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## **The Transglossic: Contemporary Fiction and the Limitations of the Modern**

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### **Abstract**

In the past twenty years, the continued relevance of the term postmodernism for literary studies has increasingly been called into question. In the wake of this re-evaluation of literary terminology, many new terms have been coined, frequently associated still with a “-modern” suffix. This paper suggests that while the new modernisms hold relevance for specific concerns of contemporary literature, they have yet to provide an alternative framing for dominant trends. This is the case even when, as for metamodernism, a term has begun to move into general usage. The new modernisms, we suggest, are caught in a reductive association to the past which minimises their applicability to the dynamic newness of contemporary writing, particularly as it responds to ethico-political concerns. As an alternative to these terminologies we suggest “transglossic”, capturing the movement across forms and identities that uniquely defines contemporary literature.

**Keywords (6 words)**

Metamodernism; Postmodernism; Contemporary; Post-postmodernism; Transglossic;  
Modernism

“A term to finally supplant the postmodern has yet to be coined”.<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, the landmark publication of *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature* made a very public literary statement that postmodernism was over – it was a history, a discourse to be referred to in the past tense: it had happened, and was therefore *no longer* happening.

Alongside works such as David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris’s *Supplanting the Postmodern* (2015), Mary Holland’s *Succeeding Postmodernism* (2014) and Josh Toth’s *The Passing of Postmodernism* (2010), *The Cambridge History* suggests the death of the postmodern while at the same time gesturing towards the emergence of new critical paradigms. The accuracy of this demise is, however, both contentious and complex. For some critics postmodern literature has never really existed; Paul Virilio is a notable case in point, contending that the term is of little use beyond the confines of its employment in architectural practice.<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, others - such as Martin Eve in his essay “Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace and the Problems of Metamodernism”: Post-Millennial Post-Postmodernism?” (2012) – affirm postmodern literature’s continued contemporary resonance. Between these two poles sit a majority of critics who situate the term as historically circumscribed and contingent, recognising its relevance either for a specific period in the 1970s and 1980s associated with a certain kind of experimental prose style, or for a limited number of texts

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<sup>1</sup> Rudrum and Stavris, “Introduction,” xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Armitage, 25.

preoccupied with late capitalist culture. In this group one can count not only the perspective of David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavrakis in *Supplanting to Postmodern* but also David James and Ursula Seshagiri's essay "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution" (2014), both of which emphasise postmodernism's tenuous critical grounding against the enduring critical presence of modernism, raising the possibility that the latter has never really gone away, and that postmodernism is merely a variant of an enduring modernist sensibility. Once a foremost postmodern critic, Linda Hutcheon now argues in her more recent scholarship that postmodernism's institutionalisation has led to its transformation into a "generic counter discourse," bringing to fruition De Man's warning (1986) that the term would ultimately become meaningless.<sup>3</sup> Rather than an end point, Hutcheon locates postmodernism as a specific movement from which the contemporary has now emerged - the possibility that the prefix "post" was merely a "preparatory step" to a much wider non-hierarchical aesthetic.<sup>4</sup>

For Frederic Jameson, at least, the cultural logic of postmodernism continues to be "indispensable" in diagnosing contemporary developments even though the term itself has become "out-of-date" and "outmoded".<sup>5</sup> Jameson acknowledges that his initial work should have employed the term *postmodernity* in place of postmodernism, designating "not a style but a historical period" from 1980 onwards.<sup>6</sup> He goes on to admit that postmodern culture suffers from numerous "contradictions" and operates "as a kind of commentary on modernism, as one formal tradition commenting on another". Jameson's words echo Jürgen Habermas, for example, who critiques the self-referential nature of postmodernism and calls attention to its inherent performative contradictions, as well as its asymmetrical power

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<sup>3</sup> Hutcheon, "Gone Forever," 10.

<sup>4</sup> Hutcheon, "Epilogue," 8.

<sup>5</sup> Jameson, "Aesthetics," n.pag.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

relations. Habermas' defence of modernity demonstrates that modernist-postmodernist debates are still well underway even as we seek to escape the postmodern. Resolution of these complexities is to some extent impossible, but the presence of the debate itself signifies a problematic. While critics define the postmodern in various ways, those who draw attention to concerns surrounding the term in contemporary usage are united by the general sense that there is something difficult to define and yet equally hard to dismiss in the current moment, an intangibility which most significantly exceeds or displaces the assignment of contemporary texts as straightforwardly postmodern. While resisting the disabling stereotypes of postmodern literature as nihilistic or apolitical, these critics locate a movement within literature that has taken place incrementally over the past thirty years but gathered momentum since the millennium, towards a certain kind of tone or intention that is absent from high postmodern writing. It is a shift of attention variously categorised – through the turn of particular historical moments such as September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 or more recently the political activism of #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion; in relation to philosophical movements such as the ethical turn in contemporary European philosophy; and in the social awareness of new theoretical paradigms such as new materialism and affect theory. The notion of intention itself speaks to the character of this difference – an association in the contemporary with an explicit positioning or standpoint, a certainty of purpose – which may be developed through an aesthetic radicalism reminiscent of postmodern literature but which is through this purpose identifiably distinct for its ethico-political character. So Robert McLaughlin, for example, notes in what he identifies as post-postmodern fiction a renewed attempt by novels to engage political concerns, an effort to “reenergize literature’s social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world,” while David Shields (2010) locates in contemporary writing a *reality hunger* that represents the desire to identify what tangibly

remains in the wake of deconstruction.<sup>7</sup> Such theorisation, then, is not a rejection of postmodern tropes of fragmentation, but rather a recognition of an enduring and contingent presence of meaning within and between those spaces of dissolution that continue to characterise contemporary culture. In doing so, contemporary literary criticism identifies a significance placed upon meaning in the contemporary text which exceeds or develops the often amorphous or abstract nature of that politicisation in high postmodernism with a more particular and specific ethico-political engagement.

Creative writers have themselves, in classic metafictional terms, addressed this shift. In Olivia Laing's novel *Crudo* (2018), for example, Laing imagines that postmodern punk icon Kathy Acker, who died of breast cancer in 1997, is still alive today, examining what becomes of Acker's radical postmodern thinking in the contemporary to find that while postmodernism still registers as an anarchic discourse of disruption, it fails to address the thirst for meaning that Acker in her contemporary guise desires. Likewise, the first work in Ali Smith's Seasonal quartet, *Autumn* (2016), re-examines 1960s culture to present a counter-current that re-inserts explicit politics into postmodern discourse. The central character of Elisabeth rediscovers the work of artist Pauline Boty on iconic Christine Keeler, recuperating her artwork from postmodernism to reveal a powerful feminist counter current. Like the contemporary text which somehow registers as postmodern – stylistically fragmented, non-linear, and anarchic – Boty's painting of Keeler differs from the original in its weight and explicit political intent. These representations are metafictional in this sense that both *Crudo* and *Autumn* are themselves novels which exist in a liminal formal position – works which *feel* stylistically postmodern, but which offer direct and explicit political commentary that seems at odds with the obtuse politics of 1970s high postmodern literature.

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<sup>7</sup> McLaughlin, "Post-postmodern Discontent," 55.

Laing and Smith typify a fictional mode in which postmodernism is acknowledged as a key moment of experimental discourse, yet conterminously positioned as not alone equipped to capture the zeitgeist of the contemporary – a moment that was always political, but not with the directness of weight needed to face the present. Unsurprisingly, a central aim of critiques of postmodernism has been to establish an alternative terminology to capture this paradigm shift, a plethora of potential neologisms posited. What unites many of these terms is a continued recourse to the “-modern” as a frame of reference, both in relation to modernist epistemologies and postmodern thinking. Such a tendency constructs a narrative of continuity that is not necessarily teleological but is nevertheless continuous. This strategy of attention by association creates a particular cache around terms with a “modernism” suffix, meaning increased critical attention and citation. As Linda Hutcheon claims,

The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on – as do those of modernism – in our contemporary twenty first-century world. Literary historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are, after all, only heuristic labels that we create in our attempts to chart cultural changes and continuities. Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own.<sup>8</sup>

In this paper, we look towards the possibility for the alternative framing that Hutcheon identifies, taking up her contention that post-postmodernism is not the appropriate terminology for a literary cultural moment that needs its own distinct language. In the service of this distinctiveness we examine the limitations of continued recourse to the modern more widely, arguing that terms such as metamodernism, hypermodernism, digimodernism, cosmopolitanism, remodernism and automodernism (which for ease of use we categorise

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<sup>8</sup> Hutcheon, “Politics,” 181.

collectively as *post-postmodernisms*) – while useful for foregrounding the need to push beyond existing frames of reference – are confined within historical paradigms that construct unhelpful boundaries with regard to the articulation of the dynamism of the contemporary literary moment. Moreover, recourse to the modern involves these theories in a self-referential bind which despite intentions sees terminology applied so as to become as much a matter of a relation to the past as the relevance to the now. Such internalised debate is ultimately unproductive, given in particular the unstable theoretical ground of postmodernism as a signifier conterminously both empty and overloaded. For while literary style may contribute meaningfully to socio-political questions (and indeed both modernism and postmodernism were shaped by such imperatives), the debates about literary inheritance itself that emerge from continued use of the modernist suffix distract from the urgent imperative to articulate the role of literature in a socio-political context where authors are responding passionately to issues such as the rise of neo-conservatism, ecological crisis, and xenophobia. In the second part of the article we turn our attention to the possibilities of a critical future which, while aware of (post)modernist legacies, is no longer dominated by internal debates about continued post-postmodernist resonances. This future, we suggest, might be productively referred to rather as *transglossic* – a term that captures the productive simultaneity and intersectionality of contemporary literature since the millennium.

### **The Limits of “Modern”**

Given ongoing misconceptions surrounding the usage of postmodernism and the competing (and contradictory) paradigms forwarded by leading scholars it is not the intention of this paper to enter into the debate surrounding postmodernism’s continued usefulness as a literary term. Rather, this paper begins from the conceptual starting point of attempting to address the demands from within postmodernist theory itself that a new terminology is pertinent,

echoing the call of postmodern thinkers such as Ihab Hassan, who in his later work draws attention to the need for a more concrete engagement with local and global issues, but also Karen Barad, whose theory of agential realism highlights the ethics of intra-acting agencies. Focused on perhaps the most notable of these new post-postmodernisms, metamodernism, Eve argues that the success of such a term has less to do with its distinctiveness and descriptive power, and more to do with its authors' concentrated efforts to manipulate diversified forms of popular scholarship, disseminating the term across digital and social media spheres. Ironically, this accumulation of cultural capital symbolises nothing more accurately than the postmodern simulacrum of multi-layered illusion.

It is certainly the intention of the authors of the new terminologies to move beyond the illusion and to make meaningful intervention. Each of these new terms is positioned by its originator as a direct response to both the apparent demise of postmodernism and the altered cultural landscape of post-millennial life. Yet by constructing a contiguous relationship to postmodernism, critics reinforce reductive cultural stereotypes that have been defined as postmodern, in particular the characterisation of postmodernism as apolitical and divorced from everyday life. So in discussion of performatism, Eschelman describes postmodernism in terms of "decentered subjectivity and ludic regress"; in relation to altermodernism Bourriard defines it as a "philosophy of mourning"; Kirby's digimodernism posits postmodernism as no different from realism in its supposed readerly predilections; while Samuels in the context of automodernism associates postmodernism with the loss of individual agency.<sup>9</sup>

While these various post-postmodernisms cannot be reduced to single-issue theories, such stereotypes cannot, however, be the justification for new terminology, given that they represent a problematic simplification of postmodernist politics. Nowhere is this more

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<sup>9</sup> Eschelman, "*Performatism*," 113; Bourriard, n.pag; Kirby, 277; Samuels, 173.

notable than in relation to metamodernism – a term with a relatively long literary history, but which has been popularised in a particular form by Dutch academics Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in 2010. Given its popularity, metamodernism stands as a case study for the problematic which arises from recourse to previous modernisms.<sup>10</sup>

Vermeulen and van den Akker's formulation of metamodernism involves a concentration on affect and idealism in place of postmodern irony, responding to the triple "threat" of recent financial crises, the disintegration of the political centre and ecological uncertainties by arguing that "grand narratives are as necessary as they are problematic, hope is not simply something to distrust, love not necessarily something to be ridiculed".<sup>11</sup> For theorists of metamodernism, the need for a new terminology is driven by the claims from thinkers including Hutcheon and De Man that postmodernism has become a generic discourse, resting upon a version of postmodernism which is expansive to the extent that it becomes an empty – and thus redundant – signifier. While this is undoubtedly a valid critique, what is striking in discussions of metamodernism is that it is equally non-specific; its proponents are intensely fluid in their thoughts on what might constitute a metamodernist text. At the same time, the metamodernist critique of postmodernism fails to identify its own discrete terms of reference for the earlier phenomenon, being strangely silent on what constitutes a postmodern text. Admittedly, metamodernism positions itself in relation to Jameson's framing of postmodernism as a cultural logic rather than a literary postmodernism, but in failing to elucidate on this matter it contributes to the very discourse that it identifies as problematic, through its lack of specific identification of a postmodern canon.

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<sup>10</sup> Mas'ud Zavarzadeh (1975) first coined the term metamodernism in the 1970s in reference to an attitudinal shift in post-war North American texts.

<sup>11</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Tank," n.pag.

Conterminously, theories of metamodernism equally under-theorise modernism, which is linked by van den Akker and Vermeulen to romanticism. It has fallen to David James and Ursula Seshagiri in “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution” to correct this oversight, describing an alternative metamodernism rooted in the reactivation of modernist lineage, involving formal difficulty and a mediation on consciousness and interiority: fiction which “reactivates and complicates the aesthetic prerogatives of an earlier cultural moment”.<sup>12</sup> James and Seshagiri’s adaptation of the metamodern paradigm intensifies the sense in which reference to post-postmodernisms creates an internalised debate – before one can employ metamodernism, one must not only navigate its assumptions about postmodernism and modernism, one must also determine *whose* metamodernism is at play.

What is revealed within these terms is a recursive process that is equally applicably to other uses of the modernist suffix: the *hyper* of hypermodernism, the *meta* of metamodernism or the *digi* of digimodernism mark an altered perspective, yet the suffix consumes newness within an inward-looking discourse. Within this context, the use of such terms is not so much a newness of literary production, but rather a cultural move that represents a critical re-centring. In this respect, we agree with Eve, who argues that, rather than marking the death of postmodernist thought, post-postmodernisms function “as a reading practice [that] offers a means of excavating the latent ethical connotations of supposedly nihilistic postmodern texts”.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, many features of the new post-postmodernisms could also be attributed to postmodernist works. For example, the closing stages of Julian Barnes’ *England, England* (1998) or Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997) include ethico-political statements which gesture towards notions of meaning and demonstrate how late postmodernist texts reveal an earlier transition towards so-called post-postmodernist modes of operation,

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<sup>12</sup> James and Seshagiri, 93.

<sup>13</sup> Eve, 8; 22.

containing an anticipatory logic which complicates the neat demarcation between successive literary paradigms.

Given this contextual slippage, post-postmodern discourses cannot but emphasise continuity at the expense of newness; the various theoretical connections between post-postmodern terminologies is also an acknowledgement that these terms are not only potentially interchangeable, but also hindered by centring their response around the values of the postmodern. In this context, literary theory becomes less an enablement of critical readings of texts, and more an enablement of its own relation to previous paradigms. As Rudrum and Stavris note, “the various postmortems, epitaphs, obituaries, and requiems [...] are actually a means of prolonging postmodernism’s cultural (after)life,” part of a literary criticism that is “enslaved to grammar” often in spite of its own intentions.<sup>14</sup> This ‘in spite’ is crucial – for while the theorists of the new post-postmodernisms often outline that their evocation of the nomenclature of the modern is a matter of the inheritance of economic models, institutional discourses and epistemologies rather than the continuance of a historical style, in keeping with Jameson’s reading of postmodernism, nevertheless Rudrum and Stavris identify how the assumption of these theories frequently means a larger suggestion of continued modes of representation and cultural attitudes. Ironically, their edited collection is part of this same enslavement, a recognition in the title *Supplanting the Postmodern* that the critical term not only continues to be of relevance, but also is the term that need be invoked if one is to find a space in the critical conversation.

The rest of this essay thus serves as provocation against such grammatical conservatism and its inevitable maintenance of existing historical paradigms. It is our contention that it is of great necessity to outline the specifically literary and specifically contemporary features of

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<sup>14</sup> Rudrum and Stavris, “Introduction,” xvi.

today's fiction with clarity, without compromise, and without turning to either the intellectual security or critical advantage of reflexivity. In doing so, literary theory becomes again a matter of reading the text, of identifying what comes from the text, rather than a dialogue with itself. Such theory is concerned not only for the society that literature *describes*, but also for the society that literature *makes*, for not only the negativities of the accelerated moment as highlighted by digimodernism, super-hybridity, performatism and hypermodernism, but also the potential to question and interrogate these moments precisely through disrupting rather than continuing past economic systems, identity politics and subjectivities.

### **The Transglossic**

A sustained body of critical work now exists that speaks to contemporary literature outside the modernist suffix. Beyond Europe, American criticism has preferred the terms “New Sincerity” and “postirony” (as evident in the work of Nicoline Timmer) to describe the ethical engagement of writers such as Dave Eggers, Jennifer Egan, Colson Whitehead, Miranda July, Garth Greenwell, Meg Wolitzer and Jonathan Lethem. Alongside this, cultural terms such as post-humanism, performatism, and accelerationism have been adopted by literary critics. For each of these terms, contemporary literature is marked by a culturally affective moment. The new terms draw our attention to a singular characteristic of the contemporary such as sincerity or acceleration and define literature as embodying the zeitgeist of the moment. Such approaches are useful lenses through which to capture facets of newness and innovation. At the same time, however, their specificity contrasts with the expansiveness of modernism and postmodernism as theories with the capacity to encompass multiple characteristics; focusing on specific aspects of the contemporary, each theory is restrained in its ability to expose the complex interworkings of today's fiction. While

postmodernism is reductively held as an endlessly shifting and empty signifier, these terms, conversely, shy away from the cultural expansiveness.

This is not to say, however, that there are not contenders for a more overarching framework. Most notably, Toth's concept of renewalism (2010) presents a sophisticated and multifaceted consideration of contemporary literature which identifies both an attention to literary newness and a recognition, equally, of the political engagement of formal modes beyond modernist experimentation. Yet Toth's work is framed within the context of what he views as a repeating hauntological process, where the contemporary "break" with the postmodern repeats the epistemic break of postmodernism with modernism in a recurring spectrality so that "What we have-in modernism, in postmodernism, and now after postmodernism-is a series of repetitions, or returns. A persistent revenant".<sup>15</sup> For Toth, this relation is not only the inescapable remnant of previous discourse as Jameson might contend, it is also a necessary factor in the later discourse's existence – a Derridean reading in which, as postmodernism rests upon the trace of modernism, so its replacement exists necessarily in a play of *differance* with postmodern theory. It is in keeping with this relation that Toth devotes the majority of his work not to renewalism's distinct features, but to what it shares with postmodernism, and that he more recently seems to have moved away from his own term toward a focus on metamodernism as that which in both its naming and definition consciously identifies a similar relationality, contributing to recent collections on the subject. While for Toth this is no doubt perceived as a productive move, it is a critical impulse that we identify here as problematic; an exemplar of the ways in which recourse to the modernist suffix obscures the opportunities provided by less genealogical modes of framing critical interpretation.

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<sup>15</sup> Toth, *Passing*, Kindle location 261.

Within this hauntological context, a space thus remains for a framework that might concern itself less with internalised resonances and more explicitly confront the distinctiveness of the multiple operations within the contemporary text as it emerges post-millennium, and in the wake of a socio-politically energised desire for meaning. For such a term we choose instead the concept of the *transglossic*. The notion of *trans*, meaning to move across, is one with a particular contemporary relevance; it has emerged in relation to several contemporary theories including the “transnational” turn in literature and Enrique Dussel’s conception of the “transmodern,” a term that suggests the end of modernism, critiques the postmodern, and places an emphasis on spiritual or transcendental enlightenment. Combined with the notion of *glossic*, meaning to speak, the term refers to an active and performative articulation across positions, both formally and thematically, which defines the particularities of contemporary literary expression.

Noting the problems of postmodernism’s status as an empty signifier, and the ambiguity with which this has been addressed by terms such as metamodernism, instead we identify the *transglossic* quite particularly and specifically in relation to six indefinable trends and characteristics. These characteristics reflect the term’s simultaneous expression through both form and theme:

- 1) Deep simultaneity
- 2) Planetary consciousness
- 3) Intersectional transversality
- 4) Artistic responsibility
- 5) Productive authenticity
- 6) Trans-formalism

Such features are not in themselves all without prior association to contemporary literature; responsibility and authenticity, for example, feature in discussions of new sincerity, renewalism, and metamodernism, while trans-formalism and transversality resonate with accounts of generic inventiveness and cultural dialogue emphasised in literary applications of accelerationism, performatism and digimodernism. Yet within a transglossic framing distinct differences emerge in how such features are defined compared with earlier scholarship, with an emphasis on dialogic movement that has specific implications. At the same time, some features such as deep simultaneity are distinct to our perspective.

In the outline below we document what we see as the essential tenets of each of these core features, as a tentative and opening provocation to broader discussion. While antecedents for this moment exist before 2000, we see its emergence most definitively from the millennium, and thus draw our examples most readily from texts written in the period 2000-2020. It is beyond the scope of this initial outline to provide the level of close reading needed to fully expose each aspect of the transglossic, or indeed to fully outline relationships to other related terminologies; thus we select examples and cross references which we hope indicate the range of transglossic literature's applicability and its distinctiveness, and which might resonate with a range of readers and their textual experiences. In doing so, we again wish to avoid the ambivalence surrounding post-postmodernisms in favour of criteria that, whilst in process, nevertheless aims toward a discrete set of criteria against which it is possible to assess the features of an individual work.

### **1. Deep Simultaneity**

At its centre, transglossic fiction is concerned for what can be seen as a deep *simultaneity*; that is, for a commitment to the simultaneous occupation of multiple positions which is fundamental in its sustained expression at both formal and thematic levels within the text.

Fluidity is transcribed in the notion of movement across different identities, perspectives, and subjectivities and expressed by a correlative formal inhabitancy of multiple codes and genres. These positions, however, are occupied within a single spatio-temporal location, and are to be viewed thus as conterminous. How these multiple perspectives coalesce and interrelate is explicitly connected to the text's relationship to the extra-textual world – a deep engagement that implicates simultaneity in social and political resonances. In this respect, we draw from previous usage of the term transglossic in education studies, where the term describes a framework to detail the “fluid, yet stable, language practices of bilingual and multilingual societies” and “the social, historical, political, ideological, and spatial realities within which voices emerge”.<sup>16</sup> Simultaneity in this regard can be contrasted to the metamodernist conception of oscillation; while the latter reaches for the inhabitancy of alternating positions, the former is concerned rather with the conterminous occupation of multiplicity. For Vermeulen and van den Akker “meta” implies a form of ontologically pendulous oscillation between and beyond oppositional poles (namely, modernism and postmodernism). This oscillation – or metaxis – concerns “a modern desire for [meaning] and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all,” which is, they argue, immediately evident in late-twentieth century works of fiction.<sup>17</sup> What emerges is a redemptive “as-if” oscillation or performed multistability between “decay and transcendence [...] melancholy and hope, enthusiasm and despair”, a critical space in which the literary techniques of postmodernism are redirected towards modernist aims.<sup>18</sup> Against this notion of the *between*, however, one can posit an argument for the concept of the *across*. Indeed, one can argue that the notion of oscillation is driven not by the characteristics of contemporary fiction so much as by the desire to

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<sup>16</sup> Garcia, 108.

<sup>17</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes,” 6.

<sup>18</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Utopia,” 65.

simultaneously create space for modernist and postmodernist epistemologies without any kind of binaristic opposition or Hegelian resolution.

While we agree that such sublimation to the whole does violence to the difference of contemporary fiction, still we suggest that *across* offers a more productive way to think the contemporary. In the across, one is able to break apart the contiguity that encircles post-postmodernisms in their relation to the past. A text such as George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), for example, engages in psycho-corporal mirroring and the hauntological spectrality of historical memory to recast the relationship between the living and the dead, to enact the spatio-temporal confluences of Homi K. Bhabha's time lag in which we find ourselves simultaneously in both past and present, the here and the elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> In such moments, that meaning which once was closed by the authority of the *logos* is opened again to the interpretation of obscured voices and even to the interrogations of silence.

Despite its stylistic innovations and unreliable narrations, at the centre of *Lincoln in the Bardo* is thus a very specific racial politics, speaking simultaneously to two very specific political moments (the contemporary and the mid-nineteenth century), and a very specific place (the United States). Deep simultaneity takes the multiple as deeply connected to the meaningful with a commitment to a relation to concrete material realities. Such a perspective is markedly different from the strategic self-denial, or "squelching" (as Eschelman puts it), of irony offered by performatism, or the troubling of commitment by postmodernism nihilism implied by renewalism.<sup>20</sup> It also distinguishes itself from the metamodern association with theories such as new materialism where, as critics such as Paul Rekret have argued (2018), the concrete is frequently made abstract and thus essentially depoliticised through a

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<sup>19</sup> Bhabha, 183.

<sup>20</sup> Eschelman and Toth do, however, avoid a "-modern" suffix, indicating there is a precedent, and impetus, for moving away from such terminology.

misplaced emphasis on the fluidity of individual subjectivity at the expense of identifying the political structures which drive inter-relations between organic and non-organic forms.<sup>21</sup> The notion of *fluid yet stable* implies a dual commitment to an assertion of conclusions that may be both applied and extrapolated to specifically named and identifiable political positions alongside a rejection of fixed or ahistorical meaning.

In the service of the *across* rather than the *between* and *against* the post-postmodern preoccupation with pendulous oscillation we advance the notion of *envelopment*, the commitment to a synthesis so that there is meaning within the context of instability rather than against it.<sup>22</sup> This deep simultaneity – to be both *fluid yet stable* in a single moment – avoids the problem of a relation in post-postmodernisms between two terms (modernism and postmodernism) that are themselves unstable and deeply contested. In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, for example, we find a multitude of voices as singular expression rather than polyvocality, the whole of the text brought to bear not in the expression of individual perspectives, but rather in a collectivity which exceeds the singular.<sup>23</sup> Yet Saunders combines this modernist affirmation with a postmodern irony which neither destabilises nor disavows the “reality” of his fictional consciousnesses, with a grim humour and a lamella of references – some genuine, some fabricated – that creates a self-reflexive drawing of attention to the performativity of the text. Elsewhere in Isabel Waidner’s *Gaudy Bauble* (2017) we are introduced not to the

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<sup>21</sup> In “Misunderstandings and Clarifications” Vermeulen and van den Akker identify metamodernism’s “structure of feeling” as synonymous with that identified within new materialist theory.

<sup>22</sup> Eschelmann questions the proposed dialectical oscillation advanced by Vermeulen and van den Akker (a “both-neither” dynamic) and accuses metamodernism of attempting to “straddle the fence” – either there is “dialectical synthesis” or “static” oscillation, but not both. “Notes,” 199. Indeed, Eschelmann’s performatism shares some minor similarities with the notion of envelopment, but differs in its suggestion that the performatist subject is not ‘authentic’ or ‘sincere’ but rather ‘formally apart from others’ with performatist narratives in general designed ‘to trick or coerce us into a position of believing in something unified’. Eschelmann, “What”, n.pag

<sup>23</sup> This description undoubtedly resonates with modernist stream of consciousness, with echoes in particular of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) or Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931).

avantgarde but rather to “awkwardgarde fiction”.<sup>24</sup> Such writing, defined as “potentially trailblazing”, sums up this transglossic moment – writing that simultaneously both is, and is not, meaningful.<sup>25</sup>

It is this idea of a both, a simultaneous everything, which likewise characterises Ali Smith’s fiction. In one notable exchange in *Autumn*, Daniel and Elisabeth discuss her future plans. Declaring her desire to study everything, Daniel declares “That’s why you need to go to collage.” When Elisabeth challenges his incorrect word usage, his reply serves as a statement for an alternative methodology: an insightful definition of that new fiction we struggle to define:

Collage is an institute of education where all the rules can be thrown into the air, and size and space and time and foreground and background all become relative, and because of this everything you think you know gets made into something new and strange.<sup>26</sup>

Collage fiction is a response from the novel to what Shields defines as the threat of its redundancy. For Shields the novel is a literary dinosaur out of step with the “evolution beyond narrative” that he perceives elsewhere in hybrid fusions of fiction and non-fiction prose.<sup>27</sup> Yet these features suggest, rather, a continuity between the novel and texts such as Katherine Angel’s *Unmastered* (2012), Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2016), Max Porter’s *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2015), and indeed Shields’ own *Reality Hunger* (2010): new hybrid works of autofiction, autotheory, memoir, lyrical essay and personal criticism that

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<sup>24</sup> Waidner, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Autumn*, 72.

<sup>27</sup> Shields, 115.

embody a discursive radicalism and the potential of formal innovation to speak to contemporary socio-political concerns.

## 2. Planetary Consciousness

To evoke simultaneity in such deep terms is to recuperate it from a hypermodernist notion of simultaneity which is concerned for ideological conservatism and the service of capitalist systems. So it is that the concept of the transglossic is explicit in its identification of the critical neglect of both non-Western voices and voices of trauma and injustice in existing terminology, as such concerns become generalised into a non-specific and depoliticised ethical statement.<sup>28</sup> In the case of those theories most consumed by globalisation – namely digimodernism, cosmodernism, automodernism and hypermodernism – the limits of globalisation are read largely via its impact on global capital within the west. While altermodernism is concerned with the multicultural consequences of the global, considerably less attention is paid to the violence wrought by globalising forces on the developing world. For example, Christian Moraru’s cosmodernism makes the strongest claim for an engagement with globalization, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism; however, as Moraru admits, his framework at time of writing is not a well-structured or developed *movement*, and he restricts himself to a discussion of post-Cold War American literature and culture to expand on his theory.

Vermeulen and van den Akker’s formulation of a metamodern vernacular addresses “the cultural politics and political cultures of global capitalism as seen from the perspective of Western societies” (predominantly, however, the US and the EU); likewise, hypermodernism

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<sup>28</sup> See Arrow.

exposes the inflated consumerism and individualism at the centre of twenty-first century social relations”.<sup>29</sup> In the case of both theories, these boundaries are explicitly positioned as acknowledgement of the risks that come with the superficial treatment of non-western voices. In the wake of postcolonial theory’s critique of western representation of the other, exemplified by Gayatri Spivak’s landmark essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, such an approach actively avoids the appropriation of non-western literatures.

Yet in relating contemporary affects to reconfigurations in *western* systems, these frameworks have little opportunity to fully examine how one might productively rethink the contemporary through cross-cultural dialogue. In what, despite its intentions, can appear little different to a developed-world centrism, such approaches cannot but repeat in particular a distinction between postmodern and postcolonial writings that some postcolonial criticism has challenged through the suggestion that postmodernism is not tied primarily to western capitalism as many critics suggest, but rather is the secondary by-product of postcolonial expression; the west’s own response to the unravelling of its empire. Rather than correcting this imbalance, these terms inadvertently maintain it, evident both in the concentrated ethnicities of contributors and the notable whiteness of their subjects of focus. The voice of the marginalised writer is crucial to metamodernism; as Nick Bentley notes, “if it is to be a valuable concept, it is only useful at the level of its attitude towards the fragmentary and plural nature of contemporary local, national and global conditions”, yet the majority of studies to date focus on white and Anglo-American writers.<sup>30</sup> While some criticism on metamodernism emphasises its applicability to global contexts, most notably Ilori’s (2014)

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<sup>29</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Periodising,” 18.

<sup>30</sup> Bentley, 740.

work on Wole Soyinka, Bruton's (2018) work on American poetry, and Toth's work on *Beloved*, these are rare examples.<sup>31</sup>

How then to approach this dilemma without repeating a western appropriation? How to acknowledge a contemporary cultural landscape driven by inter-cultural dialogue without subsuming non-western texts as "minor" literatures in a western discourse? Contemporary literature, we suggest, addresses this dialogue explicitly in its globalised subject matter. And in response to this, any theory of the contemporary must hold such cross-cultural dialogue at the centre of its formulation. So it is that transglossic interpretation, while equally resisting the claim to speak for non-western literatures, focuses itself explicitly on how it is that contemporary western literatures have directed their attention toward the creation of a literary consciousness that is anti-national and culturally inclusive. In his discussion of metamodern antecedents, Toth highlights Morrison's *Beloved*, first published in 1987, evidence for him of postmodernism's slow decline against the ethical imperatives of African-American writing. Yet the antecedents to contemporary transglossic form lie not only in texts such as *Beloved*, but also in other postcolonial works. One could look at Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, written in 1981, or J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, published in 1986, or Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, published in 1991, or perhaps most strikingly Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*, written all the way back in 1960, to identify high profile examples within postmodernism's remit that exceed the limitations of high postmodernism as defined in critical writings declaring its death, and which mark the beginning of an alternative literary

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<sup>31</sup> All the contributors to the collection *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, Depth* are white; only two essays in the collection, Toth's and Jörg Heiser's, respectively, offer any notable reference to non-white writers and there are no South Asian or African writers referenced in the collection).

consciousness. *Midnight's Children*, in particular, exemplifies the central meaning of the transglossic – the *trans* as a movement across, and the *glossic*: speaking.

Such *speaking across* cultures is more pronounced in twenty-first century fiction, where it characterises a response to international crises, cosmopolitanism, identity politics, and late capitalist globalisation, a new cultural logic that identifies how works of fiction are involved in the reinscription of the postmodern to address cultural, ecological, socio-economic and political realities. It draws attention to the fact that not only are most post-postmodern paradigms coined by white, male theorists, speaking from a unitary subject position, but their terminologies neglect non-western and marginalised subjectivities, limiting the scope of their dominant cultural logics. New terminology must emphasise the impact of globalisation as a crucial contributing factor in the development or transition of dominant cultural logics, “gradually replacing earlier key concepts in theories of the contemporary such as ‘postmodernism’ and ‘postcolonialism’” and incorporating the heightened consciousness of global others so as to demonstrate fiction’s capacity to enact geopolitical and institutional change, and engage with previously marginalised subject positions.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, the transglossic operates as an expansion of Paul Gilroy’s notion of planetary humanism in its “transitional yearning” to embody a multicultural ethics and comprehend “the universality of our elemental vulnerability to the wrongs we visit upon each other” (2000: 2; 2004: 4), and an expansion of Hassan’s call for a post-postmodernism defined by “pragmatic and planetary civility” that operates “without borders”.<sup>33</sup> The transglossic draws in particular on cosmopolitan forms of relationality and simultaneity to advance planetary discourses and global citizenship. We are consumed by texts with different voices and their intersection:

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<sup>32</sup> Heise, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Gilroy, *Against*, 2; Gilroy, *Empire* 4; Ihab Hassan, “Beyond Postmodernism: Towards an Aesthetic of Trust”, *Modern Greek Studies* 11 (2003), 303-316, 307.

John Lanchester's *Capital* (2009), Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* (2016), Guy Gunaratne's *In Our Mad and Furious City* (2018), Donal Ryan's *From a Low and Quiet Sea* (2018) and Chigozi Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019). Importantly, the grouping of these authors resists a dichotomy between ethnic and white writing that continues to persist in a field that has yet to fully address the ghettoization of writers of colour.

As Donna Haraway writes, "Recuperation is still possible, but only in multispecies alliance, across the killing divisions of nature, culture, and technology".<sup>34</sup> The contemporary planetary consciousness is likewise one which, in the wake of the public attention to organisations such as Extinction Rebellion - and in the context of posthumanist and new materialist theories - speaks of both the human and non-human animal, the latter no longer simply a metaphor for human concerns, but a subject of ethical responsibility in its own right. While Gilroy at the millennium writes of planetary humanism, both Susan Friedman (2015) and Nicholas Bourriaud (2009) write of planetary movements that explicitly exceed the human. Maggie Gee's *The Flood* (2004) is an unusual text at that moment with its human-animal reciprocity captured in animal-children and childlike animals; likewise Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy which takes the common motif of animal consciousness in children's literature and rethinks it as a literary model for *fantastical* cosmopolitanism, built upon existing human aspirations and desires, but extended to trans-species living via its ambitious world-building and concentration on distributive justice regarding trans-species equality and rights.<sup>35</sup> In the past fifteen years, however, texts which examine the precarious interdependencies between humans, animals and the environment have emerged in unprecedented number. For transglossic literature, cosmopolitanism thus includes the impetus

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<sup>34</sup> Haraway, 117-118.

<sup>35</sup> Shaw (2018) discusses the unique capacity of fantasy literature to extend discussions of cosmopolitanism in new and innovative directions.

to open a space for the non-human, as part of a radically different approach to community, political engagement and narrative renewal, evident in novels such as Malachy Tallack's *The Valley at the Centre of the World* (2018), Andrew O'Hagan's *The Life and Opinions of Maf the Dog, and of His Friend Marilyn Monroe* (2010), Ian Stephen's *A Book of Death and Fish* (2014), and Mandy Haggith's *Bear Witness* (2013). Movement between species and the fluid structures of ecological interdependence and affect are distinguished from the idea of the voicing of multiple species. So Jonathan Frantzen's *Freedom* (2010) traces amongst its relationships that between birds and cats; Jon McGregor in *Even the Dogs* (2010) blurs boundaries of human and animal to illuminate the limits of social justice, while Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2017) advances a trans-species cosmopolitanism in which a college student and a botanist find their lives interwoven ecologically with a host of globalised others including an American-Asian computer programmer who finds parallels between code and botany. Powers' novel evokes the fictional form itself as an ecosystem, in which no single character takes preference and where the conclusion of each individual rests symbiotically on relational existence. Such transglossic creativity also extends to the nature of life and death, a defining feature illustrated by novels such as Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001) and Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* (2016).

### **3. Intersectional Transversality**

Inherent in the embrace of cosmopolitanism in these novels is the rejection of separatist notions of cultural difference for what in contradiction Bhabha calls cultural diversity. Within this framing, transglossic fictions continue to approach racial identities as sites of cultural wealth, albeit in contingent terms. Contrast, for example, Zadie Smith's "postmodern" *White Teeth* (2000) with Diana Evans' "transglossic" *26a* (2005). In the former Irie's mixed race

identity is strongly defined against Magid and Millat's cultural hybridity; while the latter is easily assumed, the former is a conceptual battleground that identifies the continued difficulty of inhabiting what is still negatively defined as the "in-between". In *26a*, conversely, Evans' protagonists are comfortably at ease with their racial identities – they no longer move between positions but represent the production of an equally established mixed-race identity. This affiliation is genuine and yet not fixed or predetermined. Evans' characters thus define a transglossic commitment to identity within the terms of what David Hollinger defines as "affiliation by revocable consent"; the idea not of complete fragmentation of communal identification, but rather the inhabitancy of the multiple or indefinable as itself a rooted positioning.<sup>36</sup>

The turn to a position of revocable consent highlights how contemporary literature has returned to questions of belonging with the context of strategic and contingent affiliation. Theories such as renewalism and New Sincerity recognise the centrality of identity politics to questions of meaning and authenticity in such terms, replacing postmodern literature's emphasis on the deconstruction of fixed identities. Yet as a feature of the transglossic, such deconstruction must be advanced not in singular terms, but rather across identity positions, illustrating the intersection of multiple contingent identifications within a single text. In this sense transglossic literature constructs meaning as *transversal*. A term which we borrow from new materialist methodologies, transversality focuses on how subjects inhabit positions within the context of change and difference, assuming the refusal of binary structures and resisting the movement to the transcendental or singular, a positioning which appropriately is defined as opposing "traditions that are haunting a cultural theory that is standing on the brink of both the modern *and* the post-postmodern era".<sup>37</sup> Intrinsically connected to the

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<sup>36</sup> Hollinger, 13,

<sup>37</sup> Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 153.

notion of “queering” as a radical gender politics which the prefix “trans” explicitly invokes, such a movement across positions specifically disrupts existing authorities, binaries, established knowledges, and normative identities. In terms of fiction Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* (1998) for example is a novel simultaneously about the entanglement of race, class and gender; likewise Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* (2005), Sunjeev Sahota’s *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) or Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003). Similarly, the short story is an apposite literary form for giving voice to such liminal subjectivities while simultaneously uniting isolated fragments into an interdependent structure. Short-story collections by McGregor, Olumide Popoola and Annie Holmes, Lorrie Moore, Jhumpa Lahiri and Xiaolu Guo contain narratives that move across subject positions and enact a deep commitment to the perspective of the other, exceeding sympathetic association and extending towards empathetic identification with radical forms of otherness.

Such intersectionality manifests itself in attention to non-binary gender identities in particular. Fictions such as Ali Smith’s *Girl Meets Boy* (2007), Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist* (2002), Jordy Rosenberg’s *Confessions of the Fox* (2018), Casey Plett’s *Little Fish* (2018), David Mitchell’s *The Bone Clocks* (2015), and Isabel Waidner’s *Gaudy Bauble* (2017) not only decouple gender and biological sex, but move across gender positions in the disavowal of binary identities in favour of multiple and strategic identifications. Individuals exist within a wider heteroglossic cultural landscape in order to assign meaning and retrieve the “subject” or “self”. In Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*, for example, the central character of Pran is a young Indian who survives a brutal childhood by a series of transformations that involve both racial and gender fluidity. This work can be starkly contrasted with Salman Rushdie’s approach to a similar subject of diasporic Indian identity two decades earlier in *The Satanic Verses* (1988). In Rushdie’s postmodern text, identity is hybrid and the loss of certainty celebrated as a deconstruction of racialised absolutes connected to notions of

fundamentalism and intolerance. In *The Impressionist*, however, the loss of identity is an erosion of subjectivity that leaves the individual without not only communal association but also personal meaning. By problematizing postmodern deconstruction of identity Kunzru illustrates the continued attraction of meaning, be this contingent or unstable.

#### 4. Artistic Responsibility

Here the glossic signifies the need for an outward-looking communication in order to face postmillennial crises, what Hassan defines as the impetus to move beyond a postmodernism of “radical relativism, of extreme particularism, which denies reciprocity, denies both empathy and obligation”.<sup>38</sup> Just as the fictional Acker in *Crudo* identifies her problems being “because you have not learnt how to soften your borders, how to make room,” in Smith’s *Autumn* Elisabeth Demand (her surname deriving from the French *du monde*, “of the world”) must learn to practice a form of cosmopolitan narrative hospitality, to “always try to welcome people into the home of your story”.<sup>39</sup> In the conjunction of connectivity and social change these texts approach another *trans*, namely *transindividuality*, and particularly its development in the work of Etienne Balibar. As Balibar (1997) declares that transindividuality must be viewed as a positive notion of conjunction rather than as the absence of a recognised position, so both Smith’s and Laing’s protagonists come to understand that their political impulses are meaningless unless a personal strength of feeling is combined with a communal sense of identification.

Balibar’s work confers upon the individual a continual movement from selfhood to communality that has the potential to enact political change. The writer as an embodied form of that isolated selfhood is particularly implicated in transglossic narrative revision.

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<sup>38</sup> Hassan, “Beyond”, 308.

<sup>39</sup> Laing, 66; Smith, *Autumn*, 119.

Transglossic fictions such as *Autumn* and *Crudo* distinguish the function of writing from that presented in postmodern writings. Although both novels are explicit about the responsibility of the writer – evident in *Autumn*'s contention that “whoever makes up the story makes up the world” – such textual interventions are quite different from the hierarchical patronage in novels such as Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) or *Atonement* (2001), both of which might conversely be seen as excellent examples of metamodernism's oscillations.<sup>40</sup> While McEwan preserves the writer *as writer*, Smith's and Laing's texts open up to parable, prompting a universalism that reveals transglossic fiction's ethics. How different are the definitive actions and statements found in *Crudo* and *Autumn* to the interminable musings of McEwan's modernist-influenced Henry Perowne, endless vacillating over the war, acting only in the wake of the ceaseless hand wringing of the reluctant? Perowne, we can think, never truly sees his antagonist Baxter even as he saves him, far removed from the intimate realities of the other.

Implicit in such a shift is a new temporal relation between fiction and its contexts – the specificity of the transglossic moment where the post-millennium has produced fictions that are explicitly rather than implicitly political. The very concept behind Smith's Seasonal quartet is one which foregrounds precisely this positioning of the author as public intellectual with social responsibility; Smith has written the tetralogy in order to conduct a writing experiment into the possible public role of fiction in actively engaging in political events, with the first three books offering stark commentary on European identity in the wake of Brexit, Tory austerity, and the forced detainment of migrants in Britain, while the final book in the sequence engages with the post-Covid moment. Yet while Smith is the most striking example of this intervention, she is not alone; Kristian Shaw's *Brexlit* (2021) documents the

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<sup>40</sup> Smith, *Autumn*, 119.

widespread literary response to European integration and British fiction's response to subsequent EU withdrawal, drawing on the work of over one hundred writers. In October 2017 sexual allegations against media mogul Harvey Weinstein became headline news and by December *The New Yorker* had published Kristian Rouponian's short story, "Cat Person", in which a spurned older man verbally abuses the novel's female protagonist, ostensibly punishing her for a failure to conform to social norms of female behaviour. So followed a stream of novels focused on abusive male-female relationships including Anna Burns' Booker Prize-winning *Milkman* (2018) and Kate Walbert's *His Favourites* (2018), leading the *New York Times* to publish an article entitled "#MeToo is all too real. But to better understand it, turn to fiction".<sup>41</sup>

Rhian Lucy Cosslett notes in her discussion of this swift explosion of #MeToo fictions (2019) that such developments are both a powerful creative intervention that recognises the power of literature to offer unique modes of critique and an uncomfortable reminder of publishing's tactical association with political causes. Writers have embraced this knowledge self-consciously and strategically; writing of the "politicised creativity" of black British woman writers shortly after her own Booker Prize win in 2019, Bernadine Evaristo notes, "We never imagined that we would be taken as seriously as we are at this moment", but that the task for writers is to find a sustainable presence that will outlive the trend.<sup>42</sup> Even as Covid-19 continued to rage, Zadie Smith's collection of essays, *Intimations*, was published in the summer of 2020, presenting the idea of racism as a virus sweeping the American nation without a vaccine in sight, writing which not only exemplifies the strength of authorial investment but also captures the crossing of subject positions inherent in the transglossic moment, a simultaneity of sufferings speaking to and for each other. The explosion of digital

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<sup>41</sup> Seghal, n.pag.

<sup>42</sup> Evaristo, "Unprecedented," n.pag.

platforms has also played a crucial part in such authorial interventions, allowing writers to make statements both faster and more explosively than they ever could via traditional publishing.<sup>43</sup> In *The Washington Post*, Salman Rushdie would write a scathing critique of Donald Trump. Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the second wave of Black Lives Matter, authors including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ben Okri were amongst those who spoke publicly about the need for radical action.<sup>44</sup> And in the midst of Covid-19, authors have become voices of universal discontent and tragedy – an exacerbation of the already evident public role of writers as they express a collective longing for meaningful experience in the context of a suddenly proximal mortality.<sup>45</sup>

## 5. Productive Authenticity

As literary texts and their authors declare a role once again as contributors to socio-political realities, the marginal subject is positioned conversely as central – to be a productive failure in Jack Halberstam’s terms (2011), to be a queer, but never to be wholly unintelligible or subaltern. *Trans* stands here for the notion of a provisional authenticity – one spoken not merely on the acceptance of contingency but characterised by it, by a rooted mutability which announces the relevance of concepts such as dwelling, community and belonging in an explicitly after-the-postmodern formulation. In early discussions the theory of metamodernism emphasises this operation; for example, in their 2013 article, “Utopia, Sort Of,” Vermeulen and van den Akker highlight how postmodern intertextuality is transformed in the contemporary period, where such referentiality is less an ironic postmodern game and

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<sup>43</sup> Jörg Heiser’s theory of super-modernity, building on the work of postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, touches upon similar ground, albeit via its exceptionally vague discussion of acceleration and cultural entanglement. However, its concentration on how the digital (specifically the Internet) creates ‘a kind of *computational aggregate of multiple influences and sources*’ in the contemporary moment is of limited use and also involves forms of rupture, fragmentation and exhaustion (echoing the postmodern moment). Heiser, “Pick”.

<sup>44</sup> See Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “On Racism and Cancel Culture”; Ben Okri, “A Time Comes”.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Patricia Scanlan’s piece “Irish Writers on Covid 19”.

rather shorthand for direct access to fundamental meaning. In this respect, the distinction lies not in how words function, not in what they *are*, but in what they *do*. In metamodernism, however, such meaning is undercut by the notion of oscillation and its reliance on an irreconcilable uncertainty. This fails to account for how many contemporary texts employ such reference points. In *Autumn*, for example, we witness the invocation of Blake, where the line from *Auguries of Innocence*, “To see a world in a grain of sand” becomes “How many worlds can you hold in a hand. In a handful of sand”.<sup>46</sup> Smith’s reference to the hand evokes the embodied experience of the contemporary, and the agency of the individual to hold the contemporary diaspora together – a provocation to those driven to vote leave by anti-immigration sentiment. Yet this moment does not result in metamodernist vacillation, but rather the opposite. Daniel gives Elisabeth the choice whether to throw or not throw his watch into the river, and her decision – to throw – is italicised as if to formally bring her act into being with a definitive sense of both purpose and meaning.

Existing post-postmodernisms fail to do justice to this ethical project, and its desire for a sense of ethical wholeness that eschews the disorder of postmodernism. Yet at the same time, the notion of authenticity risks a recourse to a conservative politics of nostalgia, defined respectively by Robert Eaglestone and Gilroy as both cruel and imperialist.<sup>47</sup> In the wake of Black Lives Matter and Brexit, this conservative nostalgia is perhaps more dangerous than ever. It is imperative, therefore, that the transglossic investment in authenticity stands alongside its reliance on revocable affiliation and transversal politics, constructing a specifically anti-nostalgic authenticity which is driven by its commitment to new rather than recurrent identifications. It is in such a framing that fluidity and authenticity cease to be antithetical. The fluidity of meaning or truth in the transglossic pertains not to the postmodern

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<sup>46</sup> Smith, *Autumn*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> See Eaglestone 2018 and Gilroy 2004.

deconstruction of grand narratives, but rather to a necessary consequence of the need to speak across and between subject positions that are themselves always speaking across and between their own interests. In metamodern thinking, for example, the postmodern position on the grand narrative is revised to allow for the desire for the ethical or sincere, yet the uncertain remains as an *a priori* condition. In this respect, the erasure of the grand narrative is that with which the metamodern must grapple in order to construct a space for that which is contingent yet meaningful. In contrast, we suggest here that something quite different is in operation, in which it is empathetic identification which is the *a priori*, and the erasure of the grand narrative a necessary consequence of this imperative. It is this rebalancing which accounts for the ambivalence regarding meaning in transglossic fictions. That is, while the text may unravel the grand narrative in the service of identity politics, it is not opposed to the existence of a grand narrative more generally. Indeed, there remains the potential for a grand narrative that might encompass multiple perspectives and marginalised voices, touched upon in works such as Caryl Phillips' *A View from the Empire at Sunset* (2018), Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad* (2016), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Marilyn Robison's *Gilead* trilogy, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), or Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017).

These texts move us far away from post-postmodernism, but also away from Vermeulen and van den Akker's presentation of metamodernism as a discourse of movement in spite of inevitable failure, with the expectation that the search for truth is futile.<sup>48</sup> Equally, there is a distinct difference in our emphasis here from Toth's renewalism, which sees the distinction between postmodernism and the contemporary in terms of meaning as one of emphasis but not of ontological difference: the teleological illusions exposed by postmodernism are still

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<sup>48</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes," 5.

illusions in the contemporary, only now they have become desirable; the text is no longer nihilistic, yet paradoxically neither does it return to modernist idealism.<sup>49</sup> What emerges in the transglossic, rather, is an authentic dialogue and communicative strategy that activates not only a more empathetic reader response but also a deeper literary encounter between reader and author with material consequence which has more in common with Hassan's return to a Jamesian pragmatism that would reinvigorate the concept of truth as both dynamic and real.<sup>50</sup> Such an encounter, we suggest, is equally neither postmodern nor modernist, in that it stages a re-commitment to principles viewed as neither lost nor illusory, but rather accessible through the contingent and diversified dialogues of contemporary culture.

Transglossic literature is thus actively provocative regarding questions of meaning within a politicised context that views ideas such as belonging, community, and ethical action as inherently possible. Vermeulen and van den Akker reject the notion of ideology for a Williamesque "structure of feeling" in order to subsume a range of emerging and tangential literary trends with their own unique angles, ultimately risking the same lack of specificity for which they critique postmodernism. They acknowledge this "structure" as belonging not only to their own terminology, but also to a broader school of thinking which also encompasses New Romanticism, new materialism, and speculative realism. There is to be no manifesto, no movement, and no "vision or utopian goal".<sup>51</sup> Yet in contrast to this, transglossic perspective announces without apology a structure of committed engagement; not a moment of New Sincerity, but one of new *responsibility*, not an affect, but an *action*; not an "ethics of indecision" as Toth calls it, but rather an ethics of strategic affiliation<sup>52</sup>

These texts are less concerned with affectual happiness *per se*, than with the ethico-political

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<sup>49</sup> Toth, *Passing*, Kindle location 1074.

<sup>50</sup> See Hassan, "Beyond Postmodernism: Towards an Aesthetic of Trust".

<sup>51</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Misunderstandings and Clarifications", np.

<sup>52</sup> Toth, *Passing*, Kindle location 1496.

potential of productive happiness. In this context, the metamodernist focus on hope is starkly ineffectual, pointing as it does to sentiment without necessary provocation to agency. Rather than seeing renewalism in Toth's terms as the frustration of meaning by the spectral inheritance of irony, a theory of transglossic fiction positively reads formal conjunctions in the spirit of a *postmodernism that has always been ethical*.

It is in this context that when Irmtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk observe in relation to Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* that the text mimics postmodern narrative disjunction but at the same time resists postmodern unreadability, pointing beyond the novel's textual surface; they refer to this not as metamodernism, but reconstruction.<sup>53</sup> This reference points to the impact of the transglossic text, which is not simply the creation of contingent meaning, but also a meaning that points towards radical action and social change. The transglossic concerns a *reconstructive* rather than *deconstructive* mission, suggesting fiction's potential to hold meaning beyond formal experimentation or surface representation. McLaughlin notes that following the postmodern moment, writers of fiction "need to find a way beyond self-referential irony to offer the possibility of construction," to "write within the context of self-aware language, irony and cynicism, acknowledge them, even use them, but then to write through them, to break through the cycle of self-reference, to represent the world constructively, to connect with others" in a process of renewal.<sup>54</sup> In response, the transglossic works to realise this renewal, emboldening the narrative towards gestures of transformation and newness in what can be referred to more specifically as a *productive* optimism. We choose the modifier productive to indicate not simply a positive attitude towards the future, but rather a positive attitude that actively demands social and/or political change.<sup>55</sup> This can

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<sup>53</sup> Huber and Funk, 161-175.

<sup>54</sup> McLaughlin, "Discontent," 65; "Post-postmodernism," 215.

<sup>55</sup> Jameson, "Aesthetics," n.pag.

be compared, for example, to Jameson's continued framing of postmodernism in the twenty-first century as "a kind of contemporary imprisonment in the present [...] this is a political diagnosis as well as an existential or phenomenological one, since it is intended to indict our current political paralysis and inability to imagine, let alone to organize, the future and future change". It is, we contend, more useful to think about texts in these terms than to see them as oscillating between negative and positive outcomes. For in fact it is rather the case that the texts are optimistic about the possibility for positive outcomes, but that in order to cement the need for action and to avow marginal experiences they must contextualise this with a crucial acknowledgement of socio-political realities.

Elsewhere, Sara Upstone (2016) has written about this specifically in relation to the representation of race as a utopian realism, and such a term speaks here equally to the formal simultaneity of the transglossic and its function to advance a specific socio-political possibility. The turn to speculative, optimistic future thinking in the midst of cataclysmic political change marks the transglossic out from both the postmodern with its apocalyptic tropes but also the metamodern; the ambivalence of which is again present through Vermeulen and van den Akker's definition of the genre as atopic – "a future presence that is futureless".<sup>56</sup> For Eve this temporality is the defining feature of the metamodern ontology, a framing in which "hope, melancholy, empathy, apathy, unity, plurality, totality and fragmentation [...] can be reduced to the oscillation of eternity against time and reflexive stasis against utopia".<sup>57</sup> This awareness reflects Vermeulen and van den Akker's argument that the combination of "a modern naiveté [...] informed by postmodern scepticism" means that "the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility,"

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<sup>56</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes," 12.

<sup>57</sup> Eve, 13.

where postmodern melancholy is retrieved to invoke hope.<sup>58</sup> Yet in the transglossic what we see is more akin to the heterotopia, a space not of nothing, but rather of everything.<sup>59</sup>

Whereas for Eve the heterotopia is not at odds with the *atopos*, being merely the location of utopian and dystopian impulses, this is not the case in the transglossic, where the heterotopia exists as the situated, pragmatic optimism defying both ideal futures and their nightmare undercurrents. For example, *Autumn* ends with the sense of a beginning; novels such as Max Porter's *Lanny* (2019), Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015) and Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* (2020) interweave stories of horrific suffering with strident statements of survival – each text filled with an energy and creativity that refuses the idea of an ending, not in the service of the dissipation of meaning but rather in the spirit of continuance, ongoing, and possibility.

To evoke productivity in such terms is not to evoke a neo-capitalist ideology; ironically, productivity in these terms means eschewing capitalist ways of thinking. In this respect, to be made productive for a social good, for a hospitality and an engagement with the other, remains a radical and anti-authoritarian positioning.<sup>60</sup> As texts such as *A Little Life* and *Shuggie Bain* illustrate, the transglossic is concerned in its optimism not to eschew social and political hardships, but quite the opposite, producing this optimism as the consequence of a social commitment to act on the barriers to its realisation. Therefore, productive optimism can also involve what might typically be seen negatively, where that negativity speaks to a radical anti-establishment position that is in itself an optimistic driver of change. This negativity evokes what Jack Halberstam (2011) defines as the queer art of failure, quite in

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<sup>58</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes," 5.

<sup>59</sup> Although this in itself does not confer newness if we take Brian McHale's point in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) that the postmodern is not dystopic but itself heterotopic (again evidence of the problematics of these kind of distinctions).

<sup>60</sup> Such optimism, equally, is not to be confused with the conservative nostalgia and readerly comfort of what in popular terms is defined as *Up Lit*.

keeping with transglossic spirit in which such failure is structured to create resistance and potential social transformation. In *Crudo* we hear that “It was the thing right now to take people from the outskirts [...] and try and look at events through their eyes. No one cared about Napoleon or Darwin, it was more interesting to be obscure, almost unheard of”.<sup>61</sup> In *Brick Lane* it is the failure of Nazneen’s marriage that creates the possibility of both her cosmopolitan and feminist future, while in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008) the narrator Balram’s personal transformation and subsequent material success rests on his moral failure in a complex globalised environment of cultural exchange and syncretism.

## 6. Trans-formalism

Formal experimentation cannot but be altered by these imperatives: it becomes itself a mode of *entanglement* of realist, postmodern, and modernist writing cast to emphasise the inherent relationality at the centre of transglossic narrative. Thus in structural and generic terms, a core part of the transglossic is that it implies a wider notion of *trans-formalism*: an envelopment embodied in a speaking across forms and literary paradigms. Trans-formalism thus indicates how the deep simultaneity of identity positions is mirrored in an equally conjunctive formal practice. The overlap between postmodernism, renewalism and New Sincerity reveals how a focus on either literary form or affect is insufficient in taking account of what is essential to all of these terms. Namely, a conscious engagement with literary form in the service of a particular ethico-political engagement that exists in the midst of, rather than in denial of, the postmodern deconstruction of grand narratives and discourses of authenticity. Vermeulen and van den Akker acknowledge as much when, in the introduction to their latest edited volume, they write that in metamodernism “we witness the return of

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<sup>61</sup> Laing, 123-24.

realist and modernist forms”.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, Toth’s framing of renewalism as the complicating of postmodern focus with a “dirty realism” that renews the possibility of the “Real”.<sup>63</sup> While metamodernist oscillation implies tension and disjunction and renewalism argues for the haunting and subsequent frustration of the promised “Real” by continued irony, transglossic simultaneity exists not as a return to the notion of synthesis that metamodernism disavows, but – in keeping with its identity politics and thematic concerns – as the simultaneous inhabitancy of multiple forms without reconciliation. This resonates most distinctly with Hassan’s recent work, in which he argues for a productive form of generic diversity as “literary realism, though it may not suffice, remains indispensable; its discontents spill into, indeed inform, other genres”.<sup>64</sup>

That form and thematic concern are mutually interdependent is key to the distinctiveness of transglossic writing. Again, Ali Smith perhaps best articulates this position. In her lecture for the Edinburgh World Writer’s Conference in 2012 entitled “Style vs Content,” Smith declares that *form is content*. That is, without being driven by social and political concerns, it is impossible to think in terms of a revolution of style. And, equally, that without addressing the form of the political it is impossible to think of being political. In this embrace of *form as content* and *content as form* the term transglossic permits escape from the cyclical stasis of existing literary paradigms and the limited heuristic tools through which academics define and locate contemporary innovations of the novel form. What exists is not the death of postmodern experimentation but rather its pervasiveness to a limit point in which new terminology is required to mark distinctiveness. More importantly, however, it addresses the relevance not only of modernism and postmodernism to contemporary fiction but also – and

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<sup>62</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Periodising,” 3.

<sup>63</sup> Toth, *Passing*, Kindle location 1630.

<sup>64</sup> Hassan, “Beyond”, 311.

equally – realism. It might be fair to speculate that writers like Jonathan Safran Foer, Zadie Smith, and Ali Smith, given their ethical imperatives, would have once been realist writers (indeed, Zadie Smith arguably began as such). Yet one can also suggest that, as Steven Connor argues, postmodern form has expanded to encompass their concerns, which were always possible in postmodernism’s postcolonial manifestations, but have only more recently become part of western postmodernism’s worldview to a notable degree. What can be read as the emergence of sincerity into experimental writing is also, equally, the emergence of the experimental into the sincere. Thus *Autumn* begins not with the postmodern but with Dickens – the writer of the sincere, the realist. In this context, the relationship to a specific form becomes irrelevant, and the metamodern emerges as *one stylistic manifestation* of a broader transglossic form of fiction. Rather than the radicalism of the text preceding through modernism, a transglossic perspective views both modernism and postmodernism’s formal characteristics not as essence but as extension. What is of interest is a commitment to form through its political import.

Such awareness produces the slippage between forms evident in many contemporary fictions. One might take as an example here Zadie Smith’s *NW* (2012). The novel forges an intersectional awareness of the entwined forces of race, gender and class that shape the central characters’ lives in contrast to the more discrete identity categories at work in Smith’s earlier novels. Yet alongside this *NW* embraces a formal diversity that is equally new to Smith’s work. While some reviews of the novel critique the text’s formal shift from modernism, to realism, to postmodernism as a lack of consistency, a reading through the transglossic supports David James’ argument that such shifts are an intentional part of the novel’s *unruliness*, and draws attention to the novel’s inherent pairing of form and content.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> James, “Wounded,” 204-14.

Thus the modernist-inclined opening section of the novel, “Visitation”, concerns Leah and her questions of internal selfhood, while the following section – Smith’s realist response to the wave of stabbings involving black men in London – ends with Felix’s murder. Finally, the concluding section of the novel, “Host”, embraces a postmodern form that speaks to the deconstruction of selfhood as Keisha Blake re-evaluates her transformation into Natalie De Angelis. With its brief vignettes, presented out of numerical order, the section is also a rejection of the model of cause and consequence in Smith’s earlier writings in favour of an exploration of intra-activity in the formation of Natalie’s adult self: the “host of material-discursive forces-including ones that get labeled (sic) ‘social,’ ‘cultural,’ ‘psychic,’ ‘economic,’ ‘natural,’ ‘physical’, ‘biological,’ ‘geopolitical,’ and ‘geological’ that may be important to particular (entangled) processes of materialization”.<sup>66</sup> Such parallels announce that even within the single text form must be malleable to develop content effectively. It is a movement far from metamodernist vacillation. The three generic forms are reconciled by the novel’s conclusion concerning the coming together of Leah and Natalie and the multivocality of the latter’s constructed identity: “Natalie dialled [the phone]. It was Keisha who did the talking [...] disguising her voice with her voice”.<sup>67</sup>

Considering movement between formal positions in such a way is more useful than the post-postmodern concern for locating relations to both modernism and postmodernism, which inevitably produces an internalised discourse with little productive function. A post-postmodernist scholar is at risk of becoming preoccupied with whether *NW* is a text that evokes James and Seshagiri’s modernist metamodernism or Vermeulen and van den Akker’s more postmodernist metamodernism. In contrast, identifying the text as transglossic is more concerned for the purposes of the text’s multiple registers and more comfortable with the

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<sup>66</sup> Barad, 66.

<sup>67</sup> Smith, *NW*, 294.

text's incompatibility with pre-existing formal structures without disregarding Smith's literary lineage.

## **Conclusion**

Our aim in this discussion has been to offer a provocation – to invite further consideration of how post-postmodernist neologisms may be indicative of a critical problematic concerned with the continued referencing of modernism and postmodernism in relation to contemporary literature. At a moment in which there is a global need for a vision of the future – to find the energy and dynamism for a post-Covid world – this haunting of the past becomes a barrier to the demands of the present. In response to this need we attempt to introduce some semblance of specificity against terminology destined to suffer the same fate of generalisation as postmodernism. While we agree with many critics that postmodernism has lost its critical value, and fiction has moved beyond the formal experimentation of the 1970s, we feel the solution is not to replace postmodernism with another haunting, but rather to respond definitively to the emergent subject positions and ethico-political developments of contemporary fiction.

Concurring with Rudrum and Stavris's suggestion that the metamodern paradigm constitutes "a positive challenge" to calls for the demise of postmodernism but fails to replace the postmodern as the dominant cultural logic, we believe that what really at stake in this moment is an attitudinal shift which is confused by using a stylistic suffix, and which is simultaneously both broader and more specific than the connotations attached to post-postmodernist literature.<sup>68</sup> Driven by a broader ethical turn, the re-emergence of the writer as

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<sup>68</sup> Rudrum and Stavris, "Metamodernism," 308.

public intellectual, seismic political events such as 9/11, and social-political movements such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and radical environmentalism, contemporary literature has emerged with a new emphasis on intersectionality, cross-cultural empathy, authorial responsibility, and productive authenticity. Captured by the idea of the transglossic, these features indicate a broader trend in that what has emerged exceeds specific formal characteristics in favour of a literary style that is equally diverse. Yet such a shift is more specific in the sense that although it may hold relevance beyond fiction to other written forms it is distinctly literary, defined by both a defined interweaving of content and form, and by a nuanced and identifiable attitude towards multiple perspectives and their relationship to cultural imaginaries of both the present and the future. The concept of the transglossic brings to light the apparent death of postmodernism and recasts the post-postmodernism within a wider heuristic and thematic framework. In recasting both the modern and postmodern, the realist and romantic, it involves a process of transculturation and enables the resonance of the past and the present in dialogic constructions and communications. The transglossic thus intimates the emancipatory role of literature as a vehicle for cultural and political change, moves away from the sense of an ending implied by modernist suffixes, and generates a new beginning for the literary form.

**Word Count – 11,892**

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