes therefore a kind of branding. The individual person form, accommodated in all of its idealized diversity, thus stands as the bulwark against the state's influence on society, and more generally, as a defense against any (other) form of organized collective life.[246]*

On Manifestation TikTok, this hyperindividualism is taken to its natural conclusion of

believing – paranoically – that everything is truly "For You," disregarding the fact that "you" is

indeed an amalgamation of everyone else; it is this exact willful ignorance that affords mystic

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[242] See Cotter, Kelley. "Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram." *New Media and Society*, Vol. 21 (2019), 896; also DeVito, Michael, et al. "How People Form Folk Theories of Social Media Feeds and What It Means for How We Study Self-Presentation." *CHI 2018,* Association for Computing Machinery, April 21–26, 2018, Montreal, QC, Canada. https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3173694

[243] Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. "On 'Sourcery,' or Code as Fetish." *Configurations*, Vol. 16 No. 3 (2008), 301.

[244] Cohen, Kris. *Never Alone Except for Now: Art, Networks, Populations.* Duke University Press, 2017: 3.

[245] Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. "Data as Big Drama." *ELH,* Vol. 83, No. 2 (SUMMER 2016): 363.

[246] Cohen, 32.

affect. In my next chapter, I will explore the idea that this narcissistic narration and emphasis on "journey" does indeed come at the expense of collective action and collective life; this chapter instead focuses on the appeal of looking for mysticism in online spaces.

My dissertation as a whole argues that this feeling of transcendence can emerge as a result of recognizing someone through or feeling seen via or by a network. As I formulate it, networked thinking is essentially an awareness of other peoples' lives to a degree that one understands their own place in the world as variable and potentially otherwise. Much like Clarissa Dalloway is aware, due to the networked technologies of her era, that she easily could have loved Kilman had the slightest thing been different, Manifestation TikTokers recognize their lives as differently inflected *because* of the algorithm. However, this reasoning is accompanied by an obligation to engage with the algorithm further, always learning more. As Dan McQuillan notes, "The algorithmic eye is not ocular but oracular. It is the eye of the seer, peering in to the future to produce predictions that demand both interpretation and action if we are to avoid misfortune."[247]

Thinking of the algorithm as both having the capacity *to* see and to help one see builds off and challenges existing arguments about human and algorithmic agency.[248] Indeed, the type of agency I discuss in this chapter is perhaps more narrowly defined as the ability to choose and narrate one's life. Therefore, I'm more interested in thinking about what it *feels* like to allow an algorithm to decide your future or fate. What does it then mean for the resulting relationship

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[247] McQuillan, Dan "Algorithmic paranoia and the convivial alternative." *Big Data & Society*, July–December 2016. DOI: 10.1177/2053951716671340: 3.

[248] See also: Siles, Ignacio, et al. "Folk Theories of Algorithmic Recommendations on Spotify: Enacting Data Assemblages in the Global South." *Big Data & Society* (January 2020), DOI:10.1177/2053951720923377, 12-13. Siles's collaborative agency contrasts with David Beers's influential paper on algorithmic power, in which Beers takes N. Katherine Hayles as a starting point to argue that algorithms constitute a new human unconscious and subsume human agency. Siles et al. write of agency as something that is produced from human's / user's (folk) understanding of algorithms, whereas Beer argues that this agency or its absence is produced from a lack of understanding on the behalf of scholars; our lack of clarity leads to our loss of agency.

between manifestation and agency, which is one of deferral, of always pushing one's life outside the bounds of their control, while nevertheless theorizing one's own life as the *only* thing within their control?

I consider what I've termed "algorithmic divination" a fetish for several reasons, drawing from Freud, Marx, and William Pietz's various definitions of the term. Namely, I follow Suzanne Thomas, Dawn Nafus, and Jamie Sherman, who expand on Chun's "sourcery" article, arguing that algorithms are objects that contain a potential originating from the faith users imbue them with.[249] I also draw from David Graeber's revision of Pietz,[250] in which he considers how fetishes exist as social contracts. Building off Pietz and Freud's claim that the fetish appears at the moment of identification and dis/misidentification, Graeber further contends that the fetish has a role in social creativity, in that people who engage with the fetish end up as part of a community of fellow fetishists. Importantly, this community-building is founded on a shared narrative; in Graeber's reading of one of Pietz's examples, those who had suffered at the behest of an imagined spirit and were later cured formed "a congregation of victims" who all had developed "a special relationship with the spirit… Suffering leads to knowledge, knowledge leads to power."[251] Marx's formulation of the fetish does not follow this line of thinking. He instead sees the commodity fetish as something more anesthetizing than revelatory, though still, as for Pietz, arising at a moment of exchange. We might think of the algorithm as a fetish that

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[249] Thomas, Suzanne L, Dawn Nafus, and Jamie Sherman. "Algorithms as fetish: Faith and possibility in algorithmic work." *Big Data & Society* (January–June 2018). DOI: 10.1177/2053951717751552: 4.
[250] Graeber, David. "Fetishism as social creativity or, Fetishes are gods in the process of construction." *Anthropological Theory*. Vol 5(4) (2005). DOI:10.1177/1463499605059230. Graeber attends to William Pietz's account of the fetish as first emerging in trade relations between colonists and Africans, with the fetish being "the product neither of African nor of European traditions, but of a confrontation between the two: the product of men and women with very different understandings of the world and what one had a right to wish from it trying to come to terms with one another" (410). To Pietz, the Europeans called the Africans' imbuing of beads with power "fetishes" in an effort to distance themselves from the practice, which they recognized as being uncomfortably close to their own willingness to risk safety and endure long journeys for the sake of obtaining gold.
[251] Graeber, 415.

deals in information. If we are to believe Marx's equation "people create ('make') something; then they act as if that thing has power over them,"[252] we might then say that the act of fetishizing the algorithm naturalizes market and social conditions. In this case, then, algorithmic fetishization on TikTok is dangerous for its naturalization of the conditions of attention and success, re-framing it as an individual choice and not a structural consequence. Such a belief forecloses any possibility of altering that structure or engaging in any collective action.

For Graeber, Pietz, and Freud, there is a sense that fetish formation happens without the full awareness of the fetishist, and, in creating the fetish, one relinquishes some agency over their own life. However, whereas Graeber contends that the fetish is curious because people can know it's created and also still believe it to have some power,[253] Thomas argues that people – especially now – can know something is happening purely because of the belief they've imbued and that such awareness nevertheless constitutes a fetish, because that belief still creates an affective response.[254] This becomes relevant when considering the number of TikTok videos delivered via algorithm, and how users "read" their videos as constitutive of a self. For example, users are dealt a video that tells a generic fortune or makes a vague prediction on the future; users then read their own longing for that future as significant and imagine themselves as owners of the future narrated in the video. This, in turn, allows users to reflect on why they received such a video, and work backwards to decipher what traits they must have that are legible to the algorithm.

Indeed, Manifestation TikTok users fall into the personalization trap that Neta Alexander details as happening to subscribers to Netflix's Cinematch:

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[252] Graeber, 425
[253] Graeber, 425.
[254] Thomas specifically details how members of the Quantified Self (QS) community have been known to take "mindfulness pills" (sugar pills) and that these pills are known to be placeboes, but still are capable of effecting mindfulness.

In a narcissistic manner, they confuse the "You" in "Recommended for You" with a unique, complex individual rather than with a group of strangers who all happened to have made similar choices. Ironically, the fact that Cinematch's criteria for recommendations remain hidden serves to sustain the myth of personalization. Since we can't exactly tell why one title was recommended rather than another, we simply assume that Netflix knows us. The god resides in the machine, and it is unknowable and invisible as any other divine and unworldly entity.[255]

Calling this an "unworldly entity" doesn't quite get at the nuance of what happens on Manifestation TikTok; the users know that there is no god residing in the machine. "The myth of personalization" is instead a fetish, and it is essential to recognize it as such. Alexander is describing a certain type of narcissism, and on Manifestation TikTok, it is this orientation towards the self that allows for the perpetuation of one's belief in the algorithm. The identification with the "you" as named in manifestation videos convinces users that the TikTok algorithm can reveal the future and truth to the people who profess their belief the most. There is a power in this, although a power limited to changing one's own life. It can never be political or collective, despite being affective and thus rooted in collective feelings.[256] For users fetishizing the algorithm and engaging with the logic of Manifestation TikTok, the appeal of the application is that it continuously transmits narratives promising transformation,[257] and these images form a virtual that brings a hoped-for future into the present. That this exists on an app with a business model dependent on continued attention is important, as it creates a fundamental disparity between users' hoped-for futures and TikTok's purpose.

Crucially, Thomas et al. do not represent algorithmic fetishists as misguided or naive, but as ones "[positioning] algorithms in ways that make algorithms promise more than they can

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[255] Alexander, Neta. "Catered to Your Future Self: Netflix's 'Predictive Personalization' and the Mathematization of Taste." *The Netflix Effect : Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, edited by Kevin McDonald, and Daniel Smith-Rowsey, Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2016. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=4542879: 86.
[256] Ahmed, Sarah. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004).
[257] Coleman, Rebecca. *Transforming Images: Screens, affect, futures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

deliver in strictly material terms."[258] Following Taina Bucher's call for more attention to the imaginary,[259] we might cast aside questions of definitions and think about what the fetishized algorithm allows us to *do.* In this case, I am curious as to what comfort or assurance fetishizing TikTok's recommendation algorithm provides users. And, just because there is no autonomy behind the recommendation algorithm doesn't mean that there isn't some greater insight to be gleaned. Indeed, just because a video may not be "meant for you" in a cosmic sense isn't to say that reading the algorithm's recommendations can't help users learn about who that "you" is, or at the very least reflect on who the algorithm thinks that "you" is.[260]

Yet it is perhaps the knowing fetishization that allows practitioners to fall for it, have emotional reactions despite their supposed knowing better, in the same way that Adorno, in his essay on astrology columns, writes on the "winking of an eye," the innuendo of mass communications.[261] Indeed, just because one knows something is a gimmick doesn't mean they are immune to the trick."[262] This "astrological irrationality" results from and further produces "abstract authority,"[263] similar to the non-agential autonomy granted to algorithms. When TikTok serves us a video, we must acknowledge that some mechanism has served us the video, but that mechanism remains abstract, opaque. TikTok is without any central authority figure or specific dogma, and this black box allows users to create an algorithmic imaginary, a fetishized algorithm that, if read correctly, comforts the user by assuring them of their eventual satisfaction.

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[258] Thomas et al, 4.
[259] Bucher, Taina. "The algorithmic imaginary: exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms." *Information, Communication, and Society,* Vol. 20 No. 1 (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086, 31.
[260] See Cheney-Lippold, John.
[261] Adorno, Theodor. *Adorno: The Stars Down To Earth and other essays on the irrational in culture.* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 39.
[262] For Adorno, this "secondary occultism" is "institutionalized, objectified and, to a large extent, socialized," and it is this secondary occultism's irony, its lack of pretension towards seriousness, that prevents it from being wholly unserious. It is the "pseudorationality" of the secondary occult – which includes practices like astrology – that allows it to be taken up so widely. Ibid., 36.
[263] Ibid., 38.

Looking at online ritual, Ken Hillis argues that much of our interest in digital communications demonstrates a desire to supersede the need for language and the "limits of representation." This emerges in what Hillis terms the "telefetish," which "is neither pure code nor only a virtual object,"[264] but instead an "ironic power"[265] that plays out "as a sign in the semiotic dynamic of 'I see myself seeing myself.'"[266] The telefetish, I propose, should be thought of as a mystic tool or practice, building off the definition of mysticism I offer in my introduction: a mystic tradition is one "in which one seeks a direct, personal relationship with the Divine Presence ... without barriers or intermediaries," so that "while religions offer a system of belief, mystic traditions offer a system of experience."[267] On TikTok, this experience is grounded in users' personal identification with their own feelings and interoceptive reflection. Conversely, a system of belief is exteroceptive, top-down, and often institutionalized, or, at the very least, not entirely dependent on individual practitioners' interpretation. The telefetish is thus ironic because it is fundamentally mediated despite a corresponding wish to do away with mediation, and it also can never be complete, as a system of belief is necessarily present, unfurling. Moreover, the telefetish also demands narration – to see myself seeing myself, I must split my conception of myself into two separate entities: seeing subject and seen object. The objectified self is wholly virtual, as it is entirely imagined and shaped by algorithmically-mediated images.

Algorithmic divination arises from the interplay between affect, fetishized predictive or recommendation algorithms, and an orientation towards an immanent future. I argue that TikTok users launder perspectivelessness and their knowledge of the algorithm's contingency into a new notion of the divine, which is at once not exactly autonomous (based on data as opposed to

[264] Hillis, Ken. *Online a Lot of the Time: Ritual, Fetish, Sign* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 90
[265] Ibid., 45.
[266] Ibid., 90.
[267] Monette, Connell R. *Mysticism in the 21st Century*. Wilsonville, Oregon: Sirius Productions, 2015, 11.

conscious choice) and yet *feels* uncannily individualized; it almost feels too fitting for us to accept that a program could do this. However, because this supposed enlightenment comes from an application whose business model seeks to retain viewers, divinity – in its purported finality, final "outside" – can never be attained. Although this is also perhaps true of all spiritual practices or organizations motivated by profit, gratification in this instance is *necessarily* always deferred, as the promise of TikTok's algorithm does not and cannot match up with the purpose. Yet that doesn't mean that there is no use in considering how these promises emerge and what they presume to do.

3.2 "No hashtags – if you're seeing this, it's meant for you"

I began this chapter with Jordan Ashley because her style and logic are paradigmatic of Manifestation TikTok. She is gravely serious, with her steady gaze and insistence on "spirit's" presence, and she signals this seriousness further with her context-free caption. Her language evokes phone sex, with her strange use of "baby," and is at once personal and detached, as if she is trying to force intimacy. While one might expect content creators looking to gain a following to use hashtags in their captions, Jordan's omission is part of the logic of Manifestation TikTok and central to its earnestness. By not using hashtags or keyword-laden captions, Jordan is signaling to viewers that her video has found them by way of algorithmic divinity. TikTok knows that the uncanny feeling of having your interests reflected back to you is one of its main draws; in that same June 2020 press release as mentioned earlier, the company calls the "unique and tailored" For You feed "[p]art of the magic of TikTok."[268] And magic, for what it's worth, depends somewhat on mystery; it's unsurprising that users would look at this mystery as

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[268] TikTok. "How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou."

96

meaningful.[269] Of course, many viewers will not find this meaningful, as evinced by the comments noting how performative and "fake" Jordan Ashley seems to be. However, as noted in my introduction, we cannot truly litigate the veracity of Jordan Ashley's belief, even if it might come across as counterfeit. Instead, we can only note how we feel about her performed belief and question its effects on other viewers, many of whom genuinely appear to be credulous.

Content creators take different approaches to enticing viewers, with some acknowledging the skepticism viewers may have. Cody Ray (@raysradiance) is one such creator, and his tarot readings emphasize the user's *choice* to believe and affirm. Among his most popular readings is one posted on August 29, 2021, with over 1.6 million views, 311,300 likes, and 2200 comments.[270] Like Jordan Ashley, he sits at a table, shuffling cards, but unlike Jordan, he begins by gently disparaging those who would say that the algorithm is akin to fate: "I'm not going to be like the other tarot readers; I'm not going to convince you of something that simply isn't real. I'm not going to lie to you, I'm not going to give you false hope; I'm also not going to try and convince you that this reading is for you if it is not for you, okay." He splits the deck, holding half the cards in each hand, continuing, "more important than anything is if it feels right in your heart –" (he points to the card on the bottom of one of the stacks, emblazoned with a heart, closes his eyes, points to his chest, taps one of the decks against his chest) "– in your heart, in your heart space, then know that the reading is for you. If it doesn't, take what you can, take what you learned –" (he leans forward, gesturing towards the camera) "– from the video, from other people's mistakes, what other people are going through, take what you can from their energy and experiences and apply to your life in any way, shape or form that you need to. That's really what

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[269] I am thinking here of Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's "On 'Sourcery,' or Code as Fetish," in which she writes "That is, because an interface is programmed, most users treat coincidence as meaningful. To the user, as with the paranoid schizophrenic, there is always meaning: whether or not the user knows the meaning, she or he knows that it regards her or him" (316).
[270] As of March 2024.

this is all about when we post collective readings or universal messages or anything like that."

He continues to shuffle. "It's not truly about, you know, putting out a reading that connects with every single person, because then what's the point, where's the specifics of that reading, where's the actual *feeling* of that reading, right? It's to do readings on energies that people can relate to and learn from, but not be so pigeonholed that you can't find anything in that reading…"[271] Cody Ray goes on to say that if one does want a reading that's "99% accurate," they should book an individual reading with him and spends the rest of the video delivering the reading, which is less relevant for the purposes of this chapter (but if you're interested, he says that the viewer must be firm in how they "display their passion," and that one should not lose themselves – this is especially true for those whose zodiac is fire or water, he says).

As with Jordan Ashley's video, Cody Ray doesn't use hashtags in the caption, which reads "if this resonated with you, let me know [two hearts emoji]." I present Cody's and Jordan's videos together for a few reasons. First and least importantly, I find it notable that they both go by their first and middle names alone;[272] to me, this indicates a centering of personal identity. More relevant is that both use similar formats and tropes central to tarot TikTok: looking into the camera and shuffling their cards, immediately signaling what is to follow. They both grab the viewer's attention in the first seconds, albeit with different strategies. More importantly, both Jordan and Cody engage in a contradictory logic central to manifestation TikTok. They stress both specificity and generality as well as the individual and the collective (Jordan's "if this is on your For You Page" yet "take what resonates and leave what doesn't," Cody's "I'm not saying this is for you" but then naming fire and air signs), and agency and acquiescence – to something

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[271] Cody Ray, "If this resonated with you, let me know! 💕." 2021. TikTok, August 29, 2021.
https://www.tiktok.com/@raysradiance/video/7002034307111881989.
[272] I cannot be certain that Jordan Ashley's last name is not Ashley.

resembling fate, yet without the determinacy of the traditionally divine, the authority that Adorno similarly notes as being absent from astrology.[273] Instead, the user's body (and integrated spirit) is the locus of change, with the responsibility being concurrently on the user to initiate the future and yet somehow also spurred or inspired by the algorithm, which is supposed to read the user's desire. What gets produced is an ambiguous orientation towards an imagined network of other viewers and other bodies and energies, with the resulting feeling or affect seeming like it *could* contain some "truth," albeit a truth that relies on data almost fully opaque to us. The network produced operates "elementally" and thus "above or below human registration."[274] We might also think here of Freud's "oceanic feeling": "a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded," which, though "not an article of faith," is nevertheless the source of "religious energy."[275] This feeling taps into what Deleuze describes as what the virtual does in creating a "pre-individual or even trans-individual register of life which produces the affective tone of experience."[276] When Cody urges his viewer to "feel it in [their] heart," he's operating in this trans-individual register of life, and because TikTok videos are mass media and the viewer can see how many others have liked and commented, the experience is parasocial, somewhat shared. By calling attention to sensation and naming that felt sensation as indicative of a statement's truth-value, content creators such as Cody Ray are creating a shared environment in which affect and transcendent feeling supersede any possible claims about dangers from the algorithm. This generates further self-assuredness**,** especially because the viewer is being made aware that others have had the same resonant reaction and can imagine themselves in a community of fellow believers. I call

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[273] Adorno, 39.

[274] Galloway, Alexander and Eugene Thacker. *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 157. Cited in Hansen, Mark BN. *Feed Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1.

[275] Freud, Sigmund, and Gay, Peter. *The Freud Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 723.

[276] Paasonen, Susanna, Ken Hillis, and Michael Petit. "Introduction: Networks of Transmission: Intensity, Sensation, Value." Networked Affect (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 9.

this imagination "narration" because I'm working off of Brian Massumi's formulation of affect as residing between body and change, with feeling always being self-referential, paired with the feeling of having a feeling.[277] On TikTok, the sonic plays a major role in this: sound is invoked metaphorically and materially when creators say "take what *resonates*," with the double meaning of the sonic term suggesting that vibration and physicality (resonate as literally producing sound) creates meaning (resonate as having particular relevance). It is interesting, then, that "taking what resonates" is framed as a choice. After all, one doesn't often have the choice to choose whether or not they hear some sound; I'm reminded of McLuhan's famous quip that "we are not equipped with 'earlids.'"[278] Moreover, this choice in "claiming" is seen as taking control of one's fate and is formulated as an almost radical choice. Perhaps this too is due to TikTok's infrastructure and the experience of the application as something that can be very mindless; to turn a viewing encounter into a transformative internal experience is to benefit from what might otherwise be useless, or even predatory, if we are to believe the concerns about TikTok's data collection. And, because creators focus on claiming and individual choice, viewers are able to be confident in their decision to keep scrolling. The result of this is a focus on the self that gets overlooked in scholarship, yet has real-world ramifications. There is something pernicious in reframing belief and "taking control of one's life" – here by doing something as simple as attending to one's own bodily sensations – as a radical act that has real consequences to collectivity.

3.2.1 Sound as (a)temporal catalyst

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[277] Massumi, Brian. *Parables of the Virtual* (Duke University Press, 2002).
[278] McLuhan, Marshall. *The Medium is the Massage: an Inventory of Effects* (Gingko Press): 111.

Sometimes the focus of the video is entirely sonic, and the video's focus is entirely on bodily sensation. Many of these sorts of videos play a tone on a loop, and the text on screen or in the caption will inform viewers of the tone's frequency and purported benefits. For example, content creator David Joseph Azevedo's (@crazeydavey77) most viral video (with 22 million views, 3.6 million likes, and 43,000 comments) depicts him standing in front of the ocean, silently facing the camera, as a 417hz sound is superimposed. Several snippets of text have been added in post-production: "This is a 417hz sound," "It removes all of the negative energy from your body," "It removes all stress and anxiety," "It helps your manifestations come quicker," "Stay as long as you need Save this for whenever you need it."[279]

The potential of sound on TikTok is as a force that mediates while also turning the body into a mediating agent.[280] Here, the body is the catalyst of change, with the possibility of manifestation conditional on how much negative energy is in the body. Sound is the medium that makes this possible, makes the body a better conduit, and the resulting feeling is also a medium, a conduit for change. These videos, essentially still images with sound, break the expected temporal aspect of a video. And, in encouraging viewers to listen on a loop to a consistent sound, creators of sonic videos are both racking up views (in that their videos can be shorter) and also attempting to create a sort of timeless space online – one with the temporal logic of an endless present that is nevertheless rooted in a speeding up of the present towards some hoped-for future. Specifically, this genre of video centers the present, but only for the purpose of bringing about the future. Therefore, the present is continuously deferred and not experienced as the present in

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[279] Azevedo, David Joseph. 2020 (@crazeydavey77). "For a fresh start to the new week and month re-focus your mind #417hz #cleanse #focus #clearyourmind #supportbreedssupport #manifest #spiritualhealing." TikTok, November 1, 2020. https://www.tiktok.com/@crazeydavey77/video/6890308883873631494

[280] In *The Marvelous Clouds,* John Durham Peters writes: "According to Heidegger and Kittler, humans access Being through sound, because sound embodies being's key aspect, temporality" (63). For the life of me, I cannot find where Heidegger or Kittler write about this, but I do feel it to be an accurate representation of sound.

and of itself. This logic is similar to that of investment: spend time in stillness on an application designed for instant gratification, reap the reward of achieving desires outside of the application at some later, unspecified date. Again, we might think of Adorno's abstract authority; a being or belief system is never named directly in these videos. Instead, the viewer is the believer and the embodied feeling is the belief. The "authority" is thus internal, without a stable referent, abstract, ephemeral, and difficult to pin down. This is true of all Manifestation TikTok videos, but sonic manifestations often go further in their abstraction. For example, tarot readings tend to be more specific than tonal videos; Azevedo doesn't name what one might be manifesting, so the desire is fully self-referential. Such ambiguity functions as a way for content creators to "hack" the algorithm, as videos are vague enough to be able to apply to anyone. Yet creators don't say "this is for everyone;" they say "this is for *you*." We must therefore ask what it means to opt to believe that a video or sign is uniquely "yours" despite also knowing that hundreds of thousands of others are getting the same sign, stimulus, or video. I am wary of calling this choice to focus on the self "narcissism" lest I echo the endless public think pieces demonizing social media platforms and Millennial and Gen Z's participation in their popularity,[281] yet there is a willing disregard one must adopt towards others in order to believe that a video is truly one's own. The fetish of algorithmic divination is in part the belief that one is – if not in control of the algorithm – at least able to optimize its effects. There is a major gap in scholarship exploring the effects of this so-called optimization of the algorithm and the corresponding narration users' afford it.

3.2.2 "Domino" and known alternate realities

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[281] Among others, see Stein, Joel, "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation," *Time,* 20 May 2013, https://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/; Fitzgerald, Helena. "Growing Old Online," *Wired,* 25 September 2022. https://www.wired.com/story/growing-old-online/; "Does Gen Z spend too much time on social media?", *The Economist,* 10 August 2022. https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/08/10/does-gen-z-spend-too-much-time-on-social-media

Another way that creators will call attention to the algorithm while enticing viewers is by making multiple versions of a meta, algorithm-reading video and saying something like "I made four of these, so whichever you're seeing is in your future" or similar. Sounds often play a role in this, as illustrated by two separate series of videos from two different creators, all eight of which feature a remix of Jessie J's 2011 song "Domino" as both a background track and structuring, formal meme. The sound, uploaded in December 2020, had been used in over 1.2 million videos before being removed (likely for copyright issues),[282] many of which feature two people dancing to the viral "Domino Lovers Challenge" trend. The remixed sound has a punchier drop than Jessie J's original song, lending itself to dramatic dance moves, but also to a formal trope adopted by creators looking to make algorithmic divination videos. For heightened effect, to keep users watching, and to foreground the fact that there are several versions of the same memed video, content creators will put the introduction to their "fortune" during the first half of the video and then reveal the fortune as the beat of the song drops.

Two such users are 17-year old Dante Zuppichini (@dantezupp) and a young woman named Molly (@molly_hogan03). In early February 2021, Zuppichini uploaded a series of three videos, each with the same sound and visuals, though with different text overlaid on each. The videos start out the same way: Zuppichini looks into the camera, half smiling, as LED lights in his bedroom shift in color behind him.[283] He looks to his left (the viewer's right, as if towards something approaching) and back to camera. Text laid over the video reads "how your february will go [star emoji] 1/3 [star emoji]" (or 2/3 or 3/3, depending on which video is dealt). Jessie J's voice sings over the scene: "Dirty dancing in the moonlight / Take me down like I'm a domino,"

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[282] (@stilesfanbae). "Domino Lovers Challenge." TikTok sound. https://www.tiktok.com/music/Domino-Lovers-Challenge-6905779227572947714.
[283] I mention the lights only because I feel that young millennials and Gen Z will look back on the collective obsession with these lights with nostalgia in a matter of years, if not months.

and as the beat drops and we get the next lines of the chorus ("Every second is a highlight /

When we touch don't ever let me go"), the visuals shift to whatever is meant to be in the viewer's

future. The first video flashes a montage of photos of teen couples,[284] the second has photos of

exams with high grades scrawled on top in red pen (with overlaid text: "your grades will go way

up :)"),[285] and the third mostly mirror selfies of young, attractive individuals wearing bathing

suits or showing off their abs, with overlaid text reading "glow up."[286] Though I am certainly not

the target demographic for these videos, there is something charming about the gimmick, the

formula, that I keep returning to -- perhaps it's that I'm curious as to how content creators think

about the various possibilities for the future or what they think the most universally appealing

futures entail. Though content creators are not explicitly engaging with Cohen's group form,

they nevertheless call attention to the network their videos circulate in by invoking the countless,

nameless others receiving different versions of the video. Although "the algorithm" is the one

choosing which videos each user sees, this is still a form of self-narration, as viewers are able to

reflect on what in their data has led to getting dealt a specific video.

 Molly Hogan has a nearly identical and similarly intriguing series from January 2021.

Instead of looking at the camera in close up, she dances in her bedroom, LED lights in the

background, with the initial overlaid text reading "I made 4 of these so if it's on your fyp this is

how your 2021 will go… [smiling emoji]." As the beat to the "Domino" remix drops, we get one

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[284] Zuppichini, Dante (@dantezupp). 2021. "like/follow/share to claim! also you MUST comment that you're seeing this video!🍀💫 #foryou #claimit #manifestation #lockitin." TikTok, February 1, 2021 (a). https://www.tiktok.com/@dantezupp/video/6924466540532305157.

[285] Zuppichini. 2021. "like/follow/share to claim! also you MUST comment that you're seeing this video🍀💫 #444 #1111 #claimit #manifestation #lockitin." TikTok, January 29, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@dantezupp/video/6923356528053374214

[286] Zuppichini. 2021. "like/follow/share to claim! also you MUST comment that you're seeing this video🍀💫 #444 #1111 #claimit #manifestation #lockitin." TikTok, February 1, 2021 (b). https://www.tiktok.com/@dantezupp/video/6924467113147288838

of four options, each with corresponding photo montages: "a healthy relationship,"[287] "you will become rich,"[288] "good grades,"[289] or "you will have a baby" (the comments on the last one are mixed, with many saying they "don't claim").[290]

This format has many effects and functions – for Hogan and Zuppichini, an obvious draw is fame and attention. Zuppichini's captions are an overt call to action: "like/follow/share to claim! also you MUST comment that you're seeing this video [four leaf clover emoji] [shooting star emoji] #444 #1111 #claimit #manifestation #lockitin."[291] In another of his videos from February 2021, he uses the same format and "Domino" sounder, but instead of future-casting, the overlaid text reads: "if you stay the whole video you will be the wealthiest person within your family in the next 5 years [money with wings emoji][four leaf clover emoji][shooting star emoji]" and, at the beat drop, "almost there…" appears below the initial text.[292] Again the caption insists on the viewer's imperative to comment in order to claim. If this is a ploy for views (as I believe it is), it works; Zuppichini's second of three February videos has over 715,500 likes and over 23,500 comments, and Hogan's first of four January videos has over 3.4 million views, 751,100 likes, and 35,000 comments. Videos of this genre often vaguely refer to class and economic prosperity, as with Zuppichini's promise that his viewers will be rich, though without any elaboration on how that will happen or what work one would have to do to achieve so. These promises fulfill some version of the American Dream without the original work ethic

[287] Hogan, Molly (@molly_hogan03). 2021. "✨claim it✨ #fyp #type #claim #foryoupage #cozyathome." TikTok, January 9, 2021 (a). https://www.tiktok.com/@molly_hogan03/video/6915829905238363394.
[288] Hogan. 2021. "✨claim it✨ #fyp #type #claim #foryoupage #cozyathome." TikTok, January 9, 2021 (b). https://www.tiktok.com/@molly_hogan03/video/6915831203958361346.
[289] Hogan. 2021. "✨claim it✨ #fyp #type #claim #foryoupage #cozyathome." TikTok, January 9, 2021 (c). https://www.tiktok.com/@molly_hogan03/video/6915838231372156161.
[290] Hogan, . 2021. "✨claim it✨ #fyp #type #claim #foryoupage #cozyathome." TikTok, January 9, 2021 (d). https://www.tiktok.com/@molly_hogan03/video/6915840449391496449
[291] Zuppichini. TikTok, January 29, 2021.
[292] Zuppichini. 2021. "like/follow/share to claim! also you MUST comment that you're seeing this video :) #followmyinsta #like #follow #manifestation." TikTok, February 3, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@dantezupp/video/6925208470798994693

inherent to it. The videos advance a prosperity gospel without any real good news or guidance, only pointing to the feeling of hope as evidence of the promise's veracity.

It's hard to know how TikTok users feel about this type of content. While cynical viewers or those old enough to remember chain texts and emails (of the "forward this to ten people or you will have bad luck" variety) might interpret this as simply another iteration of spam that people surely must know is "indulgent"[293] or "winking,"[294] the sheer reach of and engagement with the content indicates some underlying earnestness, or at least the performance of one. Although I feel Zuppichini and Hogan are primarily motivated by popularity, I can't be certain that they don't also believe what they're saying. When a belief system is perpetuated by members stating their belief, maybe it doesn't even matter whether that belief is truly genuine, as long as there is the illusion of mass buy-in. This is particularly relevant when acknowledging that algorithms are powerful because of their promises and potentials; on TikTok, the promise is that the algorithm will allow the user to recognize and expand upon their desires, while the algorithm's purpose is ultimately to keep users engaged and viewing content. The promise can thus never be fulfilled, as if users were to ever reach their ultimate goal, they'd have no reason to continue to engage.

Again, the "you're seeing one of four videos" meme has the effect of centering the individual while reminding them of the collective user base. As opposed to a tarot reading performed by Jordan Ashley or Cody Ray, for example, in which a user is simply told that a video is "for them" and must assume that there *might* be other tarot readings, knowing that there are however many distinct other options encourages the viewer to seek out the other videos they weren't served in order to divine what the algorithm thinks they like. The "one of four" format

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[293] Adorno. *The Stars Down To Earth,* 114.
[294] Ibid.*,* 39.

106

thus draws the viewer's attention to an otherwise present, or the knowledge that things – their life, taste, online persona -- could have been or could be different than they are. The otherwise present and future is the main temporal logic of Manifestation TikTok, and the subculture's coinciding centering of personality reconstitutes the self as having several versions across different times, all of which are somehow immanent and yet out of reach. As with the embodied logic of the atemporal sound videos and / or the emphasis on choosing to believe the "feeling in your heart," we are reminded of our dividuality – who we are is countable, registered by this algorithm – but that isn't how we're meant to think of it; the *feeling* is stressed because feeling is something we experience individually. The interplay of individuality and dividuality leads to a belief in the feeling and algorithm as divine, because the alternative is to believe for the sake of belief, indulgence, or narcissism. Contradistinct from Deleuze's trans-individual and Freud's oceanic feeling, TikTok adds a layer of self-narrativization. As opposed to the dissolution of the ego (as in Freud), the version of the oceanic feeling created by TikTok is dependent on the content creator narrating their experience and the user taking that narration and applying it to themselves. As opposed to the oceanic feeling of being pure subject, on TikTok one must recognize their subjectivity by objectifying themselves, recognizing themselves as a user, character in some predetermined story. This is where the mystic part of Manifestation TikTok comes into play, as users take the algorithm's "choice" in videos as gospel that tells them something about themselves, and use that information to inform their self-narrativization.

3.2.3 Deep breathing and abundance: Zozo Shumba

There is something comforting in the knowledge of an otherwise present and future if one is secure in their person and ability to control their "energy" and thus the direction of their life,

which is why much of Manifestation TikTok stresses embodied feeling as being the central force

behind self improvement, and which makes personal optimization integral to enlightenment.

The final TikToker I will write about here is Zozo Shumba (@astoldbyzozo). Shumba is the

epitome of Manifestation TikTok. Her videos focus on manifestation and visualization, but

above all fixate on energy and "vibes." Her voice is soft, she's nearly always wearing

activewear, and she often speaks into a tiny microphone, which is charming and also creates a

crisp sound (an effect that's heightened if one is wearing headphones). It's cute, it's aspirational,

and, while I wouldn't have thought to seek out this content, I will concede that I am Shumba's

target audience. Across her hundreds of videos, Shumba often returns to a few key themes,

including embodiment and the dual logics of desiring while letting go and envisioning the future

as being concurrent with the present.

For example, in a captionless video from October 22, 2021, Shumba speaks into her tiny

microphone: "I'm going to show you, over the next sixty seconds, how to tap into your reservoir

of abundance." Overlaid text reads "[palm tree emoji] abundance [stars emoji][money bag emoji]

meditation," "if this has found you you asked for something like this i'm glad you're here :),"

and "Do this every morning for a minimum of 30 days and watch miracles happen."[295] She

continues:

> *It's literally sitting inside of you, that's – all of us have it. It may look differently for
> everybody but it's there, built for you, given to you. Think of it like a bank account that's
> always flowing with the resources you need to fulfill every need and desire that you could
> have, that you've had, that you will have. So close your eyes, take a deep breath in, and
> take a deep breath out, and start to imagine in the center of your chest a huge ball or
> small seed of light, energy… you can think of the sun, you can think of white light, you
> can think of purple light. Let it expand … and grow bigger … and bigger … until it pours
> out of your body. Now imagine the people that are in your immediate environment that
> are a few feet away, that are a few miles away, and the light is still pouring from your
> chest. This is your store of abundance. Let it flow to the people closest to you, connecting*

[295] Shumba, Zozo (@astoldbyzozo). 2021. TikTok. October 22, 2021.
https://www.tiktok.com/@astoldbyzozo/video/7021931713936903430

to their chest… let it flow to the people that are miles from you, people all over the world, feeling this energy coming from your chest as it fills them and it's happening at a really rapid pace and it's full of love, this abundance energy that's going and meeting their needs and fulfilling their desires … now let that energy accept, receive that energy coming back to you because it's a cord and it's running back and forth, and let that energy coming from all of those people that you sent out wash over you like a wave, and return that energy to them in the form of love and action inspired by love –

The video abruptly ends; Shumba has reached the three minute maximum. During the entire video, an unaccompanied cello version of Bach's "Prelude in C Major" plays in the background, heightening the calming effect of Shumba's words. In encouraging viewers to close their eyes after the meditation has started but before detailing physical changes, Shumba is making the act of closing one's eyes the catalyst for the transmutation she describes, as she seeks to supersede physical space with her speaking. Notably, the content (as opposed to just the form) of the meditation stresses embodiment and autonomy, as Shumba says viewers – or listeners, if they're following her instructions – *can* think of yellow, white, purple light (we might remember Cody Ray's similar invocation of choice). She also stresses speed, in much the same way that the tonal meditation video hastens the imminent and immanent future. The content of Shumba's visualization explicitly encourages viewers to try and tap into the oceanic feeling by presuming that human thought and energy exists in some transferable network or plane. Inner peace thus becomes something transactional yet creatable.

There are two other videos of Shumba's worth mentioning. In the first, from December 2020, a similar, calming song plays in the background as Shumba speaks into the camera.

You know when you stop wanting something, that's when it comes, that's when you get it, that's when the call comes, that's when the message shows up -- like when everything shows up. And it is because you are in a state of allowing. When you're not constantly death-gripping something, like gripping it so tightly, that like, no one can tell you anything else, you're blocking energy from flowing.[296]

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[296] Shumba. 2020. "#manifestation #manifesting #1111 #lettinggo #messageforyou #learnontiktok #loa #spirituality." TikTok. December 14, 2020. https://www.tiktok.com/@astoldbyzozo/video/6906230665293991174.

Shumba spends the rest of the fifty-five-second long video explaining that when one is "grasping" for something, it's actually resistance, and they're preventing whatever they're trying to grasp from "flowing in." In this formulation, desire isn't meant to be an end goal or an object, but a process and "journey," and thus one that never ends, can never be reached, and must always shift and develop. Despite this, the viewer is still expected to perform the impossible task of wanting an object without actually desiring it (a distinction without a difference), lest the desire itself becomes too objectified and exacts revenge almost, punishes the desirer for being so concerned with their wants. This dual logic of desiring and letting go is central across Manifestation TikTok and is related to "take what resonates, leave what doesn't." I recognize that this type of logic and language isn't unique to Manifestation TikTok and has a lot of similarity to Buddhism in the emphasis on trying to release desire, but an important difference is that the emphasis on TikTok is on the self and narration as being the path towards doing this, and – crucially – a path mediated by an algorithm. This self-narration is a way of coping with the uncanny feeling of the algorithm dealing videos: one reads the algorithm as mystical and incorporates their paranoia into an altered view of themselves. It's a willful denial of surveillance in favor of something that – on its face – seems more empowering. Desire is also bound up with time in Manifestation TikTok, as evinced by another of Shumba's videos:

> *Instead of thinking of getting to a destination or getting to a place or having a thing or having that big end goal that you've always dreamed over, that you're actively trying to manifest or get into alignment with, focus all of your energy on what it's like to have that thing, to be that person, to have that physical manifestation of what you want outside of yourself. Live in that space as much as humanly possible.*[297]

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[297] Shumba. 2020. "#BoseAllOut #manifesting #manifestation #1111 #222 #lawofattraction #learnontiktok." TikTok. January 24, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@astoldbyzozo/video/6921428504361946373.

Here, I'm most intrigued by Shumba's insistence that what it is *like* to have a thing is not the same as the fact of having that thing. The difference is that between thinking and feeling, with feeling having primacy because of its relation to embodiment and energy. The fact of accomplishing a goal, Shumba argues, is not the same as the feeling that you get from accomplishing a goal. Frankly, I'm not sure that I agree with that, or at least I think the causal demarcation is needlessly confusing, but it is nevertheless important to Shumba and the emphasis on process (the "journey," if you will) integral to Manifestation TikTok. It naturally follows, then, that the stress of the video is on embodied feeling as opposed to external ownership. Here, the salvific power of attaining one's desire is about the internal process that occurs when a goal is reached, and therefore this internal process can be affected whenever, outside of materially having to work toward the goal; all one need do is adjust their attitude. The logic of manifestation as a practice is that this internal change will shift one's "energy" in such a way that the external world follows suit. This logic also presumes that the future is contemporaneous with the present, as any future that can be immediately altered is one somehow already here.

Central across all of these videos by all of these different creators are a number of uniting features and dual logics: First, the videos center the body and encourage viewers to recognize their emotions as being rooted in bodily sensations. This reconstitutes knowledge as something limited to one's own feelings, so that self-reflection and self-narration of that reflection become the primary way of knowing the world. Next, time is theorized as something always already collapsed, in that the present is always deferred in favor of a manifested future, but that future is also always concurrent with the present moment because that future is wholly imagined. Lastly, the user and subject is conceived of as being autonomous (it is *your* choice and mindset that catalyzes the fulfilled future) yet only insofar as the algorithm provides that ability and the

content creators introduce the ideas. Plus, one's autonomy only goes so far as the embodied feeling affords.

Of course, TikTok didn't invent this type of thinking; Adorno's study of astrology indicates the staying power of pseudorationality, and we might also think of the hit self-help book and phenomenon *The Secret*. My purpose in this project isn't to take a stance on the validity of spiritual logics, but to consider how digital mediation makes this viewpoint seem perspectiveless, and what it means when an algorithm creates vulnerable users for whom videos are "meant." It's important to look at TikTok because of how pervasive it is, lest the fetishized algorithm undergoes "stabilization into full-fledged gods and demons."[298] And, opposed to astrology columns of the twentieth century, TikTok's user-generated content allows anyone to try their hand at generating views in an infinitely-refreshing stream of content. The final, overarching logic of Manifestation TikTok, then, is that of monetization. Though I am inclined to think that she practices and believes what she preaches, Shumba is also rather entrepreneurial, with a YouTube, podcast, and weekly newsletter. She organizes her TikTok videos into playlists for easy access and binge viewing. Jordan Ashley and Cody Ray advertise personalized, paid readings on their pages as well. Content creators who are less direct, or who don't have specific services still have the incentive to rack up views, which could help them secure brand deals, fame, influence, or simply validation.

However, because Manifestation TikTok stresses personal embodiment and feels so personalized, success on TikTok can easily come to be seen as meritocratic -- content creators with the most views are deserving of their resulting brand deals or celebrity because they have the best energy, because their content is divinely meant for more people. This new age prosperity

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[298] Thomas et al., 1.

gospel is created via the algorithm. Though a mediating agent, TikTok's algorithm is not seen to have actual autonomy in the way a human would. Instead, it plays a numerical and thus seemingly neutral, omniscient role in regulating the app. These feelings obscure some of the human influence on and intervention in the algorithm's construction; we should again remember the shadowbanning of content related to Black Lives Matter and the memo about "undesirables."

But it's not that algorithmic fetishization always masks the presence of any actual human autonomy behind the app – though code is embedded with biases, sometimes explicitly, there isn't an individual programmer feeding us individual videos. To what extent, though, there is "agency" behind the served videos is impossible to know, and it is simpler and safer to fetishize the program, to create a belief in belief and in our ability to harness that belief to produce some type of change. To return to Graeber: suffering leads to knowledge, and knowledge leads to power, but in the frictionless, non-agential void of TikTok, it's not so much suffering as an anxiety that there's something we're not fully aware of lurking just out of sight. So the new formula thus becomes: anxiety leads to paranoia, paranoia to fetishization / belief, belief to knowledge, knowledge to power, but a power contained, mainly affecting the self.

3.3 Believing in belief

Because Manifestation TikTok's focus is on bodily and affective responses, the belief produced isn't a belief in, say, tarot, but a belief in the feeling produced by a tarot reading. As discussed, this is a technique to keep users engaged, as any video could be one to produce an affective response, even if it doesn't "read" a viewer perfectly. When pressed on how this works, how manifestation works, my younger sister – a TikTok user and practitioner of new age spiritual practices, especially those involving astrology, manifestation, and what some have called "witchtok" – shrugged: "energy is energy." Not satisfied, I pressed further: "that's just

circular though; what *is* energy?" Again, she insisted, energy is energy. I'm not interested in verifying that claim, but that it *cannot* be verified is indicative of the faith that those entrenched in this subculture place in abstract authority, in the oceanic feeling these videos seek to produce. And, as opposed to the politically-oriented transcendence I read in my first chapter on *Mrs Dalloway*, the mystical affect on Manifestation TikTok is one that can only be traced back to the user herself. This is why the subculture places such a high value on self-narration and self-reflection. The overarching belief of Manifestation TikTok is in one's ability to enact some self-transformation, and a transformation that is catalyzed by some feeling, which is dependent on the self's determination and "energy."

Yet because this narrative is tautological, it operates outside of time, lacking the usual temporal logic of narrative. For Manifestation TikTokers, the self is an amalgamation – there is the present version of the self, which has some ambiguous potential or promise, and this potential is at once narrated from the point of view of the present self and yet given or inspired by some imagined future self, who also, according to Shumba and others, is nonetheless the same self as the current one.

The user is at once unified and split, as this collapse of selves is dependent on the separability of one's self into seeing subject and viewed object, a move which is encouraged by TikTok and social media's imperative to narrativize one's life. Put simply, in order to have some self transformation, I must narrate my life in such a way that I can see myself as a character in a larger narrative (and, crucially, a narrative that I author and am yet never fully in control of).[299] TikTok and other platforms prime users to do this by incentivizing attention and figuratively and

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[299] See also Chun, "Data as Big Drama."

114

literally encouraging us to turn our (conveniently front-facing) cameras on ourselves. Again we might return to Hillis's "telefetish": "I see myself seeing myself."[300]

On Manifestation TikTok, viewers come to believe in the truth of this telefetish because of its relation to embodied feeling. Shumba is a prime example of this, although there are other creators that stress it more explicitly, including a user named Morgan, whose popular video from October 2020 features text that reads: "The only reason why you crave anything is because you are tapping into a version of yourself who already has it."[301] Here, the selves are split into present subject and future object, of course the same person to some degree, and influencing one another. Here, the future object is purely virtual, imagined as having some influence but in actuality only exerting "agency" insofar as the present self conjures and acts upon their own imagination of that agency. Paradoxically, the future self is not the one acted upon, but the one imagined to reach back through time and act upon the present self. The present self thus defers a sense of their own agency (of course maintaining it the entire time) in service of a hoped-for, would-be future, albeit one that only applies to their own self; one can know that their *own* desires will come true, but their capacity to know is limited by the self-referential nature of their feeling. The implication of such a logic is that the self is, firstly, not a stable thing, as multiple versions of oneself can exist and be observed or acted upon. Manifestation TikTokers are constantly oriented towards a transformed future, but it's important to note the added onus for those in the subculture to not be too consumed with their ongoing transformation. If what you want is already in your future clutches, to obsess or worry about the outcome betrays a lack of faith. The key is to "claim" the manifestation without spending too much energy, because

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[300] Hillis. *Online a Lot of the Time*, 90.
[301] Morgan (@lordzygote911). 2021. Tiktok. October 7, 2021.
https://www.tiktok.com/@lordzygote911/video/7016458383536426246.

expended worried energy is tainted, bad, potentially disrupting the desired outcome. The agency of the viewer or manifestor is thus continuously displaced, not only by or for the algorithm, but by themselves, in service of manifesting their desires. However, this agency is not so straightforward, as TikTokers note that one's "subconscious" has the power to "block manifestations."[302] This too puts an onus on the viewer to develop an even deeper narrative or understanding of themselves. A "blocked" manifestation and the realization of one is almost like a badge of honor, though, as it allows users to unearth their trauma, know themselves more fully. (Again, as in Graeber: suffering leads to knowledge leads to power, and here that power is borne out through narration of one's journey with manifestation.) It's not enough to know what you want and focus on that, but you must also know all of the contours of your psyche preventing you from unconsciously thwarting your plans and hopes. However, this invocation of the subconscious is just another way to advance the fetish and defer one's agency; one will never unlock their full subconscious. At first glance, it may seem as if this is different from a Freudian fetish, the purpose of which is to displace desire and prevent the id from emerging. However, though algorithmic fetishes presume to instead unearth desire, which is here (neoliberally) also paired with "potential," the reliance on a program to tell us our desires and fates simply leads to a deferral of facing for ourselves what it is that we want.

Additionally, that the experience of TikTok is so grounded in time, the displacement of desire is a temporal deferral. We are encouraged to objectify our selves and become characters in our own lives, self-narrativizing in a way that collapses our experience of temporality, in that the future is always already a part of the present (as in Morgan's video, with desire being an imprint

[302] Bachmeier, Lydia (@lydiabachmeier). 2021. "#affirmations #manifestation #loatips #spirituality #lawofvibration #energy #subconsciousmind #reprogrammingyourmind." TikTok. September 30, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@lydiabachmeier/video/7013855727059995910.

from the future), and the present is always deferred or given up, as to "manifest" something – as in the sound video – is to devote present energy in service of some future thing.

To some extent this is perhaps the nature of setting goals, working, daydreaming, et cetera, but the difference on TikTok is the constant, repeated collapse of time and the focus on energy that makes the manifesting central to identity and autonomy in a way that gets wrapped up with moral judgment and blame. It's a temporal orientation akin to what some scholars describe as the nature of time in modernity: a combination of ephemerality and eternity.[303] Similarly, Chun writes of "the enduring ephemeral" in an effort to get away from a recent scholarly focus on speed as the defining feature of mediated life,[304] and I agree that more focus should be paid to contemporaneity. While speed is a component of a daily living that feels more brief – the short videos and the premium placed on attention allows TikTok's recommendation algorithm to hone in on users' specific interests – more crucial is how the future exists concurrently with the present as potential, and how potential is *the* logic of the information / post-information / disinformation age.

This isn't about speed so much as about affect, as Massumi convincingly puts forth in his article, "The Future Birth Of The Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat," in which he critiques the post-9/11 turn to feelings as fact, examining the rhetoric around the war on terror and a contemporary affect of fear and anticipation that can never be evaded. For Massumi, the crucial temporal formulation here relies on the future being brought into the present in the form of threat – it is this threat that allows the future to act on the present and this threat that obscures reason: "The mass affective production of felt threat-potential engulfs the (f)actuality of the

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[303] Adams, Vincanne ; Murphy, Michelle ; Clarke, Adele E. "Anticipation: Technoscience, Life, Affect, Temporality." *Subjectivity* (2009). n.d. doi:10.1057/sub.2009.18, 247.
[304] Chun, "The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future Is a Memory." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Autumn 2008), 148-171.

comparatively small number of incidents where danger materialized. They blend together in a shared atmosphere of fear."[305] Notably, Massumi focuses on the *felt* threat-potential, as opposed to a rational evaluation of likely outcomes. Fetishizing the algorithm for its ability to "read" the future is constitutive of this affective turn, and one further aided by the embodied logic so pervasive on Manifestation TikTok.

Of course, there is no clear, shared threat being staved off on TikTok. When Molly and Dante Zuppichini promise a vague "glow up" or good grades or a romantic partner, or Zozo Shumba encourages viewers to imagine themselves full of light, there is no danger, per se. Yet there is this *feeling,* as noted earlier in this chapter, that the "oracular" algorithm demands interpretation.[306] Though without external threats bearing down on them, TikTokers are still subject to the pressure of constantly narrating their own lives– in this way, the self becomes the locus of political change, and then it's not so much about active fear or threat, but about a shifting sense that one is wholly responsible for themselves, in a way distinct from a more prosperous, distant past with stronger institutions and social support systems.

Though the affective landscape of TikTok stands distinct from the shared fear of the post-9/11 United States, Massumi's framework is still useful for its emphasis on circularity; his diagnosis of a turn to affect and felt potential is prescient. There are myriad reasons we could point to as to why this self-reflective logic is comforting to TikTok users: informational overload, socioeconomic precarity and downwards mobility, and the general scale of sociopolitical problems that feel so outside one's control. Much like the divine the users seek, these social "threats" are diffuse and without any stable authority or easy remedy. Instead, the

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[305] Massumi, Brian. "The Future Birth Of The Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat." *The Affect Theory Reader,* ed. Melissa Gregg and Greg Seigworth. Duke University Press, 2010: 61.
[306] McQuillan, 3.

locus of control can only be self-oriented. I have sought to suspend my disbelief, but it is here that I must intervene and say that Manifestation TikTok is very harmful from a political standpoint, because it locates the possibility of change as entirely limited to one's individual person, foreclosing collective action or change. Whereas Massumi's population was ruled by fear, the dominant mood on TikTok is one that oscillates between deferral and desire. If one does know their desires, they are unable to act on them, or, even worse, they act on a "wrong" desire. The "(f)actuality" of a threat can never be verified, but fear or affect need not be: they are individually felt and only "real" insofar as they can be recognized or named to exist. Massumi describes threat as "combin[ing] an ontology with an epistemology in such a way as to endow itself with powers of self-causation."[307] On Manifestation TikTok, the self-causation emerges in the embodied affects, which are translated into an epistemology of the self and one's place in the larger world. And this knowledge, of course, leads to more feelings of wonder; this self-causation is misrecognized as divinity. The self-causation is baked into the application; it's why content creators will say things like "if you're seeing this it's meant for you," trusting that their video will find interested users. Because indeed, it will – people who engage with Manifestation TikTok videos will be dealt more, and with increasingly specific topics catering to their desires.

Again, from a user standpoint, this *feels* uncanny, and it's all too easy to imbue this process with divine foresight. While Lauren Berlant has described Facebook as "eventalizing" the thing that has just happened,[308] similarly important is to consider how algorithms eventalize the thing that has yet to happen and indeed may never come to pass. In fact, the uncertainty of a specific future is the very circumstance that makes it *the future,* and especially the future *self* so

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[307] Massumi. "The Future Birth Of The Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat," 61.

[308] Berlant, Lauren. "Faceless Book," Supervalent Thought (blog), December 25, 2007, https://supervalentthought.com/2007/12/25/faceless-book/, cited in Dinnen, Zara. *The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 7.

vulnerable to present, projected fantasies. I don't need to manifest that the sun will rise tomorrow morning, but, according to TikTok, I do need to manifest an affordable apartment, a high-paying job, and fulfilling romantic relationships. But, because I can only *know* that manifestation through my own feeling of its truth, I cannot manifest political change or good fortune for another person.

Algorithmic divination is essentially a fetishized response to neoliberalism and increasing precarity, despite the fact that the algorithm also forecloses this shaky future by shaping what users see and think about. What I am able to want is fed through an algorithm of what I am already presumed to want based on my demographic information or scrolling habits. Hillis writes on this, nothing that:

> [m]any participants and users of networked sites, while using the sites for purposes that *some might consider profane, do so in ways that* accord to the technology *a status akin to the divine. The difficulty here is that in making the virtual stand in for the future, other possibilities or ways of imagining the future get foreclosed. Implicitly positioning the virtual as the 'new' future forgets that this virtual is actually taking place right now.*[309]

The potential of the future is foreclosed by the app, and yet TikTok videos insist that agency remains with the user, with the onus being on them to claim the positive energy or put out a positive energy in order to reap the reward of this fortune. The autonomy imposed by Manifestation TikTok is thus akin to the "freedom" that accompanies astrology, in Adorno's view, which "consists of the individual's taking upon himself voluntarily what is inevitable anyway."[310] If the algorithm is oracular, we have no choice but to accept. This increased mediation leads to what Chun, drawing on McKenzie Wark and Paul Virilio, terms "global one time,"[311] or a loss of one's "bearings" and "reason" due to events being *produced* by the

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[309] Hillis, *Online a Lot of the Time:* 65, emphasis his.
[310] Adorno, 44.
[311] Chun, "Enduring Ephemeral," 151.

media.[312] Deferring desire via mediated manifestation, though perhaps appearing to push back against global one time, ensures that mediation regulates time and the future.

However, I'd like to note a key and perhaps obvious nuance about temporality often glossed over. While theorists tend to describe the future writ large as "inevitable,"[313] they neglect to clarify that, while the future may contain events which are inevitable (which is what Adorno writes on), the future itself is necessarily always out of reach and will never come to pass – only the present arrives, and once over, it becomes the past. In putting something in the domain of the future or saying that something is from the future, we are thus necessarily holding whatever that thing is at a distance and making it untouchable, to some degree. We can thus read the TikTok video wherein the content creator says that a feeling of desire is proof that we have what we want in the future as a way of coping with, deferring, a perceived lack in the present and pushing it outside of the present, outside of an actionable domain. Algorithmic divination is a fetish response that allows us to invest in a neoliberal notion of the self and the market under the guise of collective enlightenment, as the collective (as evoked in the "one of four" videos or Shumba's flowing light) is only useful insofar as it advances personal growth.

3.4 Conclusion

On TikTok, the continually-remediated message is that some form of enlightenment can be reached if one knows themselves well enough. All of TikTok's dual logics, of course, also exist in the landscape of wellness culture and neoliberalism, but what's distinctive (and pernicious, perhaps) about Manifestation TikTok is that this works via a seemingly neutral algorithm. As this is paired with a mystical aesthetic that centers bodily affect, the resulting logic

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[312] Paul Virilio, "Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!" cited in Chun, "Enduring Ephemeral."
[313] Adams, Murphy, and Clark, 259.

is one in which feelings have more authority than facts. In a move similar to the one I discuss in my second chapter on voice and immediacy online, the post-factual landscape created on TikTok also serves to naturalize a new prosperity gospel, in which only those who believe enough can thrive. This is, as Marx notes, the danger of the fetish. In attempting to create affective responses that reclaim autonomy from an otherwise flattening, dividuating process (that of being read by the algorithm), Manifestation TikTokers are, rather, reinforcing the very global one time they seek to circumvent. The all-encompassing-ness, one-ness perpetuated by a focus on affective responses in all of their self-causing logic, is the exact reason why there can never be an outside to Manifestation TikTok, though it stresses the possibility of such a fantasy, an imagined future in which what we desire will be in our clutches and we'll no longer need to manifest or visualize or claim anything, because we will be "complete." We might finally return to Adorno:

> *astrology cannot be simply interpreted as an expression of dependence but must be also considered as an ideology for dependence, as an attempt to strengthen and somehow justify painful conditions which seem to be more tolerable if an affirmative attitude is taken towards them.*[314]

Although I have argued that this constitutes a bad thing, perhaps I am too cynical. Despite his diagnosis of the fetish and its relation to power, Graeber writes that "the paradox of power," as "something which exists only if other people think it does," is also found at the core of magic and creativity.[315] Although I argue that TikTok forecloses the future, we might consider what possibilities are opened up by an increased emphasis on self-narrativization, and how digital networks have the potential to increase collective action. My final chapter further considers how "artificial intelligence" produces and perpetuates a speculative trend market in which the primary concerns are a commodified identity and an earnestness in devotion.

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[314] Adorno, 114.
[315] Graeber, 430.

Chapter 4 Group Workshops and Cone Worship on Netflix's *Too Hot to Handle*

Among its slate of reality shows, Netflix's *Too Hot to Handle* (*THTH*) is among the most absurd. The premise is as follows: a group of hyper-sexual singles with poor impulse control and worse emotional intelligence are invited to stay in a private resort, where they are forbidden from engaging in any sexual contact with each other (or themselves). This "retreat" comes complete with workshops meant to aid in their spiritual growth, and contestants capitalize on this built-in narrative structure to craft personas and arcs emphasizing their own personal development. Winners of the show get to split a pool of $100k, and every rule break, ranging from a kiss to sex to "self-pleasure," causes that cash pool to dwindle. The show is insistent that the contestants, allegedly largely cast from Instagram, are unaware of what they are signing up for: "The producers weren't able to tell them anything about the show without ruining the surprise so crucial to the show's premise. All the potential cast knew about the show was that it involved a month in the sun, there was a prize, and it was related to dating. But that's pretty much it!"[316]

Enforcing this abstinence is Lana, a conical, "artificially intelligent," Alexa-like device often jokingly referred to as an "air freshener," whose British-accented, mechanical voice is recognizable as being loosely foreign and yet not really belonging to any one nation. Lana's omniscience is a running joke, as players try and fail to evade her gaze. Despite the humor, the show is undergirded by a supreme sense of earnestness; each contestant praises the "process" of "Lana" teaching them to be more human and vulnerable through new-age workshops and various

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[316] "Too Hot To Handle Revealed - The Secrets of How They Film The Show."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z023yB9_oaE.

challenges. Indeed, Lana is almost supernatural. In the first season, as the players sit around accusing one another of breaking the rules, one contestant suggests that they ask Lana for the truth, and the show's off-camera host quips: "Yes! This scene is calling out for some divine intervention, or a plastic cone."[317]

This isn't the only instance of the show referring to Lana as a godlike figure; the series is saturated with an overwhelming predilection for superstition and New Age workshops meant to "put the guests on the path towards making deeper and more meaningful connections"[318] – that is, if they are willing to "invest in their own personal growth."[319] At the end of the season, the contestant or contestants deemed to have made the most progress are rewarded with what's left of the prize pool. Various infractions cost different amounts of money, with a kiss costing three thousand dollars in the first two seasons (and six thousand in the third and fourth after several intentional rule breaks) and sex costing twenty thousand minimum. Of course, the show is sensational, so rule breaks abound, especially early on in the season as contestants act out, angry that they've been duped and are actually not on a more sex-permissive dating show.

Across all seasons, the respective groups have rare opportunities to earn back some of the money spent by engaging in "the ultimate test of chastity" – typically, a night alone in a romantic suite for the couple who has broken the rules most frequently. Contestants can also be sent home if they fail to form "meaningful" connections. Even those who make it to the end aren't guaranteed a share of the prize money, as the rules for remaining on the show shift each season.

Though the contestants are shielded from the outside world during their time on the show, the specter of social media and its potential to create wealth haunts their time at the retreat,

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[317] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 3, "Revenge is a Dish Best Served Hot." Aired April 17, 2020 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81031048.
[318] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 1, "Love, Sex or Money."
[319] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 2, "When Harry Met Francesca."

and I argue that winning the money is, in fact, not the main motivation for going on the show. The first season of *THTH* garnered over 50 million viewers,[320] and successful contestants can walk away with hundreds of thousands of followers on social media and myriad brand deals. If it is true that contestants are scouted via Instagram,[321] that means that producers are aware of and feed off of the promise of the influencer economy, luring potential guests in with the promise of fame. Conversely, even if really tricked, the choice to participate in *THTH* once one knows they've been cast is an economic one, despite the contestants' shows of devotion to the "process" and their faux-AI idol. And indeed, their displays of devotion are intense and often center on their own self-narration.

What I am examining in this chapter is the interplay between irony, sincerity, consumerism, and new age spirituality that emerge on *THTH*, all of which are important for understanding both the reality television show and, in turn, how spirituality and the performance of devotion emerge online. Namely, I look at how contestants' self-branding and self-promotion – imbued with religious language and emphasizing transformation – are practice for their post-show careers, as many contestants indeed go on to become social media influencers. I consider the contestants' motivations and desires for going on the show, as well as our own reasons for engaging with the show and participating in the circulation of these narratives.

Key to all of this is consumption, both in terms of Netflix viewership and the consumption of the television show, as well as the contestants anticipating this viewership and creating narratives to *be* consumed. The mystical, contradictory affect that emerges is a result of the myriad purposes that these narratives must fulfill: the stories have to negotiate the challenge

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[320] White, Peter. "Netflix Shares 'Sweet Tooth' & 'Too Hot To Handle' Viewing Data." *Deadline,* 20 January 2021: https://deadline.com/2021/07/netflix-sweet-tooth-too-hot-to-handle-viewing-data-1234796917/
[321] Yang, Fan. "Learning From Lana: Netflix's Too Hot to Handle, COVID-19, and the human-nonhuman entanglement in contemporary technoculture," *Cultural Studies*, 2021.

of being objects to be consumed and yet seeming genuine, as well as also having to appear as if coming from the contestants themselves, when we know that Netflix and the producers are behind contestants' creating these narratives in the first place.

This is a larger phenomenon outside of Netflix and *THTH*, but focusing on the show dramatizes the problem of algorithmic divination by offering a model of selfhood in miniature – a model in which one seeks prosperity and enlightenment by crafting narratives of transformation.[322] Specifically, I draw on what Eva Ilouz calls "the intertwining of textuality with emotional experience," in which textuality becomes "an important adjunct of emotional experience. 'Writing down' an emotion 'locks' it in space in the sense that it creates a distance between the experience of the emotion(s) and the person's awareness of that emotion."[323] Contestants on *THTH* "lock in" their emotional experience by narrating their past indiscretions and flaws. In "emplotting"[324] their lives, they, like the TikTokers, split themselves into seeing subject and seen (and commodified) object. The subject making the observation has been transformed by Lana's grace and surveillance, and the self-object is in the past, a character in a story to be mined for sympathy and social clout, and to be represented, profited off of as ideal image of transformation.

Again, this is not a new phenomenon. As Ilouz writes, "the making of capitalism went hand in hand with the making of an intensely specialized emotional culture,"[325] and one that centers on therapeutic, self-oriented language. Ilouz continues, describing our propensity to self-narrate: "The prevalence and persistence of this narrative, which we may call as shorthand *a narrative of recognition*, is related to the material and ideal interests of a variety of social groups

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[322] It's worth noting that narratives of transformation are crucial in the history of Western spirituality, as detailed in Coleman, Rebecca. *Transforming Images: Screens, affect, futures*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013: 3.
[323] Ilouz, Eva. *Cold Intimacies*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, 33.
[324] Ilouz, 7.
[325] Ilouz, 4.

operating within the market, in civil society, and within the institutional boundaries of the state."[326] Focusing on *THTH* and Netflix, as well as on the social media influencer economy more broadly, demonstrates how this emotional culture proliferates. This emotional culture looks like the oscillation between irony and sincerity, self-disclosure and ironizing that disclosure, and the collapse of the global into the personal.

Examining the latter is of particular importance for studying Netflix, as the company continually seeks to expand its global market share and does so in part by presenting local or individual stories as integral to the company's mission. As I will detail, the spiritual aesthetics of *THTH* are shaped by the oscillation between the global and the personal, as mediated by the nebulous terms "stories" and "voices" that Netflix uses to explain its corporate mission, as well as by Lana's imperative that contestants self-narrate their struggles and continually craft their presented selves. Netflix is enacting corporate cosmopolitanism in painting themselves as stewards of inclusion, as if they are doing the world a service by sharing otherwise unheard stories. Moreover, in having "Lana" be the one mediating these narratives, the relationships we are able to have to our own transformation and self get warped, as Lana is largely opaque and with mysterious rules.

Additionally, this emphasis on the personal as global is similar to Silicon Valley's propensity for "transparency and openness," as described by Alice Marwick in her ethnographic study of social media companies in the late aughts.[327] Although often thought of as synonymous or, at the very least, working in tandem, Marwick details the difference between these two terms, noting that "openness is about making all information available, whereas transparency happens

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[326] Ilouz, 4-5. Emphasis in original.
[327] Marwick, Alice E. *Status Update Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013.

when there is a policy of making useful and relevant information available."[328] Tech companies

often operate openly but not transparently – we might think back to TikTok's privacy policy

discussed in the last chapter, which outlines the scope of the data collected but not how that data

is used or how the algorithm works. Of course, there is a difference between Web 2.0 agents

such as tech companies or hacker collectives being open and transparent – disclosing the data

they mine and sharing code, for example – and reality television and social media self-narration.

Yet I argue that Netflix collapses this distinction in *THTH* and their corporate documents

stressing the importance of inclusion. We can thus read *THTH* as a microcosm of a larger trend

in Silicon Valley and beyond of demanding self-disclosure from social media users and

consumers (the line between the two are muddied), wherein this self-disclosure primarily serves

the corporations and their bottom lines.

      In *THTH,* Lana – as artificial intelligence, as god-like and omniscient – allows

contestants to understand themselves as active participants in their lives, the arc of which they

narrate to earn social media followers. As with Manifestation TikTok, the spiritualism that

emerges on *THTH* is latent to the attention economy, forming a new prosperity gospel. And, just

as the aims of TikTok as a social media company preclude it from truly promoting spiritualism to

its users, so too is it hard to reconcile Netflix's goal of global market domination with their spate

of programming modeling personal growth. Yet the contestants – and viewers – are willing to

suspend their disbelief, perhaps because, as Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, we "need to believe…

that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions, something outside of

mere consumer culture, something above the reductiveness of profit margins, the crassness of

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[328] Marwick, 232.

capital exchange."[329] Banet-Weiser names self-identity and religion as two cultural spaces we like to insist are "authentic" – yet these spaces are not immune to branding, as *THTH* demonstrates. Instead, "in order to marketize elements in culture that are seen as beyond, or more than, mere commodities such as human life or religious faith, the material aims of capitalism are retooled as somehow not only about capital accumulation."[330]

Of course, framing this show as being more than mere entertainment (and instead genuinely or authentically helpful for the contestants) has the result of advancing Netflix's material aims, making us eager to subscribe and tune in, because we feel as if the show is providing some enchantment and, beyond that, instruction. After all, as Marwick writes, "Modern Americans learn to be proper citizens not only from each other, but also from reality television, self-help books, talk shows, novels, magazines, and films."[331] That this is a process led by Netflix is the primary difference between the spiritualism emerging on *THTH* and that of Manifestation TikTok, which is user-led and generated. Yet both platforms and practices involve practitioners trying to make money and become influencers. *Too Hot to Handle* is a rich site for considering how contemporary spiritual practices often overlap with self-narration and economic promise.

In this chapter, I consider how Lana – as idol, false artificial intelligence, and, crucially, voice device – allows Netflix to mediate and reinforce a rationale that stresses performative selfhood, priming contestants to self-narrativize and share personal, often traumatic stories, thus capitalizing on contestants' hopes of succeeding in the attention economy. Lana's sonic nature and recognizability as an "artificial intelligence" device allows us to project fantasies of pure

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[329] Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture.* New York: New York University Press, 2012: 5.
[330] Banet-Weiser, 167.
[331] Marwick, 278.

objectivity onto her. To be explicit: Lana is a framing device, through which Netflix can launder its true mammon: the allure of the influence economy and the possibility of self-transformation.

4.1 Lana: omniscient, fictional god

Despite the ways in which the producers try to manipulate the rules each season to keep things fresh, there are a few constants: Lana, the emphasis on "journey," and the show's comedian host, Desiree, who acts as a meta-narrator, mostly inserting ironic jokes spelling out exactly how absurd the show is or otherwise guiding us through our watching experience to ensure that we're approaching the show with a certain orientation. Though bizarre, the aesthetic of the show is also fairly uniform – it generally consists of close-up, short-duration shots (savvy reality television viewers will recognize this as an editing trick; production can re-contextualize and fabricate scenes that never happened with these close-ups and overlaid, spliced audio) and the plot is interspersed with a deluge of commentary – it feels like TikTok, or *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, or *Bullet Train*, or any other 2020s media: all flash and colors and the refusal to stay on anything too long, lest we lose attention and return to the Netflix homepage. Re-watching the seasons in preparation for this chapter was a dizzying experience, in part because I initially started the first season at 1.25x and 1.5x speed, making the already-erratic dialogue seem lightning-fast. As with other reality shows, the moments of big reveal are drawn out, and *THTH* does this by cutting to each contestant in a direct-to-camera interview, with each individual saying something like "what!?" or "just tell us already!" It's obnoxious and doesn't actually build drama, but rather pretends to heighten the stakes. As I will discuss in this chapter, this is just one of many instances of the show's conflicting, erratic tone, which oscillates between earnestness and irony.

Presumably mediating all of this is Lana, a "digital, personal assistant." Of course, Lana is not an actual "smart" device, but a plastic cone with a speaker and a mechanical voice "created by a team of experts."[332] The show depends on contestants and viewers suspending their disbelief and regarding Lana as sovereign of the retreat. In an early "direct-to-camera" interview,[333] she states that her "purpose is to put the guests on the path towards making deeper and more meaningful connections."[334] And, just as contestants' direct-to-camera interviews are complete with a chiron listing their name and where they're from, so too does Lana's. Her place of origin reads "Factory, China." Of course, "factory" is not a city, and I can only imagine that this is meant to be a joke about the West's dependence on Chinese manufacturing, but it is a bizarre and unsettling introduction to Lana, and careful viewers are immediately primed for confusion. Though recognizable as a smart-home device, what are we supposed to make of Lana? One of the few academic articles on *THTH* delves into the relationship between Lana, China, and Netflix. For Fan Yang, Lana is "a surveillance robot embodying the operation of Netflix as part of the expanding regime of data colonialism…", and "[i]nstructing the contestants to care for their entrepreneurial selves while encroaching upon their autonomy, Lana invites us to rethink the common framing of China – a coveted market for Netflix – as the nonhuman Other of the liberal-democratic West."[335] Part of the narrative utility of her being "from China" is that she remains entirely within a black box of algorithmic processes, obscuring "social processes embedded in [her] operations."[336]

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[332] "Who Voices Lana On Too Hot To Handle? Host's Identity & NSFW Name Explained." *Capital FM,* 18 January 2022: https://www.capitalfm.com/news/tv-film/too-hot-handle/who-is-lana-voice-alexa-device-host/. Lana is a mechanical turk of sorts: meant to appear as robotic, but controlled by humans.

[333] These are the scenes where one contestant (on occasion, two contestants) sits and speaks to the camera, commenting on their experience on the show.

[334] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 1, "Love, Sex or Money."

[335] Yang, Fan: 2-3.

[336] Gaw, Fatima. "Algorithmic logics and the construction of cultural taste of the Netflix Recommender System." *Media, Culture & Society* 2022, (Vol. 44(4)): 708.

Lana's never-again-mentioned Chinese-ness and "her" insistence on crafting New Age workshops for the contestants are part of a long tradition of "a racist ideology of Orientalism and Asian 'mystique'" with origins in the 19th and 20th centuries, taking hold in 1960s' youth culture, "which ignored the complexity of social problems by offering "banal solutions in exotic garb.'"[337] Though still rooted in a vague conception of Orientalism, that "exotic garb" functions as that black box for Lana and Netflix alike.

Yet this black box, much like many New Age spiritual practices, is "a 'red herring' to restrict any attempts at knowledge, except through deciphering the code."[338] It is this black box that lends itself to contestants' projected divinity, especially as it's unclear what Lana's full scope is meant to be. When new players come in, they will often be shown swiping through potential suitors on a dating app, implying that Lana has access to this data, but there are also times where Lana, despite somehow being "the all-seeing, all-knowing personal assistant… in charge of the retreat,"[339] notes her limitations, saying: "Flirting is not a function I am programmed for."[340] It's worth noting what a strange turn of phrase this is – while writing this chapter, I had misremembered it and thought Lana "said" "I have not been programmed to flirt." Instead, the producers are careful not to center Lana's would-be programmers, instead using a passive sentence construction that emphasizes Lana's neutral nature. She is not programmed by *someone*, but it is also unclear who or what has done the programming she references. This comment is meant to be comedic but also perhaps comforting – despite her sophistication, Lana

[337] Banet-Weiser, 189-90.
[338] Bucher, Taina. *If. . . Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Cited in Gaw, Fatima. "Algorithmic logics and the construction of cultural taste of the Netflix Recommender System." Media, Culture & Society, 2022, Vol. 44(4): 708.
[339] "How They Made Too Hot To Handle Season 2 | The Behind-The-Scenes Gossip | Netflix." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtHSyepkXYI
[340] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 2, "When Harry Met Francesca." Aired April 17, 2020 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81031047

does not have any claims to world domination and will never presume to replace humans. Rather, Lana acts on behalf of Netflix, and her "assembling" an international spate of retreat guests based on their shared personalities and personal deficits is not unlike Netflix's cosmopolitan ambitions. Lana is not only a stand-in for the producers, but for Netflix more broadly.

After all, although "Lana" mediates the retreat, it is Netflix that has created its platform from which the contestants hope to launch a successful career as media personalities. Lana is a convenient proxy for Netflix, which is one of the major players in the "social quantification sector,"[341] doing the "ideological work"[342] to naturalize the process of data collection. Contestants consenting to "Lana's" surveilling is painted as economically promising and morally virtuous.

This imperative for self-disclosure and contestants' participation translates off-screen for us, the viewing audience. Not only do we bear witness to Lana's regressive rules, but many of us end up following these players on Instagram and TikTok; as I will discuss later in this chapter, their clout impacts the real-world economy, as our continued attention allows them to become brand ambassadors or models. We are pulled into the show and contribute to its success and impact on the larger world. Moreover, in all of this being framed as morally righteous, transformative, we are buying into the idea that artificial intelligence and data collection can be used for social good, or at the very least, allowing ourselves to half-believe this could be the case.

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[341]Couldry, Nick, and Ulises A. Mejias. "Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data's Relation to the Contemporary Subject." *Television & New Media*, 2019 (Vol. 20(4)): 340.
[342] Ibid.

If "Lana, the sensor" is metaphorically similar to "China, the censor,"[343] she nevertheless exists as a recognizable physical object. Part of the absurdity of the show is that the contestants (whom Lana often refers to as "my guests" or "retreat guests") are indeed taking orders from a plastic object resembling an air freshener or other household device, and one who somehow knows more than they do about how to form human connection. Lana is said to have a "watchful eye"[344] and at one point even warns the contestants "remember: this alarm clock has eyes on the back of her head."[345] Of course, Lana doesn't really have eyes on the back of her head – she doesn't have eyes or a head! Although shaping the conceit of and being a character in the show, Lana is largely imaginary. She speaks occasionally to the contestants or in direct-to-camera interviews, but her largest impact is as an imagined, god-like figure, watching over the retreat. Lana is what Michael Chion would call the visualized acousmêtre: often just a voice, though one to which we have a visual reference.[346] And sometimes she is on screen, the top of her cone lit up as she "speaks," while other times, her chime permeates retreat while she remains out of view. That we have seen and occasionally see Lana diminishes her power, according to Chion, in that, once seen, the visualized acousmêtre "bears with the image a relationship of possible inclusion"[347] between voice and body. Yet Lana's "body" remains somewhat opaque to us; we recognize what she is meant to be, but it's unclear exactly what she *is*: Chinese appliance, air freshener, or artificial intelligence idol. Further, her voice doesn't quite match any of these containers or bodies, allowing her, as I will detail in the next section, to appear as pure

[343] Yang, 397.
[344] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2022. Season 3, Episode 2, "The Midnight Train to Georgia." Aired January 19, 2022 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81392316.
[345] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2021. Season 2, Episode 3, "On Est dans la Merde" Aired June 23, 2021 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81392308.
[346] Chion, Michael. *The Voice in Cinema*. Edited and translated by Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999: 21.
[347] Chion, 23.

subjectivity. It is her acousmetric nature that allows the presumption of omniscience,[348] which is never explained, though it is referenced frequently, and Lana's supposed fore-knowledge and our own suspension of disbelief has practical, narrative reasons: that an algorithmic intelligence system would think that the best way to become more human is through absurd workshops is both funnier and more narratively sound than if the show's producers were the acknowledged as the arbiters of the plot, especially given how uncomfortable and personally forthcoming that plot turns out to be. The workshops are odd, bordering on culturally appropriative, and wholly unscientific, yet we are meant to believe that they are useful. Attributing their logic to "Lana" allows us to set aside our misgivings: the technology knows best. Put otherwise, Lana as a framing device and literal household device allows producers to defer their responsibility for requiring contestants to debase themselves. Such opacity and foreignness obscures and even justifies how regressive Lana's rules are; as one reviewer of *THTH* snarks, "there's plenty to be said about the show's retrograde attitudes toward sexuality (do people in their early 20s who aren't ready to settle down really need to be scared into doing so?)."[349]

Indeed, there's something about Lana's presumed algorithmic nature that makes her *feel* more neutral and trustworthy. Given that we increasingly turn to "smart" devices[350] and services to manage our purchases, curate our music playlists, tell us when someone is at our front door, and control the lighting in our homes, we are perhaps more comfortable taking advice from a

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[348] Chion, 24.

[349]Berman, Judy. "Netflix's New Dating Show Is Too Hot to Handle Is Unabashedly Trashy. It's Also Weirdly Perfect for Right Now." *TIME* magazine, 16 April 2020.

[350] For more on this, see Goulden, Murray. "'Delete the family': platform families and the colonisation of the smart home," I*nformation, Communication & Society*, 2021, 24:7, 903-920, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2019.1668454; Sadowski, Jathan, Yolande Strengers, and Jenny Kennedy. "More work for Big Mother: Revaluing care and control in smart homes." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space,* 2024 56:1, 330-345; and Woods, Heather Suzanne. "Smart homes: domestic futurity as Infrastructure," *Cultural Studies*, 2021, 35:4-5, 876-899, DOI: 10.1080/09502386.2021.1895254.

"plastic cone" than we would be a fellow human – after all, humans are not without ideology, in the way we can perhaps pretend that algorithmic technologies are.

To understand Lana's power and bear out her significance, it is helpful to contrast her networked nature to that of another networked technology ruling over a similar Netflix show: *The Circle.* On *The Circle,* contestants are placed in isolation within apartment units, and their only way of communicating with each other is through the Circle "app." Contestants create a social media-like profile, opting to play as themselves or as a "catfish," with the goal of becoming well-liked amongst the fellow competitors, making alliances, and attempting to come off as genuine, lest someone believes they are indeed a catfish. The Circle app is structuring and omniscient, but unlike Lana, has no physical form. Contestants do not pray to their Circle app, though they at times will lament its decisions – for example, bemoaning competitions "designed" by the Circle which reveal them to be lying about their identity.[351] Though engaging in a similar format and pretense, Lana is presumed to be much more powerful than the Circle. She needs to be, given that her stated purpose is so much more human and emotional than that of the Circle "app." Contestants on *THTH* aren't simply playing for the prize money, but for their emotional well-being.

As with TikTok, the "data" Lana collects is obscured. All we know is that she is always watching, as she reveals in the season two finale: "I have been collecting data since you arrived, and have now conducted my final analysis."[352] The specter of Lana's watchful, eyeless gaze, along with the show's incentive for the contestants to craft "transformative images"[353] coalesce to form what Marwick calls the "discourse of Web 2.0," noting "that when everyday people,

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[351] *The Circle.* 2021. Season 2, Episode 7, "Friend Zoned…." Aired April 21, 2021 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/8130380
[352] *Too Hot to Handle.* 2021. Season 2, Episode 10, "I Did Not See That Coming." Aired June 30, 2021 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81394402.
[353] See Coleman.

popular media, and scholars discuss Web 2.0, they often abstract real events, technologies, and people into an all-encompassing metanarrative."[354]

If Lana is presumed to be an actual networked technology, she's also presumed to be literally divine in her omniscience. Early in the second season, contestants start praying to Lana. At first it's overly ironic – in the first instance of prayer, guests Cam Holmes and Emily Miller (the only *THTH* couple still together, as of February 2023) pray to Lana for forgiveness for "any inappropriate touching, grabbing, stroking, feeling, [or] kissing" while high church music plays in the background.[355] This trend continues in later seasons without the ironic music, and though there is still something winking about it, the contestants are so earnest in their prayers that it's harder to know how much of it is a joke. Guests pray for various reasons. In the third season, one contestant prays that Lana didn't see her kissing another guest in the night,[356] Nathan Soan Mngomezulu prays to get a reprieve from the rules, and the entire group prays to Lana that Holly Scarfone and Nathan passed her test of chastity, with one contestant saying about Lana: "(s)he's the divine one here, so let's get it."[357]

The show adopts other religious language, as well. Part of Lana's power is that she can send people home at will, though there is little cohesion on who gets to stay, and why (as I will detail later in this chapter). Informing contestants of this twist for the first time, Lana says that two of them must be "sacrificed for the greater good of the group," and sends home a woman whom Lana has "calculated … has the lowest possibility of forming meaningful

[354] Marwick, 25.
[355] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2021. Season 2, Episode 3, "On Est dans la Merde."
[356] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2022. Season 3, Episode 8, "Reaching Rock Bottom," Aired January 19, 2022 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81392322.
[357] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2022. Season 3, Episode 5, "The Summer of '69," Aired January 19, 2022 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81392319.

relationships."[358] Her language here is saturated with algorithmic and religious significance[359] – it's at once incredibly arbitrary and shrouded in technicality. Indeed, it's similar to the jargon of Manifestation TikTok, which also combines opaque, proprietary algorithms and religious language.

In another instance of religious invocation at the end of the second season, fan favorite contestant Francesca Farago says in a direct-to-camera interview: "I'm gonna be the Lana for all my friends, and I'm gonna be preaching these things to them; I'm literally Mother Teresa, and I'm gonna spread my knowledge into the world."[360] This joke, mostly ironic but tinged with earnestness, is one of the most-used on the show, with Desiree especially harping on how contestants become "Lana converts."[361] Even though most of the "successful" couples break up within weeks of the show closing filming, they remain devotees of Netflix, with many tagging the company in their Instagram bio and benefiting from their "conversion" into social media influencers.

Despite this eventual conformity, most of the guests begin by rebelling against Lana and outwardly professing their resentment towards her. This is especially true in later seasons, as contestants gain an understanding of how the economy and gameplay of the retreat works. To follow the rules from the jump will not earn you a place in the finale. Instead, one must show how far they've grown; this often entails initial rule breaks and later acquiescence. The first season sets the stage for this format, which continues across the series. In the second and third seasons, there are two instances of women kissing one another to spite the other contestants and

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[358] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2021. Season 2, Episode 5, "An Offer You Can't Refuse," Aired June 30, 2021 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81392310.
[359] And to some degree, there is a historical overlap in these two categories – what is a covenant or ritual if not an attempt to navigate an input / output scenario: e.g., input: perform religious rite, output: achieve salvation.
[360] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2021. Season 2, Episode 10, "I Did Not See That Coming."
[361] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 6, "The Bryce Isn't Right," Aired April 17, 2020 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81031051

flaunt the rules.[362] Perhaps counterintuitively, this ploy works: Georgia Hassarati (season three)

ends up one of the main characters of the season despite her early rebellion, and as of December

2023 has over one and a half million Instagram followers,[363] making her among the top social

media successes of the cast. Season two's Francesca (our Lana convert) similarly makes waves

by kissing a woman on her season, but nevertheless makes it to the end and currently has over

six million followers.[364]

      Ambivalence towards Lana often tends to linger. Sharron Townsend, for example, notes

in the first season that Lana's messages are bad news "nine times out of ten."[365] He says this

towards the end of the season, after already singing praises about how great the process is a few

episodes earlier. Many of the contestants share Sharron's wariness and are hesitant to believe

that Lana could know better than they about being vulnerable or human. Watching the seasons, I

was struck by how much this was like my own experience of getting on TikTok or embracing a

new technology meant to improve my life. In the same way that we come to accept technological

convenience slowly, so too do the contestants bend to Lana's will.[366] They create stories

detailing how they've changed, which helps them naturalize the process and feel as if they are in

control.

      Contestants also feel more kind towards Lana after she introduces rewards and temporary

reprieves from her strict rules. At about the halfway point in each season, guests are given a

"smart watch" from Lana. As far as I can tell, these wearables have no watch function, and are

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[362] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2022. Season 3, Episode 1, "No Pleasure Island," Aired January 19, 2022 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81392315.
[363] Hassarati, Georgia (@georgiahassarati), *Instagram*. www.instagram.com/georgiahassarati
[364] Farago, Francesca ("frankie" @francescafarago), *Instagram:* https://www.instagram.com/francescafarago/
[365] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 8, "Lust or Bust," Aired April 17, 2020 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81031053.
[366] And I recognize that I'm doing it too, in instinctively wanting to call this "Lana's will," which is admittedly absurd – AI devices don't have wills, and Lana isn't AI, anyway.

instead just bracelets with an LED interface that glows green on the occasion that its wearers are

being rewarded. While the watch is lit up, contestants are not held to the show's standards;

typically, rewarded contestants will remark on the color change and immediately kiss. Sharron

and his love interest, Rhonda Paul, are the first two to earn this reward, in this case because

Sharron "opened up" about his childhood and shared a moment of vulnerability with Rhonda.[367]

In a screenshot from later in the season (fig. 1), we can see the "watch" on Sharron's wrist lit up,

with Desiree remarking: "Looks like Lana, or God, likes what they see."[368]

Figure 1: Sharron's green watch rewards chastity and emotional growth

[367] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 4, "Two's Company, Three's… A Threesome" Aired April 17, 2020 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81031049.
[368] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 8, "Lust or Bust."

Figure 2: Lana waits to be activated

In both this example and the one with which I opened the chapter (fig. 2, above –

"...divine intervention, or a plastic cone"), the "or" is doing a lot of heavy lifting. "A plastic

cone" becomes what we get in place of actual "divine intervention"; in saying "Lana *or* God

liking what they see" (emphasis mine) after episodes upon episodes of reminding us that Lana is

the one ruling over the retreat, the "or" becomes moot: Lana is our god.

Crucially for reality television, both of these scenes are legible *as* scenes – that is to say:

digestible, meme-able bites of content that offer cheap laughs and thoughtless reactions. As I've

discussed, contestants recognize this format, making it easy for them to recreate it as they craft

their larger personal narrative. As with the TikTokers LARPing their belief in manifestation,[369]

successful *THTH* contestants similarly flaunt their devotion to Lana and her rules. And it is

performative, aside from the fact that such a performance is for viewers' consumption, in that all

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[369] LARPing as in "live-action role playing." For more on LARPing online, see Walleston, Aimee. "Make a Wish." *Real Life Magazine,* 20 December 2021. https://reallifemag.com/make-a-wish/

contestants are able to do on the show is create scenes – they are unable to control the means of

production of the show or exert agency otherwise. However, within the scope of the show's

premise, contestants across all seasons have the opportunity to earn back lost money by

demonstrating their devotion to the "process." Devotion in this sense is different than what we

might think of in a more traditionally religious sense – whereas Christians or members of

institutionalized religions have rituals and liturgy, or even *Mrs Dalloway*'s Clarissa has her

practices of maintaining her social network,[370] devotion on *THTH* is proven by contestants

talking about the intensity of their feelings and narrating their own growth. On the show,

devotion is equivalent to communication and the circulation of stories. One *must* be open and

vulnerable.

Additionally, devoted contestants read Lana's reactions as reflective of their own

personalities and relationships, such as when season two's Carly Lawrence and Chase DeMoor

go on a date and fail to get a green light as anticipated. Chase tells Carly that Lana should have

given them a reprieve from the rules, Carly disagrees, and Chase acquiesces, agreeing that Lana

must have seen something that they missed; the two part ways.[371] Far from simply "reading" the

interactions, Lana's presence shapes and forecloses contestants' actions. Though fake, Lana's

presence is very much real, endowed with a divine quality.

4.2 Voice, stories, and Netflix cosmopolitanism

It matters that Lana is a personal assistant who operates via voice. Similar to a Siri or an

Alexa, we recognize Lana as a category of device we often use, and likely often use

unquestioningly, due to these devices' sonic nature: "These products promise users a seamless,

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[370] See Panken, Shirley.
[371] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2021. Season 2, Episode 6, "Give Up The Chase," Aired June 30, 2021 on Netflix.
https://www.netflix.com/watch/81392311.

integrated way to access digital spaces. They are selling (and creating) futures where the internet

is no longer merely at your fingertips, but an immersive – and vocal – experience."[372] Lana's

ability to provide this immersion is important; she can interrupt, and her tri-tone "wake up" cue

is often met with groans or excitement from the contestants.

Voice is not a neutral media, although we often think of it as such. Indeed, as Amanda

Weidman writes on the "metaphorization of voice," our assumption "is that the speaking subject

is the ground of subjectivity and the source of agency."[373] Weidman contends that "the voice is

fetishized, made to stand as an authentic source apart from the social relations that have

produced it."[374] When "voice" is used synonymously with "agency" or "choice",[375] it's easy to

conflate voice and consciousness itself. Weidman discusses the history of such thinking, tying it

to issues of representation and social justice. Citing Mrinhalini Sinha, Weidman notes

> *the problematic nature of the project of 'allowing women's voices to be heard' as an*
> *antidote to male-dominated histories and historiography. The desire for a 'pure' feminist*
> *consciousness, [Sinha] writes, 'serves, in the end, to remove the feminist subject from the*
> *history of her production within interconnected axes of gender, race, class/caste, nation,*
> *or sexuality.'* [376]

Although Lana has a "body," her sleek, reminiscent-of-other-devices form doesn't call

attention to the material processes that would create such a device – in part because Lana as AI

doesn't actually exist, and in part because we as consumers know so little about the material

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[372] Kim, Levin. "A New AI Lexicon: Voice." AI Now Institute, *Medium,* 10 December 2021: https://medium.com/a-new-ai-lexicon/a-new-ai-lexicon-voice-e01c7b7fcb1a

[373] Weidman, Amanda. *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India.* Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2006: 11.

[374] Ibid.

[375] See Eidsheim, Nina Sun, and Katherine Meizel (eds.). "Introduction: Voice Studies Now," in *The Oxford Handbook of Voice Studies.* Oxford University Press: 2019: xxviii Regarding the Latin "vote," the authors write: "Voice as it is made to stand in for a given meaning is regarded in terms of that meaning only, and thus the very concept of voice becomes identified with that meaning and is erroneously made to 'evidence' it. As John Shepherd and Peter Wicke have noted about timbre, voice offers a 'sonic saddle' upon which the listener is invited to ride in order to define a given meaning... For example, voice is depended upon to signal a category such as gender." … "As a result, voice is subsumed within the meaning-function it is pulled into. In this way, voice qua voice is often ignored. For example, a voice that is coded as "feminine" is made to reflect the feminine dimension of a person."

[376] Weidman, Amanda J., 11.

processes that go into creating similar smart technologies. This section considers how Lana's capacity as a voice agent is meant to install her in the retreat and on the show as a sort of pure AI consciousness. The audience and contestants understanding her as such allows us to look past the fact that she is a produced object, a character. Lana's aurality strengthens the spiritual affect of *THTH*: she is "pure" consciousness and thus somehow boundless, able to understand contestants better than they themselves. Lana then sells contestants back this improved version of themselves, which they then sell to viewers via Netflix-sanctioned social media accounts and other reality shows. However, as I will detail in the next section, this process stresses transparency and openness (or narratives of recognition, to use Banet-Weiser's term) from contestants, and such a degree of self-disclosure can be extremely damaging.

This is another example of Ilouz's specialized emotional culture, which harkens back to Freud's talking cure and yet another instance in which a disembodied voice (in this case, the psychoanalyst) is taken as an expert. As Ilouz traces it, therapy and feminism have transformed relationships "into cognitive objects that can be compared with each other and are susceptible to cost-benefit analysis,"[377] and this has been accompanied by

> *an intensely subjectivist way of legitimating one's sentiments. For the bearer of an emotion is recognized as the ultimate arbiter of their own feelings. 'I feel that…' implies not only that one has the right to feel that way, but also that such right entitles one to be accepted and recognized simply by virtue of feeling a certain way. To say 'I feel hurt' allows little discussion and in fact demands immediate recognition of that hurt.[378]*

I trace this proliferation of "therapy speak" for a few reasons. First and foremost, I see this "legitimating [of] one's own sentiments" extending into social media and the performance of one's self online, both in terms of professed beliefs and in self-narration more broadly. Just as the individual has come to be seen as "the ultimate arbiter of their own feelings," so too has the

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377 Ilouz, 36.
[378] Ilouz, 39.

would-be believer come to be seen as the ultimate arbiter of their devotion. This is because professing religious belief no longer relies on ritual or action, but on feeling and the narration of one's belief. It is worth revisiting Charles Taylor's secularism here, in which religion is not only an individual choice, but one affixed to a narrative of self development.[379] An individual thus becomes the authority on how "authentic"[380] their belief is, and who are we to judge? One can say that they are Lana disciples and mean it half-ironically, perhaps, but it is impossible to arbitrate how ironic they're being. Put otherwise: it almost does not matter whether or not someone is being sincere, as their right to claim sincerity allows little room for disagreement.

Such subjectivity is heightened by the emphasis on voice throughout the show. As discussed, Lana is the fantasy of pure subjectivity, but contestants also remark on voice, noting each others' accents or regional slang, and similarly think of voice as representing identity. Early in the show, American contestant Rhonda Paul says that she hopes that British contestant David Birtwistle's accent will "rub off on" her (he, predictably, makes a lewd, off-camera comment about how attractive having an English accent is to Americans).[381] And by the end of the season, American contestants are referring to their British and French counterparts as their "mates,"[382] for example. Indeed, Netflix stresses how multicultural the cast is; contestants are mainly from the US, UK, Ireland, and Australia, but also from France, Netherlands, Peru, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. Distance is a major obstacle for developing couples such as season four's Kayla Richart and Sebastian "Seb" Melrose, and they prove their devotion to the process and each other by vowing to make their relationship work despite living in Los Angeles and

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[379] Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007: 486, emphasis mine.
[380] Taylor, 299.
[381] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 1, "Love, Sex or Money."
[382] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2021. Season 2, Episode 10, "I Did Not See That Coming."

Scotland, respectively.[383] Contestants' slang infects Lana, as well. At the end of season two she

reflects: "I have been forced to add the words 'crab grab' and 'handy' to my memory bank."[384]

Lana's remark is meant to be playful, but it is reflective of Netflix's larger goals of "imagin[ing]

globality," as Evan Elkins puts it in an article on Netflix and Spotify:

> *In touting their internationally-focused engagement with diversity, Netflix and Spotify*
> *routinely invoke their sophisticated computational systems as paths toward greater*
> *human understanding. Broadly, then, they promote a positive, humanistic vision of*
> *algorithmic culture, or the 'enfolding of human thought, conduct, organization and*
> *expression into the logic of big data and large-scale computation.'[385]*

Lana is the representation of Netflix's massive computing power, and, as Elkins argues,

allows Netflix to represent themselves as "a steward of a benevolent form of globalization

characterized by liberal-cosmopolitan ideals of international connection."[386] This brings me to

the final reason I mention therapeutic and self-centered language, as I see corporations also

adopting these ideas to further their economic interests. Netflix employees further this idea as

well: a January 2023 *New Yorker* profile of Bela Bajaria, Netflix's global head of television,

quotes Netflix executives as saying that the company has a reputation for "saying yes in a town

that's built to say no," and that "when cultivating relationships with new countries," one VP

"promises that Netflix will foster both economic growth and 'a deeper affinity for their culture

around the world.'"[387] Because connection, like faith and belief, are values we hold to be outside

of the realm of capital,[388] Netflix is able to "promot[e] their global ambitions as humanistic

projects rather than economic ones"[389] in stressing the personal growth that occurs on the show.

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[383] The two have since broken up.
[384] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2021. Season 2, Episode 10, "I Did Not See That Coming."
[385] Elkins, Evan. "Algorithmic cosmopolitanism: on the global claims of digital entertainment platforms." *Critical Studies In Media Communication,* 2019 (Vol. 36, No. 4): 384.
[386] Elkins, 377.
[387]Syme, Rachel. "How Much More Netflix Can the World Absorb?" The New Yorker, (16 Jan 2023 issue), 9 January 2023.
388 Banet-Weiser, 378.
389 Ibid.

But of course, this show does not exist separately from its market value, nor does its focus on developing personal narratives. Instead, the guests' insistence on their devotion to the process simply serves to naturalize the relationship between spiritual and economic growth.

Again, this is not unique to *THTH*, as major media and social media platforms advance this thinking further. For example, Netflix's "About" page underscores the value of vulnerability by stressing the importance of connection and communication: "Stories move us. They make us feel more emotion, see new perspectives, and bring us closer to each other."[390] But what is a story, exactly? In promoting the importance of "stories" without clearly defining the scale or specifics of the term, Netflix is able to conflate the global and the personal, collapsing the distance between the two and presenting them as fundamentally intertwined. For example, Netflix's first diversity initiative report, released in 2021, starts with the author, Vice President of Inclusion Strategy Vernā Myers, recounting her experience learning of Dr. Martin Luther King Jrs' assassination and seeing her father cry for the first time, informing readers that working on Netflix diversity initiatives is "liv[ing] King's dream," as she "joined forces with a company that had so much influence on which stories get told and by who."[391] Although Netflix doesn't clearly define how it's using "stories," I want to suggest that this term is used similarly to "voice," as in "subjectivity" and "self-narration." It isn't only that contestants on *THTH* are encouraged to disclose their personal traumas; corporate documents such as those authored by Myers often encourage employees to narrate their privilege and marginalization as well. To refer back to the Banet-Weiser quote from earlier in this chapter, we want to believe that even our jobs and media consumption habits are "outside of mere consumer culture" and that what we spend so

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390 "About Netflix." Netflix. https://about.netflix.com/en
391 Myers, Vernā. "Inclusion Takes Root at Netflix: Our First Report." *Netflix,* January 13, 2021. https://about.netflix.com/en/news/netflix-inclusion-report-2021

much of our time on demonstrates our authenticity or is "driven by genuine affect and emotions."[392]

Even further, this isn't unique to Netflix. Similarly, the Instagram "About" page[393] reads: "Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together."[394] Scrolling down, the sub-heading "Community" tagline is "We're commited [sic] to fostering a safe and supportive community for everyone," and following the link to the "Community" page delivers information on anti-bullying campaigns and a collection of instructional "programs"[395] designed to convince users that the platform can be used for good ("Instagram fosters communities of support").[396] While Instagram is not affiliated with Netflix or with Lana, the social media platform has an outsized influence on the show; gaining Instagram followers is the whole point, and none of the contestants would be going on *THTH* – at least not after the first season – without the promise of Instagram followers and a future influencing career.

TikTok, for what it's worth, is less abstract, sentimental in its mission: "TikTok is the leading destination for short-form mobile video. Our mission is to inspire creativity and bring joy."[397] (Of course, as late as March 2023, a banner ran across the page, reading: "How TikTok is supporting our community through COVID-19," so the emphasis on community persisted here, too). Across these platforms, we're being told that our narrativizing matters and creates entire communities, worlds. But what we're really engaging in is nothing more than media consumption; there is this idea that such consumption and content production is mystical, but it's

[392] Banet-Weiser, 5.
[393] All of this as of March 2024.
[394] "Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." *Instagram.* https://about.instagram.com/
[395] "Instagram Community | A Safe & Supportive Experience." *Instagram.* https://about.instagram.com/community
[396] "Instagram Community Programs | About Instagram." *Instagram.* https://about.instagram.com/community/programs
[397] "About TikTok." *TikTok.* https://www.tiktok.com/about?lang=en

rather that we're seeking enchantment, and that enchantment can only be mediated through these corporate systems.

As with *THTH*'s half-irony, there is also cognitive dissonance when it comes to social media usage more broadly. While TikTok and Netflix and Instagram can all claim to be fostering community and creating social good, many if not most of us know this cannot be entirely true. Indeed, most Americans distrust social media companies, with over 70% of respondents to a recent Pew Research study saying that they wouldn't trust social media to admit mistakes or protect users' data.[398] Yet anecdotally, I can affirm that this doesn't prevent people from using social media or believing that there is some social good created in their promotions, whether of themselves or their products.

There are several examples of this, and I will only mention two. First, *THTH* season one's Harry Jowsey, one of the few male contestants to have over a million Instagram followers,[399] uses his social media to promote his candle brand, aptly named The Ritual, which is "dedicated to promoting mental health and empowering individuals to cultivate positive daily rituals that enhance their lives and mindset."[400] Indeed, a recent Instagram post from the company notes that Jowsey founded the company "because he realized the importance of awakening the senses and using them as an anchor for personal goals and manifestations. Starting with candles, people can light them during their rituals and write down goals, manifestations, and gratitude."[401] Or there is season two's Chloe Veitch, who often posts partnerships with Netflix, Buzzfeed, Smart Water, and various fast fashion clothing brands. A

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[398] Faverio, Michelle. "Key findings about Americans and data privacy." *Pew Research Center,* October 18, 2023: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/18/key-findings-about-americans-and-data-privacy
[399] Jowsey, Harry (@harryjowsey), *Instagram.* https://www.instagram.com/harryjowsey/
[400] "About Us." *The Ritual.* https://theritualonline.com/pages/about-us
[401] The Ritual (@theritual). "We're so proud of Ritual founder @harryjowsey for his amazing journey on @dancingwiththestars !!" *Instagram* reel, November 22, 2023. https://www.instagram.com/theritual/reel/Cz9Mg2wRQqo/

post from March 2023 features Veitch modeling, alone in the frame, with a long caption

detailing how she ate lunch alone in her teenage years, continuing: "God has a plan. [rose emoji]

you are not weird. You are not strange. You are enough. You are unique.. you are one-of-a-kind.

Let's be weird and wonderful together. [eyes welled up with tears emoji]."[402] The idea here is

that Veitch's success is deserved and that there is something preordained about it; further, it isn't

just for her benefit that she has two million Instagram followers, but now she can be a beacon of

hope for other girls. Commenters affirm this, calling Veitch "inspiring."

We can recognize all of this as marketing – it isn't particularly slick or clever. Yet

whether or not people actually believe that the contestants, Netflix, and *THTH* are doing good is

almost incidental. Contestants need only to pretend to believe in order to advance in the show,

and Netflix viewers can feel more comfortable about their consumption of this mindless show

because of its professed message of self-improvement. Similarly, Netflix can use its own

emphasis on "stories" and humanist globalization to further its corporate cosmopolitanism,

whether or not employees truly believe that this is the company's mission. In framing connection

and communication as the highest good – similar to Woolf's Dr Holmes – Netflix is able to

expand its reach, and use invocations of spirituality to do so.

4.3 Personal journeys as mediated through workshops

In addition to Lana's watchful gaze, another constant of *THTH* is its emphasis on journey

and workshops, most of which draw from New Age practices, and most of which are imbued

with a deep if unstable sense of irony. If Lana is *THTH*'s god, these behavior-correcting

workshops meant to "aid the contestants in their personal growth" are its primary ritual. The

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[402] Veitch, Chloe (@chloeveitchofficial). "If you would've told 13 year old m…" *Instagram* post, March 1, 2023. https://www.instagram.com/p/CpQnfq6vUKS/

show's workshops fulfill the same function as competitions or challenges do on other reality series. *THTH* is, of course, not billed as a competition show in the same way that network giants *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, or *The Amazing Race* are, but perhaps it should be. Prize money aside, the structure of the show lends itself to the same self-constructed narrative arcs that these other shows often have – contestants are meant to signal their growth and charm the viewers in the direct-to-camera interviews, and in this way they have the opportunity to become fan favorites and gain fame. The competitive arena of *THTH* is an emotional one.

Specifically, contestants are meant to demonstrate growth through a commitment to vulnerability, and namely vulnerability in sharing stories and narratives explaining why they've come to lead a life governed by casual sex. Such a focus is not unlike the ethos of "openness and transparency" that dominates Silicon Valley. Openness and transparency, far from liberating the contestant and consumer, rather leads to the commodification of everyday living, allowing "private experiences… [to be] quantified and become data points within privately owned systems."[403]

This is what we are witnessing when Sharron and season four's Jawahir Khalifa are pressured to narrativize their personal traumas, and it is persuasive for viewers because social media and fame has been endowed with this quasi-mystical quality, in which companies stress the importance of connection, community, and narrative, all of which are intangible[404] but highly emotional. Sharron and Jawahir are pressured into openness, and the presumed reward is self-transformation, the dissolution of their old selves. The idea of openness here is similar to what we imagine a mystic experience to be – removing the mediation and becoming one with a divine presence – in this case there is no divine to align with, only one's imagined self. This happens on

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[403] Thatcher et al, 995.
[404] Banet-Weiser, 8.

both the producer and consumer side, I argue, with contestants on *THTH* seeking to craft

compelling narratives and viewers finding meaning and connection in the contestants'

relatability.

These narratives of openness exist to create micro-celebrity: "a self-presentation strategy

that includes creating a persona, sharing personal information about oneself, constructing

intimate connections to create the illusion of friendship or closeness, acknowledging an audience

and identifying them as fans, and strategically revealing information to increase or maintain this

audience."[405] Micro-celebrity is perhaps synonymous with self-branding, which is the norm on

THTH. For example, many of the contestants are tattooed, and often share brief and well-

rehearsed narratives of the body meanings behind their body modifications. One contestant from

the first season notes that he has a lion because he, too, is brave.[406] Others have catch-phrases or

recurring jokes or themes. This strategy is crucial for forming the show's "scenes," such as the

one discussed at the opening of this chapter. Interestingly enough, that scene is one wherein the

contestants demand openness from one another, do not get it, and then Lana as an all-knowing

device reveals the truth, as she has a policy of transparency (when it comes to the guests'

information – indeed, she remains a black box to us in regards to her own workings). Because

THTH is a competition show with openness as its driving principle, guests who are unwilling to

be "open" are said to not be trying, and this is used to discredit them; as a result, contestants

often share incredibly intimate details of their lives, occasionally appearing apprehensive to do

so. For example, Sharron is reluctant to disclose that he was homeless as a child and suffered

from depression after being cheated on,[407] and much of season four centers on Jawahir's

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[405] Marwick, 166.
[406] *Too Hot to Handle.* 2020. Season 1, Episode 8, "Lust or Bust."
[407] *Too Hot to Handle.* Season 1, Episode 3, "Revenge is a Dish Best Served Hot."

adoption trauma.[408] In both instances and others on the show, openness and narrativizing one's

past functions as a social capital, but it also serves to alienate or other people who have already

suffered. Because the mystical affect I have discussed throughout this dissertation and chapter

results from this feeling of connectedness that comes from sharing one's story, the spirituality

being pushed is that we are all just pure consciousness and can connect on a deep level. Yet this

is harmful, as it elides the material conditions that lead to the contestants' suffering in the first

place.

Lana is meant to be a device that promotes openness and transparency, but no

transparency is demanded of her or of Netflix, and the company benefits from this unidirectional

and permanent imperative of self-narration. There is no way for contestants to walk back from

their disclosures, save from leaving the show and deleting their social media accounts, which

would then render their original over-sharing useless. And even so, due to editing and the

possibility that contestants will be cut out of the show by production, the contestants don't have

the guarantee of getting anything in return for their vulnerability, so in that sense, vulnerability

and openness is framed as a good in and of itself. This is why economics is important, as we get

to see how the contestants navigate what reviewers have called a tragedy of the commons

situation.[409] Once one person breaks the rules and loses prize money for the group, many others

follow suit. Others take the opposite approach, like season one's Matthew Stephen Smith (often

referred to as "Jesus" due to his long hair), who notes that he's on "Team Lana" because the

contestants are in a collective situation in which the needs of the group outweigh that of an

individual.[410] In making these economic analyses, guests must choose what they reveal to the

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[408] *Too Hot to Handle.* Season 4, Episode 8, "It's Raining Love Triangles." Aired December 14, 2022 on Netflix.
https://www.netflix.com/watch/81507134.
[409] Berman, n.p.
[410] *Too Hot to Handle.* Season 1, Episode 2, "When Harry Met Francesca."

audience in service of their future career as a public figure – a career that is predicated on this devotion to openness. Because disclosing one's trauma or secrets is more or less permanent and unidirectional, contestants have to speculate on whether or not it will be worth it. Of course, this is how all reality television goes, but that *THTH* is "mediated" by an "AI" *and* proliferating these narratives of transformation far outside of the show itself makes it a model of algorithmic divination, and one worth taking seriously.

As with the Manifestation TikTok, *THTH*'s project is dependent on the narrative splitting of oneself into seeing and acting subject and future, transformed object. Guests frequently talk about who they were before getting to the retreat, and how they are made new by Lana. Sharron epitomizes this split well, opining (somewhat crassly) to his fellow male contestants: "I was gonna do myself and herself a disservice by me fucking her. That's what I'm used to doing at home… I don't want to stop our growth and my growth as a person… the guy that's standing in front of you guys in the new Sharron that I'm becoming, and I like him."[411]

On one hand, *THTH* is letting us in on this image development, and this is largely the allure of the show. Notably, the contestants cannot just decide to change; rather, they need Lana as their mediating guide, not only because that is the conceit of the show, but because her supposed artificial intelligence makes her trustworthy and helpful, as well as affords her a critical distance from which to assess the contestants' humanity. Put otherwise, Lana assists retreat guests in their "colonization of the future"[412] – that is, contestants' goals of shaping their future, brandable selves for profit or clout. This matters because the contestants' narration is the only thing they have any control over. While at the retreat, their agency is extremely limited, as

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[411] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 5, "Boys to Men." Aired April 17, 2020 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81031050
[412] Swan, Elaine. *Worked Up Selves: Personal Development Workers, Self-Work and Therapeutic Cultures*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010: 161, cited in Coleman, 8.

"Lana" is presumed to be the one in charge of dates, who goes home and thus who wins the prize money, et cetera. As such, there is an imperative to self-brand, as that's all one *can* do in the situation, and the only way to exert any control.

4.3.1 "Boys to Men," "Yoni Live Once," and gender

Contestants' self-branding is in part dependent on their gender. Because this is a dating show, and one extremely heteronormative at that, men and women are often divided in their workshops. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the men are much more skeptical of their workshops, which, as noted, center on vulnerability. We the audience are similarly expected to be wary of the "process," though, as with the contestants, we are expected to change our minds as the workshop and series unfold.

One illustrative example: in the first season, during an episode titled "Boys to Men," the men get together with a workshop leader named Deva, referred to as "the heart warrior." Tasked (by Lana, we are told) with getting the men to "clean up their act" and become more emotionally mature, Deva has devised a plan. Deva earnestly refers to women as "females," and Desiree comments on this ironically, joking that the "females" in the retreat will refrain from "spraying their hormones" around.[413] We are thus immediately primed to distrust Deva and whatever expertise he claims to have, as Desiree is our proxy viewer and instructs us on how to feel about the show. Next, Deva instructs the men to cover one another in thick mud. The men start apprehensively, as ironic music plays in the background. One man notes that he "won't be able to show (his) face after this." Others similarly giggle, but soon they are all covered. Deva then encourages his fellow "heart warriors" to do a shared, primal scream, and after gives them each a canvas on which they "can write one or two or three words that represents (sic) that very thing

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[413] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 5, "Boys to Men."

that has been holding you back," adding, "[t]ry not to think too much." Desiree quickly quips: "way ahead of you, Deva."[414]

The men paint words like "manipulative," "controlling," or "player" on their canvases. They then share with the group, and after, Deva gives them each a staff, with which they destroy "this objectified non-truth." This language is constitutive of the larger journey narrative: one is expected to uncover his flaws, name them, share them, and eradicate them. Although operating under the guise of openness and emotional intimacy, there is something deeply moralizing and quasi-religious about the way *THTH* stresses the ritual of narrativizing one's life. Finally, in a truly hilarious scene, the men (and Deva, for some reason!) all run down to the beach and jump in the ocean, washing away the mud and – one might say – their sin and shame. Though very funny and consciously so, the show has dropped its ironic music in favor of an earnest, swelling background track as the men splash in synchronization with each other, united in their newfound vulnerability.

It's also telling that the women – excluded for the duration of the workshop – are ushered to a cliff overlooking the beach to watch the men's baptismal frolicking. The women laugh as Desiree jokes to the viewers about objectifying the men (perhaps ironic, given her snarky comment about Deva only minutes before). In allowing the women to enter at the end, the message is clear: this is somehow for them. After all, that is the conceit of the show, albeit a paradoxical one: the individual narratives that are pushed and created over the course of the season comprise the larger metanarrative, which stresses the importance of the larger, healthier social body that is produced from the individuals all changing. The message is that embracing a healthy masculinity and enacting the changes suggested by a data-collecting cone can create

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[414] Ibid.

spiritual enlightenment, economic prosperity, and influence – this intractable network, far from being progressive, is actually extremely limiting.

Women aren't exempt from regressive ideas about gender either, even if they weren't present to hear Deva call them "females." Indeed, just as every season has an episode with a men-only workshop, so too are the women subjected to one, and specifically one focused on embodiment or – more often than not – a specific body part. This is the case in the women's episode on season three: "Yoni Live Once."[415] In this season's all-girl workshop, each of the women stand in partitioned-off sections complete with a hand mirror. The workshop leader, Shan Boodram, instructs the women to drop their bikini bottoms, pick up the mirror, and examine their "yonis," the thing which "connects us here today, the thing that without it humanity would not exist at all." Notably, most of the women quickly adopt Boodram's attitude, sharing their personal experiences with having their appearance criticized. Whereas the men talk about how they have acted, the women tend to discuss how they've been treated poorly and the various ways in which this mistreatment has been their own fault. In both gendered instances, the message is nearly the same, though inflected differently: casual sex is bad, respect your body, and this will help purify your soul and make you more vulnerable.

Perhaps stranger than the fact of this season three women's workshop is that it is replicated in the fourth season for the men. Identical in title, the men's "yoni puja" is also run by Boodram, who gives each man a colorful, Y-shaped puppet. Predictably, all of the men treat this like a joke, goofing around and laughing at the absurdity of being asked to consider these toys as stand-ins for female anatomy. Boodram reprimands them: "let me remind you that this was so you could learn to respect women... Do you think that you truly respected this workshop?" It's

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[415] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2022. Season 3, Episode 7, "Yoni Live Once." Aired January 19, 2022 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81392321.

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manipulative: of course they don't take it seriously; she has given them comical dolls! Boodram asks one of the men where he's from, and after he responds "Dallas," she corrects him: "no you're wrong; you're from the yoni. This is your first home."[416] The camera cuts to a fan-favorite contestant looking incredulously at his puppet, and most of the men end the workshop talking about how this has made them respect women. It's worth briefly noting that yoni puja is described in the show as a sacred, tantric ritual,[417] but *THTH* has also reduced it to a punchline, just as "a vague concept of India served during the 19th century and early 20th century as a kind of Whitman-inspired metaphor of the soul itself, appealing to 'that sublime spirit that was lost in the throes of capitalism.'"[418]

Production's insistence on incorporating these orientalizing rituals fits with Netflix's larger, global goals. It is ironic, of course, that a television show churning out influencers would seek to present itself as spiritual (or sublime) and thus existing outside of capitalism. One cannot but wonder if this is also a corporate attempt at increasing diversity and diverse "stories," albeit an attempt that reads more appropriative than appreciative, especially given the ironic tone struck in the workshop.

The Madonna-whore complex theme is continued a few episodes later during the women's "womb workshop," in which intimacy coach Matilda Carroll[419] tells the women that they "actually absorb men's DNA [and trauma] into [their] yonis" as the women look horrified, and then directs the female contestants to conduct an abdominal self-massage to clear that

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[416] *Too Hot to Handle.* Season 4, Episode 6, "Puppets for Playas." Aired December 14, 2022 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81507132.
[417] "Yoni." Britannica Academic, Encyclopædia Britannica, 24 Dec. 2014. academic-eb-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/levels/collegiate/article/yoni/78006. Accessed 22 Jan. 2024.
[418] Banet- Weiser, 189.
[419] Whyte, Melanie. "Can You Absorb DNA Through Sex? We Fact-Checked the 'Too Hot to Handle' Womb Workshop." *Popsugar,* 18 December 2022: https://www.popsugar.com/love/does-womb-store-dna-from-sex-49043291

energy. It's practically a born-again virgin ritual, as the women all return to their partners and inform them that they will not be having casual sex ever again.[420]

As has been found in other studies of reality television and gender,[421] the focus on the women – though promoted as empowering and liberating – serves men and reinforces patriarchal notions about how women should act. To oversimplify the issue: it isn't as if the women complete this workshop and emerge with entirely new ideas about gender dynamics or their roles on the show. Indeed, the women still seem to have some obligation, whether social or contractual, to wear thong bikinis every day, and it seems to matter that they keep pure *because* their yonis are where life originates – they're going to be mothers one day, so they need to act like one. The men and women's respective workshops operate relationally, "promulgat[ing] unidimensional and limiting images of how to 'do' gender for both men and women, but these differences in rationale ultimately imbue men with agency and power that is not equally applied to women."[422] On *THTH,* there is something simultaneously progressive and regressive in the women being so insistent on their desires for sex,[423] given that it is still nearly always the man who asks, at the end, if the woman will enter into a committed relationship. The women often kiss one another as a rule-break, as well, and this is not shocking, whereas it would certainly be controversial if two men kissed. Further, there is something extremely sexless about the show, despite that presumably being the premise. Just as two women might decide to kiss to break the rules,[424] other rule breaks often feel contrived and almost-sterile, as if the contestants are not actually attracted to each other and instead are performing hypersexuality. Moreover, the prize

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[420] *Too Hot to Handle.* 2022. Season 3, Episode 7, "Yoni Live Once."
[421] See, for example, Davis, Alexander K., Laura E. Rogers, Bethany Bryson. "Own It! Constructions of Masculinity and Heterosexuality on Reality Makeover Television." *Cultural Sociology,* 2014 (Vol. 8(3)).
[422] Davis et al, 269.
[423] In season four there is a peculiar phenomenon of the women really referring to themselves as "players" often, which is a kinder, more masculine term than more feminized terms such as "slut" or "whore."
[424] *Too Hot to Handle.* 2020. Season 1, Episode 2, "When Harry Met Francesca."

money winners have always been either a man (in a relationship) or a couple. Women have journeys of their own, but women who are empowered in their single-ness (such as two women on season four who were being led on by the same man, and ultimately decided to focus on their own friendship[425]) are not rewarded. Although the show stresses narratives of transformation, the options for acceptable narratives are quite limited; sex sells, and one must be willing to play the game as delineated by the producers, or "Lana," or Netflix. Ultimately, the show serves to reinforce heterosexual ideals and present contestants as being useful only in economic and heteronormative relation to one another: people only kiss to advance the plot of the show or their own narrative as a member of a heterosexual relationship.

4.3.2 "Growth is a Team Game"

The final genre of workshop teaches the men and women how to interact with each other and is also often quite similar in content to the separate workshops. One illustrative example from season three shows how *THTH* producers are aware of how ridiculous the show is. Lana pairs up the contestants and then (*THTH* mainstay) Brenden Durell leads them in a "tantra" workshop, walking them through a series of coupled poses. These positions, of course, are sexual in nature, and couples begin the workshop laughing at the absurdity of pretending that they aren't aroused. As with the men's yoni puja workshop, we can recognize the silliness in this, but Brenden prods the guests: "if you want to giggle, try to keep it to a minimum."[426]

Although the contestants initially respond quite differently to Lana's rules, with some acting out and others taking them seriously from the jump, the only ones that make it all the way to the end are those that eventually conform. Lana's "artificial intelligence" demands earnest

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[425] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2022. Season 4, Episode 10, "Growth is a Team Game." Aired December 14, 2022 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81507136.
[426] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2022. Season 3, Episode 2, "The Midnight Train to Georgia."

effort and the performance of change. This is why the workshops are so important; they let us in on the image formation. The conceit of these workshops is that it's good to externalize one's internal struggles, so that Lana's watchful, data-collecting gaze can aptly evaluate growth and whether or not one is truly genuine. In the workshops and the show as a whole, a lot of this is winking. Because surely, it's silly to be praying to a plastic cone; it's silly to be in a workshop in which you're canoodling with near strangers or screaming at will. And even, I think, it must be silly to perform hypersexuality to such a degree that even the prospect of losing out on thousands of dollars for a kiss with a stranger doesn't truly deter one from acting on their impulses.

But this is a show that takes seriously its silliness, and beneath the veneer of giggles, slang, and cheap jokes is a quasi-mystical earnestness. Sure, we're supposed to laugh at the silliness of the yoni workshop, as the women involved do – in fact, in all of these workshops, the contestants start off laughing, but the respective workshop facilitators tamp that down quickly. But after we're done laughing, we're meant to reflect, as the participants do, and their evident effort is supposed to resonate with us. Regardless of how the contestants actually feel, they have incentive to perform as if they are really invested in "the process," so that they may first, win the money, and second, gain a large following after the show is aired, which is really the main motivation for going on the show.

In each season's final episode, there is at least one moment in which the spiritual is alluded to directly. In season two, Lana tells the contestants that they're going to have a "spiritual rebirth" in their final workshop — each contestant writes three words "that [symbolize] something that [they] will release" on a wood and bead necklace, then they each share their story with the group and discard the necklace.[427] Again, this is the intangible being made concrete, so

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[427] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2021. Season 2, Episode 10, "I Did Not See That Coming."

that it can be narrated and thus discarded. After a similar final workshop in the third season, two female contestants walk past a mirror and giddily remark to each other that they're looking at "new women."[428] It's that transformation that is rewarded by Lana. Contestants who are puritanical from the start never win; instead, those who have broken the most rules and have repented the most for their transgressions walk away with the prize money. It's an emotional rags to riches story. Lana makes this explicit, extolling: "just following my rules isn't enough to win. The winner is the one who has shown the most personal growth."[429]

Ultimately, Lana's "product" (wisdom and guidance) is represented as something that can be commodified and mass-produced, not only because her instructions are shallow platitudes, but because, as mentioned, early in the show she is revealed to be from a factory in China. Lana herself is a mass-produced object, and one imported, no less, despite her strange British accent. Her mystique is bound up in this never-again-mentioned origin story; Lana is not tied to any set of stable values, and we are able to project our spiritual hopes for salvation onto her and her opacity.

Despite the contestants' sex positivity and initial rule breaks, the show is deeply invested in its own intense moralizing and puritanism. When Holly and Nathan break the rules and have sex after other repeated infractions in season three, she tearfully admits in a direct-to-camera interview: "I want to be a good person, and I want to be a good person to the group."[430] For what it's worth, Nathan does not share the same regret, and Lana kicks him out of the group. He then goes on a redemptive journey of sorts (Desiree refers to it as "our first *Too Hot to Handle* vision quest"), as Lana gives him a chance to prove his devotion to the process by undergoing an

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[428] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2022. Season 3, Episode 10, "Out With A Bang." Aired January 19, 2021 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81439540.
[429] Ibid.
[430] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2022. Season 3, Episode 8, "Reaching Rock Bottom."

intense, one-on-one workshop with "Mentor, Speaker, and Cacao Ceremonialist"[431] Brenden

Durell. Nathan complies, and, heading to a cliff overlooking the sea, meets Brenden, who comes

equipped with shells (Nathan labels these shells with his emotions and then throws them into the

ocean) and puppets resembling Nathan and Holly. Brenden coaches Nathan on ways he could

connect with Holly emotionally, encouraging him to place "puppet Nathan's head" on "puppet

Holly's chest." "Boom," says Brenden, "intimacy without sex." Nathan laughs, perhaps aware of

how absurd this will come across to the audience, but also maintains his position, holding the

puppets in cuddling position for the duration of his conversation with Brenden.[432]

As with Desiree's snark on Deva, Netflix has acknowledged the humor of this scene, posting

screenshots on their official Twitter account captioned "Too Hot to Handle is the only show on

television where you will see someone seek advice from a wizard to learn how to be less

horny."[433] (fig 3).

[431] "About." *Brenden Durell.* https://brendendurell.com/about/

[432] *Too Hot to Handle.* 2022. Season 3, Episode 9, "Paradise Purgatory." Aired January 19, 2022 on Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81439539

[433] Netflix (@netflix). "Too Hot to Handle is the only show on television where you will see someone seek advice from a wizard to learn how to be less horny." Twitter. 1:08 PM 23 January 2022. https://twitter.com/netflix/status/1485358852396642306?lang=en

Figure 3: Screenshot of a tweet about Nathan and Brenden's one-on-one workshop

Again, this is an ironic misrepresentation on Netflix's behalf, because Nathan is not

"seek[ing] advice from a wizard on how to be less horny" but instead has been made ("by Lana")

to participate in a "one-on-one workshop" teaching him communication skills. Again, production

knows how silly this is and opts to hide its moralizing behind a joke-y meme. Ultimately, Nathan

is rewarded, as Lana allows him to re-enter the retreat and he ends up runner-up. Whether or not

we believe that Nathan has truly changed or should be rewarded, it's impossible to deny that he

has been rewarded – though he didn't win the prize money, as of December 2022, he has

392,000 Instagram followers, a modeling contract, and brand deals, about which he posts regularly.[434] It is telling that those who are the most willing to debase themselves are so successful. It's as if the contestants of *THTH* – all of them conventionally attractive, young, outgoing – deserve our mocking, undercutting the message of the show that there is something inherently good about being open, that it can only lead to prosperity. To clarify, it isn't strange that Netflix, in their official communications, would take an ironic stance towards their own show – indeed, they're always trying to toe this line of sincerity and jokiness – but rather that they're adopting the slang-y internet speak of their viewers, in in much the same way that Lana says that she's expanded her vocabulary due to the contestants' colorful language. This is reflective of "one of the key stages in late 20th-century branding practices"[435]: "a changed view of the producer-consumer relationship: no longer viewed in terms of stimulus-response, the relation was increasingly conceived of as an exchange."[436]

4.3.3 Desiree: proxy viewer

Another way that Netflix moderates viewers' interpretation of the show is by having a host in addition to Lana. If Lana mediates the retreat for the guest, comedian-host Desiree Burch operates as her human complement, providing retroactive context for viewers at home. Like Lana's real-life, uncredited voice actor, Burch is also reading from a script, also interpreting what the "data" collected means. Burch primes viewers to have a certain orientation towards the show, instructing us how to feel. If Lana is a stand-in for Netflix, Burch is a proxy for viewers, voicing her shock at the characters' bad behavior but also sympathizing with them. Burch is not anti-sex in the way Lana is (robotically, entirely); though she's anti-rule break, Burch often

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[434] Mngomezulu, Nathan Soan (@nathsoan). *Instagram.* www.instagram.com/nathsoan/
[435] Banet-Weiser, 7.
[436] Lury, Celia. *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), as quoted in Banet-Weiser, 7.

comments on how attractive the guests are, notes that she herself would have a hard time

following the parameters of the show. She speaks for us, delivering zingers that are meant to be

clever but are also things we'd likely never say. She speaks in memes that have no way of being

shared by the users, given copy protection making it impossible to take screenshots of the stream

(a move that many users attributed to Netflix).[437] Presumably to prevent pirating, this has the

ancillary effect of allowing Netflix near-full control over the circulating content about their

shows. The company capitalizes on this, operating an assortment of sanctioned social media

accounts and YouTube videos that distill the most meme-able moments into 5-minute videos

(one of the most-watched of these, with over five million views, is called "Too Hot To Handle -

Every Hook Up That Cost Them Cash"[438]). Indeed, Netflix compiles Burch's quips into

YouTube videos posted to their own account.[439]

Burch's parasocial posture allows for Netflix to enact closeness with the viewer. In a

way, Desiree is meant to represent us as viewers, so it almost feels like we're participating by

hearing our thoughts reflected back to us. She is the "real person" in contrast to the idealized

(albeit also teased) contestants, who we are meant to recognize as characters, and ones

undergoing a transformation not accessible to us.

Burch also reframes situations that may make us otherwise uncomfortable. For example,

after Deva condescendingly calls the women in the house "females," Burch jokingly points out

how clinical and cold this sounds.[440] We can rest assured that the show wouldn't accidentally

hire a misogynist. Burch's quip lets us know that Lana and Netflix are aware this is absurd, but

[437] Nugent, Annabel. "Netflix users complain after screenshots are blocked on the streaming service." *the Independent*, April 20, 2022. https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/netflix-screenshots-blocked-why-b2061337.html
[438] Still Watching Netflix. "Too Hot To Handle - Every Hook Up That Cost Them Cash." YouTube, 27 April 2020: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Axh6r27Hdn8
[439] Still Watching Netflix. "Too Hot To Handle - The Shadiest Moments From The Narrator." YouTube, 3 May 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGvoOKuUpFg
[440] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 5, "Boys to Men."

it's part of the process. In this way, Burch sets the affective tone for the viewers, encouraging us to approach the competition ironically, unseriously, until it's time to believe that the guests are actually earnest in their transformation.

Finally, another of Burch's main roles is to uphold Lana as an all-knowing, all-seeing figure. In the show's pilot episode, for example, one of the contestants remarks that the yet-unknown cone in their room is going to "blow out pheromones," and a direct-to-camera Lana responds (to viewers alone), quite the opposite, Rhonda. I'm taking it all in." Burch chimes in: "yep, if only they knew."[441] It's an unnecessary comment that only serves to underscore how ironic the situation is. It keeps viewers at a distance, allows them to indulge in the show's silliness as such, without being pushy about the underlying spiritual and ideological work being imposed.

4.4 Conclusion: (attention) economies of transformation

The supposed agency one has to achieve economic prosperity is linked to communication and the circulation of one's self-narration. Put otherwise, economic attainment is able to masquerade as spiritual fulfillment because that attainment has been linked to self-improvement. In this section, I look at *THTH*'s paratexts and other ways that Netflix and the producers of *THTH* shape our interpretation of the show and the contestants. Many of these para-texts, including Netflix-sanctioned social media accounts and spin-off shows, have far-reaching, real-world implications. I situate this phenomenon against the background of Web 2.0, with its "history of labor that emphasizes creative capitalism, personal fulfillment through work, and entrepreneurialism,"[442] and also as a part of a turn towards big data, with its "market orientation

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[441] *Too Hot to Handle*. 2020. Season 1, Episode 1, "Love, Sex or Money."
[442] Marwick, 27.

toward continual growth."[443] On *THTH,* this "digital frontierism"[444] doesn't only apply to the literal economic market, but to contestants as well, who have to continually make themselves new and find ways to market every aspect of their lives. It is important to consider how Netflix's constant expansion (as is necessitated by dint of it being a massive, publicly traded company) gets mapped onto *THTH*'s narrative and the contestants and viewers themselves. Just as Netflix's success relies on its data collection and ability to market new shows to users, salvation for *THTH* contestants comes in the form of brand deals and depends on their ability to brand themselves. As Banet-Weiser notes, describing the religious shift in the 20th century from self-denial to consumption: "The 21st-century, New Age emphasis on self-realization is in many ways a logical extension of this long-standing American ethos, today reimagined as the care and promotion of the self through the logic of branding."[445]

If Lana is replacing God, the salvation she's offering isn't otherworldly, but material. This is something I've found striking, if also a little obvious: all of my contemporary objects pose salvation in relation to economic interests. It makes sense: when everything, from entertainment to business to love to whatever else, happens online, they all start to blend together. Considering Netflix's attempt at cosmopolitanism, we should be thinking about how the spiritual affects of the show work in tandem with its economic impact.

While I contend that Lana and *THTH* comprise a unique and important example of the convergence of economics, spirituality, and voice, my inquiry into such an intersection is not entirely without precedent. As noted in my introduction, a major reference across this dissertation project has been Eugene McCarraher's *Enchantments of Mammon,* in which

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[443] Thatcher et al, 991.
[444] Ibid.
[445] Banet-Weiser, 174.

McCarraher outlines a history of Protestantism in order to diverge from Max Weber's theory that Protestantism ushered in a still-ongoing era of disenchantment, arguing that we rather are living in an era of misenchantment, in which branding and marketing seem to animate our daily and even deeper, spiritual lives.[446]

I consider *THTH* and Netflix's orientation towards personal narratives as indicative of a similar shift: whereas in early Web 2.0 we perhaps saw more user engagement (in the era of personal webpages, for example), we now have corporations like Netflix mimicking user-generated content by appropriating individuals' stories. Beyond that, individuals then try to craft narratives that appeal to corporate values in the hopes that they will benefit from the corporations' massive market share. The move I want to trace is from essentially from individuals having agency over their self-narration, to corporations mimicking this posture, to users again mimicking the corporate mimicking. This produces a misenchantment by intellectualizing what should be a more natural process and moving into the realm of capital, and *THTH* exemplifies this idea, as contestants relish in the opportunity to brand themselves *as* spiritually transformed, attributing their success to Lana and claiming to be divinely inspired.

This perversion is similar to what Jodi Dean calls "communicative capitalism," in which the political is replaced by a fantasy of participation in media circulation.[447] This fantasy of participation extends into the *THTH* resort, with contestants striving to craft a very narrow persona, a narrative, via these nonsensical workshops, all with the hopes of becoming successful microcelebrities. Simply put: the attention economy does not allow for much deviation, and producers on *THTH* are suspected of engaging in heavy editing, omitting or splicing together

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[446] See McCarraher.
[447] For example, we watch the news and feel as if we've done some deeper civic duty in "staying informed."

entire possible story lines.[448] To act as a contestant on *THTH* is, therefore, an exercise in negotiating communication without context. Moreover, Lana performs what Dean terms "condensation," the "technological fetish['s]" operation in which "complexities of politics – of organization, struggle, duration, decisiveness, division, representation, etc. – are condensed into one thing, one problem to be solved and one technological solution."[449] Lana is a condensing agent, delivering the promise – and threat – of AI, operating as a constant observer of contestants and foreclosing their behavior. Lana is also the mediator between the global and the personal, fulfilling the fantasy of a device that knows everything but speaks to the individual. I contend that this performed and imagined oscillation bears markers of spirituality: Lana is godlike in her supposed omniscience, though with a salvation rooted in cosmopolitanism, as Netflix seeks to erase the distinction between the company's goals and contestants' self-improvement.

Aside from gaining followers on their respective social media accounts, contestants have motive to stay in Netflix's good graces, as the conglomerate continually expands their collection of original programming. For example, in February 2023, a new Netflix show called *Perfect Match* aired, featuring singles from several of the platform's other reality shows.[450] Several *THTH* contestants make an appearance, including Chase DeMoor and Chloe Veitch, who has leveraged her *THTH* stint into spots on two additional Netflix reality series and nearly two million Instagram followers.[451] Similarly, season two favorite Melinda Melrose hosted a recent season of the unfortunately-named Netflix dating show *Dated and Related,* and promoted the show with an Instagram post captioned: "I may been too short to walk a runway but I'm never

[448] Baxter-Wright, Dusty. "'I was on Too Hot To Handle and this is what it's actually like.'" *Cosmopolitan,* 24 April 2020. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a32266457/what-too-hot-to-handle-is-like-nicole/
[449] Dean, "Communicative Capitalism": 63.
[450] Walsh, Charlotte. "All the Mess You Need to Know Before Watching 'Perfect Match.'" *Tudum by Netflix*, February 15, 2023. https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/perfect-match-release-date-cast-news
[451] Veitch, Chloe (@chloeveitchofficial). Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/chloeveitchofficial

too short to host a whole new show and make it my runway GLOBALLY.!!"[452] As noted, Netflix

is always seeking to expand its global market share; this too, I argue, has spiritual significance.

Melinda frames her hosting job as a way to expand her personal influence. This attitude carries a

fantasy of utopianism, mysticism: the hope of global reach promises a world not bound by

politics or space, but mediated and united under one god (in the case of *THTH,* perhaps Lana).

Melinda and Netflix's fantasy of global oneness is not unlike nineteenth-century fantasies of the

telegraph uniting the world.[453] However, our current circumstance isn't afforded by a single

technology thought to be democratic, but by a corporation, and one whose enlightenment we can

only participate in through consumption. In the above-mentioned post by Melinda announcing

her brief stint as a host, for example, the video she posts comes from the Netflix Instagram

account "@strongblacklead," which shares memes and other posts featuring Black actors and

contestants from Netflix original content.[454] Therefore, although promoting ideas of global unity

akin to a mystic oneness, Netflix nevertheless prevents viewers and users from actual

participation in content creation.

It is this total control that makes it risky for the contestants to appear on the show in the

first place. Not only is the openness demanded of contestants one-sided, but there is no guarantee

that they will, first, make any money going on the show, or second, that they will appear as they

had hoped, that their performance of transformed self will land well. Indeed, there have been

accusations from past contestants of Netflix cutting out entire story lines,[455] fan theories that the

show is secretly scripted,[456] and TikToks dedicated to proving that the producers splice audio

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[452] Berry, Melinda (@melindamelrose). "I may been too short to walk a runway…" Instagram, 5 September 2022: https://www.instagram.com/p/CiI2LHoJ_1V/?hl=en

[453] See Supp-Montgomerie, Jenna.

[454] Strong Black Lead (@strongblacklead). Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/strongblacklead/

[455] Baxter-Wright, Dusty.

[456] Davis, Christopher. "Too Hot To Handle: Why Fans Think The Show Is Scripted." *Screen Rant,* 22 February 2023: https://screenrant.com/too-hot-to-handle-show-scripted-produced-fake/

together, making up sentences that contestants never actually spoke.[457] Despite this, producers

insist that the show has a "moral backbone" and that the workshops "served a purpose. It wasn't

just learning about vulnerability, it was how your learnings about vulnerability can make your

life better in this retreat."[458]

Although *Too Hot to Handle* is absurd in its premise and even sillier in its execution, I

argue that it is also a case study for how corporations push a particular orientation towards

spirituality and belief in order to advance their economic interests, and that this orientation has

wider, social implications for contestants and viewers alike. While it might be tempting to view

this show as pure entertainment and insist that no reasonable viewer would fall for this or believe

that contestants are being sincere, I want to put forth the case that we *are* falling for it and that

these things are worth investigating. Indeed, our orientation towards the show – as begrudging,

half-ironic viewers – perhaps reflects a larger political apathy and the transfer of individual

agency into a product to be mined by corporate entities. We ought to read the popularity of

THTH as a microcosm of self-focused consumerism and late-stage capitalism: the show and its

paratexts paints individuals' agency as limited to changing only themselves while simultaneously

profiting off of the individuals' self-promotion.

It thus matters that the main "product" Netflix is promoting in this show and otherwise is

an emphasis on narrative. While Woolf also centers narrative to imagine a more utopian society

and TikTok users similarly stress narrative and agency, *THTH* is unique because it has the

infrastructure and wealth of Netflix behind it. This chapter has centered on one show, but more

exploration of Netflix and self-narration – and the wellness industry more broadly – is warranted

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[457] See, for example: (@and.isaid). 2023. TikTok. February 19, 2023. "Pretty sure none of that storyline ever happened #toohotohandle #realitytv #comedy." https://www.tiktok.com/@and.isaid/video/7201891013772840197.
[458] Corinthios, Aurelie. "Netflix's Too Hot to Handle: All Your Burning Questions Answered." *People*, 20 April 2020: https://people.com/tv/netflix-too-hot-to-handle-burning-questions-answered/

and necessary. For example, in the past few years, Netflix has also started producing and publishing several movies and television shows stressing self-improvement and mental health, even partnering with meditation startup Headspace to create a "choose your own mindfulness adventure" series.[459] This is gamified, optimized, corporate spirituality at its peak, as "mindfulness" has been divorced from its Buddhist or Hindu origins to increase viewership by way of personalized, modular content.[460] That these programs are "choose-your-own-adventure" stresses one's individuality as they promote an idea of self-help that is rooted in individual choice and agency, as opposed to larger-scale or structural change. There should be further investigation into how these programs reflect and contrast Netflix's corporate culture, as recent reports reveal the incongruence of Netflix's emphasis on a culture of "stories" and the often cutthroat policies actually governing the company.[461]

All of this – the economic decision to go on the show and perform hypersexuality, the workshops, the blurring between Netflix and the contestants, and Lana herself — creates the bizarre aesthetic of the show which cannot be wholly serious or wholly ironic. Ultimately, it is this muddled aesthetic that teaches us a lot about contemporary belief – namely, about that belief's dependence on narrative, and, specifically, narratives that are meant to be consumed by others. Consumption is key here, as Netflix's emphasis on continually producing new narratives blurs the lines between receiver and producer, with widespread ramifications both personally and politically.

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[459] "Headspace Unwind Your Mind | Only on Netflix." *Headspace.* https://www.headspace.com/netflix. Accessed 15 February 2024.
[460] Williams, R. John. *The Buddha in the Machine: Art, Technology, and The Meeting of East and West*. Yale University Press, 2014.
[461] See, for example, a *Wall Street Journal* report from 2018 detailing accusations of racism and poor leadership: Ramachandran, Shalini and Flint, Joe. "At Netflix, Radical Transparency and Blunt Firings Unsettle the Ranks; Buzzwords and anxiety fill the hallways as Hollywood giant tries to maintain a winning culture amid breakneck growth; 'sunshining' the 'N-word' scandal." *Wall Street Journal* (Online); New York, N.Y.. 25 Oct 2018.

Conclusion: Is Enchantment Possible?

There is a scene in Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet* that stands out to me, and which I was tempted to write a full chapter on. The nonagenarian protagonist, faced with an apocalyptic scene at her cult-y old-age home, ventures into the main house's basement, where she comes across another version of herself. This other Marian, a witch, is stirring a cauldron over an open flame. Her doppelgänger witch asks who constitutes the real Marian, and poses a choice – the Marian that has just entered the basement can either jump in the cauldron or kill the witch Marian. Jumping in the cauldron, our original Marian is met with a flash of pain and then has her perspective changed: she becomes the version of herself stirring the mystery stew. Returning to the rest of the old women, Marian asks them what they chose. Laughing, they recollect their own transformation, their own jump into the fire.[462]

It's hard to say what is so striking about this scene. In the face of a world-ending storm and a dragon-like creature perching itself atop the old-age home, Marian's curiosity leads her to the eventual answer (which is that Venus has returned to reign over Earth and reclaim the Holy Grail), but not before she has to face herself, or more precisely, her conception of herself. She must be willing to acknowledge herself as a witch, which in this particular case means stepping into a position of power and agency. Though Marian doesn't seem especially uncomfortable with asserting herself throughout the book, this is nonetheless a departure from how she was introduced to readers: as an aging, deaf woman abandoned by her son and family and sent to a

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[462] Carrington, Leonora. *The Hearing Trumpet.* 1974. NYRB Classics, 2021.

distant retirement home. To become a witch, then, requires Marian to confront a long-held misperception of her own self.

There is something to be said, too, about Marian being hard of hearing, with the title of the novel referring to the hearing trumpet she carries with her everywhere and uses to eavesdrop on the old-age home's sinister overlords. This device allows her connection with the world, just as its absence at times allows her to remain in the mystery, out of the loop. In situations in which she's deaf, she isn't disturbed by this, but instead uses it as time to imagine what's going on. Marian – like the *Too Hot to Handle* contestants, the manifestors on TikTok, and even Clarissa Dalloway, to some degree – is presented as being fundamentally a seeker, as it is revealed to readers that she has had this witchy part of herself in the basement the whole time; there has always been a Marian in touch with the more occult and esoteric. However, it's also important to note that Marian's revelation is a self-centered one, and with self-oriented ends.

Marian's seeking bears many of the same markers as algorithmic divination: she uses her technology, the hearing trumpet, to gain access to powerful knowledge, and knowledge about herself, no less. She is paranoid and has limited information about the situation she finds herself in, and thus spends much of the novel trying to imagine what is unfurling behind the scenes of the old-age home. Namely, she is suspicious of the proprietors of the home, Mr and Mrs Gambit, who appear to be orchestrating a self-improvement cult (while also making money off of housing the elderly women), and much of the novel involves her imagining the motives of those around her and paranoically weaving together various narrative threads – including ones about paintings, a mystery abbess, her fellow elderly housemates, and the Gambits. Unlike the other case studies, though, her paranoia proves correct and can be verified: Mr Gambit is indeed scheming (though the scheme itself hardly matters, in the end). If the other objects I read exist in this space of

175

ambiguity, Marian's story seems almost naive in its grand narrative, by comparison. But then, perhaps only a surrealist novel could have so many disjointed narratives join together, and this is also why it's so tempting to narrate the algorithm's significance: the technology's partial opacity allow for a fundamentally surrealist, schizophrenic "story" that can only make sense from the outside. And of course, there is no outside, and these narratives cannot succeed. Indeed, unlike the objects and narratives explored in this dissertation, Marian succeeds in using her technology to connect with others, understand herself, and evade governance. The narrative that she has woven with the aid of the hearing trumpet proves correct and verifiable, and the image we are left with at the novel's close is hopeful, bizarre, and yet a bit bleak: Marian and her friends are alone in the old age home alone as a new ice age rages outside, and one of her friends even remarks that she hopes all of humanity is destroyed.

Why might it be that Marian is successful? For one, her technology is more truth-apt than algorithms. Further, Marian can only access this enchantment once she is discarded by productive society (due to her age and her son's implied greed). This is reminiscent of the fact that Clarissa and Kilman can almost connect, but their social obligations impede them. Marian exists outside of the social and is thus a free agent. Moreover, unlike as on TikTok and *Too Hot to Handle*, her network remains small. Her mysticism does not seek to integrate the masses, and it instead remains true to the original definition of mysticism I put forth in my introduction, in which the mystic practitioner seeks an individual relationship with the divine.

I turn to Marian at the end of this dissertation because it would be too bleak to end with the banality of contemporary reality television, and because this is a project mainly concerned with narration, which I have argued can best be understood by turning to literature. Further, *The Hearing Trumpet* demonstrates how algorithmic divination can be implemented as a technique

for evading capitalist governance, as narrating one's positionality within networks comes with the hopes that the technology can bring insight into the system and center or empower a unified self in relation to other humans and possibly in relation to the divine.

In this dissertation, I have presented three case studies of algorithmic divination. These objects have differed in genre, mode, time period, and author. Importantly for the project of understanding the progression of algorithmic divination, we see a shift over these three chapters in who is doing the "emplotting,"[463] or narrating, and what is being narrated. In *Mrs Dalloway,* I have argued that the readers recognize the yet-impossible sonic links between characters; on TikTok, the users narrate their futures and craft their future selves; and on *Too Hot to Handle,* the contestants narrate their own lives for an imagined audience, as directed by the gaze of Lana. As the narration shifts, so too does the YOU and the imagined others. In Woolf, the others are real, named characters: Clarissa *could* recognize her connection to Miss Kilman. On TikTok, too, viewers can read comments on the videos they're being dealt and have a sense that there are real (albeit anonymous) people similarly viewing. Finally, on *THTH*, the YOU is almost entirely fictional, as Lana's "technology" is personalized, allowing for the contestant's total absorption in their own narrative. This is late-stage algorithmic divination, and I recognize that it is a grim picture to paint, and one with far-reaching and disheartening implications.

Across all three chapters, there is this pervasive, underlying, differently-inflected fantasy that connection will save us. I argue that this is also our fantasy of mediation more broadly, and why we tend to think of technology as having divine (and divinatory) potential. Yet when such technologies are inextricable from the capitalist systems producing them, we get the therapizing of the everyday, as discussed in my final chapter. As Eva Ilouz writes, the therapeutic biography

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[463] Ilouz, 7.

has become a product in and of itself: "Narrating and being transformed by one's narration are the very commodities produced, processed, and circulated by a wide cohort of professionals."[464]

In tracking the progression of algorithmic divination, we also see the parallel development of an increased focus on oneself. Such a progression betrays a longing for meaning and enchantment: people want to know themselves and to do so through their own imagination and narration of the world. It also betrays, crucially for this project, a longing for agency, as one wants to have the power to transform themselves through narrative. Paradoxically, however, one must also defer agency to their chosen technology, as in the case of Manifestation TikTokers, who believe in an eventual outside or an end to mediation, therefore making them willing to engage with the technology because it feels more temporary. We are able to set aside our reservations about data collection and surveillant advertising in service of an eventual outside.

In this dissertation, I have explored the affects that emerge from the tension of desiring enchantment and agency from technologies that often fail to provide that enchantment and agency. Aside from this mystical aesthetic being interesting in its own right, there is also the argument to be made that the proliferation of algorithmic divination has larger-scale political ramifications. In particular, in this final section I want to put Ilouz in conversation with Jodi Dean's ideas on "communicative capitalism" to explore the consequences of algorithmic divination for how agency is negotiated and imagined online. Whereas Ilouz focuses on how emotions get commodified and how individuals' feelings are influenced by corporate structures, Dean's focus is broader, on the phenomenon of the "Web" as "a zero institution" which "provides an all-encompassing space in which social antagonism is simultaneously expressed and obliterated. It is a global space in which one can recognize oneself as connected to everyone

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[464] Ilouz, 56.

178

else, as linked to everything that matters."[465] Importantly, both writers are describing a paranoid, neurotic phenomenon that negotiates the tension between the individual and the collective, which is then instructive for understanding the algorithmic technologies discussed in this dissertation. Namely, although these technologies are ultimately mediated by capitalist forces, algorithmic divination betrays a real longing for an outside of capitalism and mediation. It is important to understand this and be sympathetic to those longing for community and connection, while also trying to understand how we've arrived here. As I note in my last chapter, we want to hope that there is something driven by "genuine affect and emotion,"[466] but we're increasingly less likely to belong to a church[467] – what is there to turn to if not ourselves? Where else are we to find emotion if not in media and mediation? And what else can this media offer us aside from the vague promise of communication or connection?

Dean has argued that our cultural privileging of communication has shifted where we locate the political, so that "[r]ather than actively organized in parties and unions, politics has become a domain of financially mediated and professionalized practices centered on advertising, public relations and the means of mass communication."[468] Dean wrote this article in 2005, before the advent of personalized algorithmic advertising and widespread social media usage. As of my writing this in March 2024, it is obvious to me that this is even more salient today, and that Ilouz's "narratives of recognition"[469] emphasize (as Netflix does, for example) the importance of voice, story, and the circulation of personal narratives, but that this does not actually lead to greater connection or political agency.

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[465] Dean, Jodi. "Why the Net is Not a Public Sphere." *Constellations,* Vol. 10 No. 1, 2003: 106.
[466] Banet-Weiser, 5.
[467] Alper et. al. *Spirituality Among Americans.*
[468] Dean, "Communicative Capitalism": 55.
[469] Ilouz, 4.

But then, one might ask what politics has to do with algorithmic divination. Aren't the narratives I describe fundamentally self-oriented? Yes, but all of the objects I look at both deal with the imagined YOU and deal with questions of agency and our relation to others, which is therefore political. Further, I contend that all of my objects are undergirded by a genuine desire for social connection, and that this results in something inherently political, as the ways in which one imagines themselves as able to make those connections affects how they will navigate the social.

In *Mrs Dalloway,* for example, we get Dr Holmes's "communication is health," which Septimus mocks,[470] and Woolf's eventual connection between Clarissa and Septimus (and Clarissa and her neighbor) is outside the realm of social institutions – as noted in the chapter, the revelation in this passage is that Clarissa finally sees the sky, which has ostensibly been there the entire time. On TikTok, the desire for connection is perhaps less obvious, as content creators present enlightenment as being more localized to the individual user. The desire professed on Manifestation TikTok is for personal success (as opposed to social connection), and the user's agency is represented as similarly limited. *Too Hot to Handle* has a similarly individualistic focus and frame, but its production is shaped by Netflix's larger corporate ethos and aspirations, which tend to lie in emphasizing the importance of nebulous "stories" and "voices" – as opposed to the presumably empowered Manifestation TikToker, the Netflix reality star must be willing to sell their narrative and see their narrated selves commodified. Yet the content of these stories almost doesn't matter, I argue, because the professed beliefs of the practitioners on the show and on TikTok are hollow, more focused on embodiment and a belief in belief itself than any fixed set of rituals or doctrine.

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[470] *MD,* 93.

The self-reflexive nature of this practice leads to its proliferation, as one only needs to imagine themselves as participating by engaging with circulating, online content. Indeed, I contend that we long for connection and enchantment to such a degree that we're willing to buy into this belief in belief, all in the name of increased communication. As Dean argues, this fantasy is a pervasive one:

> *... what is driving the Net is the promise of political efficacy, of the enhancement of democracy through citizens' access and use of new communications technologies. But, the promise of participation is not simply propaganda. No, it is a deeper, underlying fantasy wherein technology functions as a fetish covering over our impotence and helping us understand ourselves as active."[471]*

With algorithmic divination, it's not just that one uses the technology to understand themselves as active, but to understand themselves, period. It is the fetishization that Dean describes, paired with a self-interested orientation towards these technologies (namely, the interest of defining oneself) that stymies any possibility of true connection with others. However, perhaps falling into the same trap of the fetish, I read this phenomenon as potentially hopeful, as it demonstrates a longing for connection.

Even McCarraher, who, as discussed in my introduction, writes from a very narrow view of what constitutes true enchantment, traces our history of mammonism to love, in a way, noting that "[c]apitalism is one such desire for communion, a predatory and misshapen love of the world. (Capitalism is a love story.)"[472] It is worth noting here that the three objects I attend to in this dissertation can be read as failed love stories – Clarissa choosing Richard over Peter, TikTokers attempting to manifest relationships, *Too Hot to Handle* being a dating show.

Recognizing this desire has allowed me to approach these objects sympathetically and with a degree of credulity (as opposed to total cynicism), and as such, I can further recognize that

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[471] Dean, "Communicative Capitalism": 62.
[472] McCarraher, 12.

there *is* something enchanting and quasi-mystical about the network form. I am not advocating

for a wholesale dismissal of algorithmic divination, but its separation from capital and prosperity

gospel – we would do well to remember Weil's concept of attention and witnessing, which is,

crucially, not self-interested or seeking. A networked version of this is perhaps like Patrick

Jagoda's network ambivalence and "extreme presence," which is a "process of slowing down

and learning to inhabit a compromised environment with the discomfort… it entails."[473]

What would such a practice look like, in the case of algorithmic divination? I wrote in my

introduction that this dissertation does not seek to demystify the technologies it engages with,

and I affirm that again here. The mysticism of the networks and connectivity in *Mrs Dalloway*

and *The Hearing Trumpet* arise from a neutral waiting – or at least, an orientation towards the

network that is not self-interested or concerned with capital. I recognize that this is not easy, and

I myself am guilty of narrating algorithms as constituting my own self – it's difficult not to when

algorithmic technologies can *feel* so personalized, and there is something so tempting about

trying to understand that feeling as providing some greater insight into oneself or one's place in

the world, especially as one relates to other people.

Indeed, that is the very thing that Woolf's Clarissa is getting at in the passage that opened

the introduction to my dissertation: the question of how to know another person. Woolf is right

to chastise Peter and Kilman, who seek to intellectualize and narrate this question that is, first,

ultimately unknowable, and second, self-interested: both Peter and Kilman rely on love and

religion (respectively) to define themselves, and this is largely why they remain unhappy

throughout the novel. As such, Woolf demonstrates that, instead of weaving these narratives in

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[473] Jagoda, Patrick. "Network Ambivalence." Contemporaneity, Vol 4, No 1 (2015). DOI 10.5195/contemp.2015.150.

order to try and intellectualize the world and understand our positionality, we should instead embrace the mystery (so to speak) and focus on witnessing.

For Woolf, this requires an oscillation between the individual and the collective, which is why reading is so important – only the reader can see both the characters and their total networks. Further, Woolf poses this readerly attention almost as if it is a service the reader can do for the novel, a gift that the reader can give in recognizing the totality. Although the algorithmic divination I have explored in this dissertation has failed, I remain hopeful that enchantment is possible through careful, readerly attention to our world and its networks. After all, as John Durham Peters writes: "Mystical styles of reading—fate, handwriting, and so on— refuse to accept the idea that the world could be meaningless." We must imbue the world with meaning through the practices of reading and attention, without fetishizing the technologies that allow us to enact this narration.

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