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U.S. Fiction in the Age of Authenticity:
Earnestness and Digital Epitexts in Leilani's
Luster

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Abstract – This essay aims to explore the interrelation of the widespread use of digital epitextual material and the common practice, in post-postmodern U.S. fiction, to employ characters and character-narrators that share some biographical details with their authors. Specifically, this essay attends to narrative communication when an autobiographical connection between authors and characters is established not textually, but paratextually, through digital epitexts to be found, for instance, on authors' social media profiles. Through the analysis of Raven Leilani's *Luster* (2020), I will show how digital epitexts acquire a central role in contemporary narrative dynamics: it is through them that many novels realize the author-character connection providing fiction with a layer of alleged authenticity meant to reinforce the post-postmodern tendency to earnestly engage with ethical and political issues.

Keywords – Post-postmodernist Fiction; Authenticity; Co-construction; Digital Epitexts; Literature and Social Media; Zadie Smith; Raven Leilani.

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U.S. Fiction in the Age of Authenticity: Earnestness and Digital Epitexts in Leilani's *Luster*

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1. Introduction

In 2013, in a footnote in an essay in his collection *The Kraus Project*, Jonathan Franzen expressed disappointment for Salman Rushdie “succumbing” to Twitter (12). Rushdie immediately replied, via Twitter, that Franzen could keep enjoying his “ivory tower” while he and Margaret Atwood, Joyce Carol Oates, Nathan Englander, Gary Shteyngart, and A.M. Homes (writers who, like Rushdie, employed Twitter) were fine with the social media platform. Today, almost ten years after this notorious episode, Franzen has not yet opened a Twitter account; instead, finding writers who, like him, do not engage in social media activities is less and less common. Although some contemporary writers have been using new media affordances for expressive purposes (e.g., Jennifer Egan and her Twitter story “Black Box”), for the most part they have been urged by the changing practices in the publishing industry to maintain a social media presence which intensifies extratextual author-audience interactions while creating new paratextual dynamics embedded into forms of online communication.¹

As I have argued elsewhere, to understand these author-audience interactions in the digital sphere, a rhetorical theory of paratextuality is particularly helpful, as it distinguishes between (i) paratexts that are created and shared by authors together with the other rhetorical resources employed in order to connect with the audience and (ii) paratexts that are not part of the rhetorical resources, either because they do not come from authors or because they are not created/shared for the specific communicative occasion of a particular narrative (Pignagnoli).² This distinction between paratexts that are rhetorical resources of narrative communication for/around a particular narrative and paratexts that are not rhetorical resources is especially relevant for literary narrative in the digital age and the current proliferation of author-audience digital interactions because it allows us to distinguish the different effects this paratextual material may have when used by authors to guide the rhetoric beyond their texts and when encountered by audience members before or after reading. Building on these definitions, my aim in this essay is to explore the interrelation of the current rise of digital epitexts and the common practice, in post-postmodern U.S. fiction, to employ characters and character-narrators that share some of their authors' biographical details. Specifically, this essay attends to narrative communication when an autobiographical connection between authors and characters is established not textually, but paratextually, through digital epitexts to be found, for instance, on authors' social media profiles. As I will show through the analysis of Raven Leilani's *Luster* (2020), digital epitexts acquire a central role in contemporary narrative dynamics because it is through them that many narratives realize the author-character autobiographical connection

¹ See also Thomas; and Latini in this issue.

² I use the term “rhetorical resources” following James Phelan definition for the elements of narrative a “teller can deploy in order to connect with the audience,” e.g., paratexts, characters, voice, style (25-26).

Earnestness and Digital Epitexts in Leilani's *Luster* Virginia Pignagnoli

providing fiction with a sense of authenticity meant to reinforce the post-postmodern tendency to employ an earnest mode to engage with ethical and political issues.

2. Author-Character Connection, Earnestness, and Digital Epitexts

In her essay "Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction" (2019), Zadie Smith addresses the current tendency to ground fiction on personal experience and to "authorize" it through an autobiographical connection between characters (or narrators) and the actual author. Smith argues against the idea that today, more and more, "only an intimate authorial autobiographical connection with a character" is considered the "rightful basis of a fiction" and remarks that many contemporary writers are following the "supposedly unquestionable authenticity of personal experience" as the guiding principle behind their novels (a principle that, according to her, at least allows fiction to still exist). Indeed, since writing is a big "act of presumption," to have "writer and subject as alike as possible," makes writers feel more correct about "representing fictional human behavior" (Smith). Smith acknowledges that it makes sense, for minorities to "reclaim their agency, when it comes to the representation of selves," although an autobiographical connection would not necessarily make readers feel that what they are reading is "fictionally speaking, true."

Smith's essay echoes recent scholarly discussions around the rise of autofiction (see Gibson; Iversen, for example) and the idea of a post-postmodern earnestness (see Ameel and Caracciolo; Konstantinou "Four Faces"; and Alber and Bell). Indeed, while the question of "truth in fiction" was mostly dealt through an ironic skepticism within postmodernist fiction, post-postmodernist fiction has been invested in "post-ironic," earnest communicative strategies.³ This means that, for example, while engaging with political and social matters, post-postmodernist novels by writers such as Catherine Lacey, Ocean Vuong, Lauren Groff, Jesmyn Ward, and Hanya Yanagihara foreground their discourses through a sincere mode, calling attention to what Susan Lanser calls the "truth-value" of the novel beyond the fictional (7). And autofiction, inscribed in this new earnest paradigm, is now considered a very common "mode, moment, and strategy" (Effe and Lawlor 4). Hanna Meretoja, for instance, links its current popularity to the "narrative turn" that has been pushing contemporary fiction to "metanarratively" reflect "on cultural processes of narrative sense-making and on the roles that narrative practices play in our lives" (121). Lee Konstantinou, instead, posits that while "postmodernists wanted to show that we could never really get behind representations to reality itself," autofiction writers "don't get too hung up on questions of mediation, representation, and interpretation. They want real people, real stories, real life, a *realer realism*" ("The Noise"; my emphasis).

In such context, the author-character autobiographical connection that Smith discusses is not only central to post-postmodernist narratives because, as she notices, it calls attention to the way minorities can reclaim their agency. Rather, this author-character connection may also become an authorial strategy employed to provide a novel with a further sense of authenticity meant to reinforce the earnestness of the ethical and political discourses presented in the narrative. But for narratives that are not labeled as autofictions nor that explicitly play with generic distinctions, clues for this kind of authenticity that relies on an author-character autobiographical connection and grounds fictional narration on personal experience are to be found extratextually. In other words, if this author-character autobiographical connection is not explicit in the text (e.g., through an onomastic correspondence between author and character), nor in the peritext (e.g., through the declaring of the genre to be autofiction, or a memoir), it may be

³ I employ the term "post-postmodernism" to refer to the poetics succeeding postmodernism following McLaughlin and McHale.

Earnestness and Digital Epitexts in Leilani's *Luster* Virginia Pignagnoli

apparent from the epitextual clues disseminated outside the text, and, in particular, on the authors' social media profiles. These digital spaces, I believe, are becoming a privileged place for authors to disseminate such authenticity clues and for audiences to be on the lookout for them. Indeed, whether including digital epitextual material employed as resource of narrative communication or not, authors' social media profiles (*pace* Franzen) have proliferated in the last few years, calling attention to the possibility for authors and audiences to expand, continue, and interact with a narrative communication in the digital world.

Paratextual material contained in authors' social media profiles explicitly connected to the authors' narratives and/or simply linked with the authors' lives and their public persona offers clues that audiences may employ in their reconstruction of a narrative storyworld. According to co-construction theory, reconstruction is the audience's active co-building of the storyworld from the author's blueprints completed with some of its own assumptions and mental representation and the possible extensions generated by further author-audience interactions that today happen more and more in the digital sphere (Effron et al.). This means that the whole body of digital epitexts disseminated on authors' social media profiles may "cause audiences to re-approach and re-interpret the narrative's communicative purpose(s)" (Effron et al. 347). In other words, digital epitexts have the ability, as co-construction theory—building on rhetorical narratology (Phelan), cognitive narratology (Herman), and possible worlds approaches to narrative (Ryan)—shows, to affect the audience's reconstruction of a storyworld. Therefore, since this re-approaching and re-interpreting of the narrative's communicative purpose(s) often involves clues for possible author-character autobiographical connections (e.g., the sharing of similar biographical characteristics or 'lived' experiences), digital epitexts are fully inscribed in the dynamics of post-postmodernist fiction described above.

Moreover, together with the establishment of an author-character connection, digital epitextual material to be found on authors' social media profiles may also, at the same time, metanarratively foreground the relevance of narratives in our society (see Meretoja). That is, contemporary writers may employ digital epitexts to add to the ethical and political discourses they engage with in their novels a further proof of the relevance of their fictional discourses for real-world issues. Indeed, providing their fictional narratives with a sense of authenticity through the establishment of a possible author-character connection via digital epitexts, may be a way to further authorize their (fictional) responses to the "moral, ethical and political issues affecting contemporary society" (Alber and Bell 124). Thus, when an author-character autobiographical connection is established extratextually through digital epitexts, these acquire a central role, showing how narratives are made of "many exchanges between authors and audiences, and between storyworlds and actual worlds" (Effron et al. 347). This means that, while audience members may have always been actively aware of the contiguous relationship between storyworld details and actual world facts, digital epitexts are becoming the place where this contiguous relationship is more evident.

3. Earnestness, Ethics, and Politics in *Luster*

In a recent review of Raven Leilani's debut novel *Luster* (2020), Garth Greenwell describes its sentences having the effect of "a consciousness overwhelmed by experience." The review does not explicitly mention the novel's earnest mode of narration but nevertheless captures the way Leilani aims at representing the consciousness of a character-narrator: Edie offers her readers a raw, sincere account of her experiences and of what she does, often reluctantly, guided by a 'survival' instinct more than any sort of planning. There are a series of clues that, from the beginning, guide audiences' judgments towards an understanding of the ethics of the rhetorical purpose—meant as "the ethical dimension of the overall narrative act" (Copland 233)—as

Earnestness and Digital Epitexts in Leilani's *Luster* Virginia Pignagnoli

calling attention to several issues that, one after the other, provide a critique of many aspects of contemporary U.S. society.

The event that gives Edie, as well as Leilani, the initial chance to discuss issues of discrimination, racial microaggressions, class, and power relations is the beginning of an affair that she, Edie, a twenty-three-years-old Black artist, living in New York, has with a man, Eric, who is twice her age, white, married, and living in the suburbs. Their relationship over the course of a few months is the driving force of the narrative, the main storyline amid a series of unfortunate events. These events include Edie losing her underpaid job as editorial assistant at a publishing house, which then leads her to start working as a delivery girl, a job that does not provide enough financial help for her not to be evicted from her apartment nor to ease the burden of her student loans. At this point in the narrative progression, audiences are aware that Edie has no support from her family since both her parents are dead. For a few months, she will end up living with her love interest Eric, his wife Rebecca, and their adopted teenage daughter Akila.

Edie's narration of her experiences produces a sense of immediacy and urgency provided by the frequent use of the present tense, which gives the impression that the events are being narrated as they happen to her, without further revision. She exposes her consciousness in a blunt way, a mode similar to contemporary autofictional strategies, attending to the presentation of a self and to the creation of a sense of intimacy with the audience. Edie often earnestly exposes her vulnerability, as in this passage: "If I'm honest, all my relationships have been like this, parsing the intent of the jaws that lock around my head. Like, is he kidding, or is he hungry? In other words, all of it, even the love, is a violence" (206).

Edie comments on her choices with men, aware of the trauma that fuels them. As Tiphonie Yanique remarks, "At this moment we suddenly understand that her entire interpretation of sexual attraction is a symptom of attachment trauma." Indeed, just a few pages earlier, after her having sex with Eric marks the end of her relationship with his wife Rebecca—who had been, at first, accepting of an open marriage—, Edie reports:

I think about the way he looked on the bathroom floor, his open mouth and soft genitals and the veins underneath his pale Lutheran skin, and a computer-generated Peach and Luigi roll through Moo Moo Farm, I think of how keenly I've been wrong. I think of all the gods I have made out of feeble men. (192)

"Intimate traumas," Elizabeth Sheehan and Megan Ward point out, "are memorialized" in *Luster*, because Edie's earnest narration is a way to produce a record of her life, something she expresses explicitly in the ending:

A way is always made to document how we manage to survive, or in some cases, how we don't. . . . And when I am alone with myself, this is what I am waiting for someone to do to me, with merciless, deliberate hands, to put me down onto the canvas so that when I'm gone, there will be a record, proof that I was here. (227)

Edie's need to be seen is a leitmotiv throughout the novel, a need she understands and comments upon:

And while I never enter a room without wondering what personal adjustments need to be made, it is strange to see something similar happen to this friendly, white, midwestern man. It is strange to see him noticing about himself what I always notice—the optimism, the presumption, this rarefied alternate reality in which there is nowhere he does not belong. (36)

Earnestness and Digital Epitexts in Leilani's *Luster* Virginia Pignagnoli

In her intimate exposition of her consciousness, Edie is always aware of the political issues at stake. As Kaitlyn Greenidge rhetorically asks: "But what does it mean when someone's consciousness is shaped in large part by the places she feels she does not necessarily belong? When someone's conception of oneself is primarily as a rude presence, to be remarked upon or politely overlooked by white liberals?"

Edie's earnest self-presentation, therefore, is always in dialogue with Leilani's critique of present-day American society. But there is also another narrative strategy that allows Leilani to engage with real-world ethical and political issues through earnestness: an instructive dynamic explicated by Malcah Effron as the realism effect occurring in those instances in fiction where audiences perceive factual information (Effron et al. 337). As Effron argues, one way a narrative can endure beyond the communicative act is by employing the realism effect with high investment, which happens when authors recount facts in their fictional narratives with clear instructive intent and, as a result, the narrative directly influences the audiences' co-construction of the actual world (cf. Effron et al.). In *Luster*, these facts involve the experience of a girl who feels invisible because of systemic racism.

To make Edie's experience "factual" (or, realer than realism, to borrow Konstantinou's expression) to her readers, and create a realism effect, Leilani needs her audience to reconstruct the character as earnest: if Edie's consciousness is openly accessible, she is trustworthy, and so are her experiences. As when she and Akila (who is also Black) are subject to police violence and she says, "And the truth is that when the officer had his arm pressed into my neck, there was a part of me that felt like, all right. Like, fine. Because there will always be a part of me that is ready to die" (217). To emphasize this effect further, Edie explicitly refers to her experiences as facts at least twice. The first time when she says:

Otherwise, I have not had much success with men. This is not a statement of self-pity. This is just a statement of the facts. Here's a fact: I have great breasts, which have warped my spine. More facts: My salary is very low. I have trouble making friends, and men lose interest in me when I talk. It always goes well initially, but then I talk too explicitly about my ovarian torsion or my rent. (4)

And the second time is when she's thinking back about her abortion: "I was sixteen. I could not have been a mother. The women in my family maybe should not have been mothers. This is not so much a judgement as a fact" (195).

The earnestness that Edie uses to present her feelings legitimizes her experiences, of which Leilani wants to create a record because of the ethics of the overall narrative, an ethics of alterity, to borrow Dorothy Hale's terminology (5). Indeed, Hale argues that fictional characters

possess a personhood that imbues their narrative representation with ethical value. No matter how deconstructed or politicized the notion of the individual has become, in our contemporary moment the novel is regarded as offering a *privileged ethical engagement with social difference* through the reader's affective experience of characterological personhood as mediated by the novelistic narrative art. (4-5, my emphasis)

In other words, the ethical and political issues underlying *Luster's* fictional discourse are supported by the earnestness that her character narrator displays to provide her experiences with a sense of "realer realism" (see Konstantinou above). As I will show in the following section, these dynamics at play in the text are completed by a digital epitextual gesture that provides the narrative with a possible author-character autobiographical connection.

4. *Luster's* Digital Epitexts

My aim in this section is to explore the communicative dynamics the digital epitexts disseminated on Raven Leilani's Instagram and Twitter profiles elicit with regard to *Luster's* political and ethical issues expressed via the narrative post-postmodern earnest mode and the author-character connection that is established extratextually. While these social media profiles are, at first glance, the prototypical performative expressions of a contemporary writer in the digital age, with the biographical descriptions foregrounding Leilani being a public figure (e.g., on Instagram, "Author of *Luster*. NBF 5 under 35. 2020 Kirkus Prize, Dylan Thomas Prize, NBCC Prize, VCU Cabell Prize and Center for Fiction First Novel Prize"), they also contain epitextual material that carries an illocutionary force.⁴ To encounter them, therefore, means adding to one's set of paratextual knowledge that indirectly enters the situated acts of narrative co-construction (Pignagnoli 82). Indeed, to distinguish these digital paratextual interactions from "communicative" digital epitexts (i.e., the rhetorical resources that authors employ, for a given narrative, in the digital sphere), I call digital epitexts that are not rhetorical resources epistemic, digital epitexts—where epistemic stands for their contributing, when encountered, to a reader's paratextual 'knowledge', i.e., the set of assumptions readers bring to the text, thanks to paratexts (epistemic, digital epitexts can be further distinguished into authorial and audiences'; cf. Pignagnoli 24).

Authorial, epistemic digital epitexts can be found on Instagram, where Leilani has been sharing pictures with various content, from the places she visited (e.g., on May 30, 2018 the "Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya," Spain, or on July 17, 2021 Paris, France) to the cultural activities she participated in (e.g., a concert in Brooklyn on May 5, 2019, a play at Hudson Theatre on April 11, 2019) and pictures of poems she published (e.g., on Sept. 25, 2022, a poem titled "Eulogy for Racehorses," published in *Astra* magazine). Indeed, she has also been implicitly sharing clues for an autobiographical connection with Edie as, through her posts, audience members may not only learn that she shares a similar biographical background with her protagonist but also that, like Edie, Leilani paints. For example, on a post shared on June 19, 2019, geotagged New York, New York, she shares a picture of a painting with the caption "I have missed painting so much. Acrylic on canvas." And on six posts shared on Sept. 15, 2020, Oct. 22, 2020, on Dec. 20, 2020, on Dec. 29, 2020, on Jan. 21, 2020, and on Feb. 2, 2021, she shares other six painted portraits with the caption "Acrylic/canvas (SOLD)."

Similarly, on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/RavenLeilani>), Leilani shares some books she liked (e.g., on Oct. 13, 2020, she posted a picture with the debut novel by Maisy Card *These Ghosts are Family* and the tweet "THANK YOU @dracm for this beauty"), some short personal stories, such as on Nov. 11, 16, replying to another user who asks, "what was the best class you took in college," she tweets, "Playwriting. Beckett was so exciting to me. Prof steered me (gently) away from mimicry into my own voice (and convinced me to shave my head off—diff story). When I finished my play, they set me up with a student producer and actors. seeing my work on stage changed my body chemistry," and re-tweets many tweets from users who shared appreciation for her novel *Luster* (e.g., on Oct. 13, 2020, on Oct. 14, 2020, on Oct. 15, 2020, on Oct. 16, 2020, on Oct. 17, 2020, on Oct. 18, 2020, and many others). Leilani also occasionally shares political tweets, such as the one on Jan. 5, 2021, "In January, Loeffler attended a private covid briefing, diminished the threat in public, and quietly bought stock teleworking software. In March, my dad contracted covid and died alone in an ICU in Georgia. Never forget how they spit on us and our dead" (the tweet, critical of racial discrimination and of at the time Senator Kelly Loeffler, received 380 comments, 10,600 retweets, and 63,500 likes). And again, she shares other pictures of her paintings, e.g., on Oct. 20, 2020, on Dec. 20, 2020,

⁴ For studies on contemporary authorship see, for example, Murray; Marvick.

Earnestness and Digital Epitexts in Leilani's *Luster* Virginia Pignagnoli

and on Feb. 25, 2021 “Acrylic/canvas,” and on March 2, 2021 “Some winter paintings,” that may possibly cue readers towards an autobiographical connection with her character Edie.

Indeed, as Edie's character arc traces her artistic journey, *Luster* can aptly be considered a *künstlerroman*. But that character and author share an interest (in this case, painting) is perhaps nothing particularly new or surprising. However, it does ground fiction on personal experience in a way that would not have been so explicit before digital media's widespread use. In other words, Leilani could have delivered the same information (i.e., that she paints) connecting her persona to her character through a different paratextual outlet (an interview, for example), but the communicative acts in which these digital epitexts appear are inscribed in a kind of storytelling that, as Ruth Page remarks, is ubiquitous and “interwoven into daily experience within the many thousands of updates, which are posted, read and reposted” (119). The repeated posting does not only signal immediacy and authenticity, but also foregrounds the relevance of the epitextual clues. So, encountering these authorial, epistemic digital epitexts before or after reading *Luster* provides the audience with an author-character autobiographical connection that completes the narrative strategies at play in Leilani's novel and influences the readers' co-constructions, informing these with the (supposed) authenticity grounded on personal experience.

The ubiquity of digital epitexts in today's literary and media practices, moreover, reinforces the supposed correlation between authenticity and authorization. It is not surprising, indeed, that Alex Georgakopoulou lists authorization among the features participating in the process of formatting social media stories and associates it with the authenticity of the storyteller, meant as someone ‘real’, i.e., non-polished, non-filtered (144). After all, also the term “authenticity” is now pervasive (see also Martínez). Grounded on an autobiographical connection repeatedly expressed through digital media, authenticity in post-postmodern novels such as *Luster* provides the representation of subjectivity with an added value that—withstanding the risks of essentialism—does not come exclusively from textual strategies. That is, instead of mimicking, challenging, and satirizing the readers' reality hunger (to use David Shields's famous expression), post-postmodern writers exploit digital—and in particular social—media interactions to “authorize” their fictional discourse in order to foreground its authenticity.⁵

Indeed, the autobiographical connection between Leilani and Edie that is established through authorial, epistemic digital epitexts on social media adds a layer of authorization for the character to tell about her experiences. Sarah Copland, in the context of a fictionalized account of an actual event in a novella, recently argued that “when texts are presented as doing political work and doing so ethically, their fictionalizations bear responsibility to their real-world counterparts” (244). *Luster's* interest in political issues is exemplified by its calling attention to gender inequalities and racial discrimination in contemporary U.S. society. The responsibility toward real-world people that might appear fictionalized in a narrative, in this case concerns herself, the author, who implicitly relies on an autobiographical connection with her character through epitextual clues she disseminates online, a connection that further reinforces the realism effect that imbues her character's beliefs and experiences so that these are perceived as earnest, authentic, and real.

5. Conclusion

Implicitly invoking theory of mind (see Zunshine), Smith claims that “our social and personal lives are a process of continual fictionalization,” because “without an ability to at least guess

⁵ See also Dawson, who emphasizes the role of extratextual sources as rhetorical strategies for authors to “establish their literary *authority* in public discourse” (236; my emphasis).

Earnestness and Digital Epitexts in Leilani's *Luster* Virginia Pignagnoli

at what the other might be thinking, we could have no social life at all." Fiction, says Smith, makes "this process explicit—visible." But with the process goes the "continual risk of wrongness," so that whether a novel is "an attempt at compassion" or an "act of containment" is left to the reader to decide. Smith defends fiction against today's alleged need of an author-character autobiographical connection to support a fictional truth able to communicate compassion, feelings, emotions. This meaning of fiction is reminiscent of David Foster Wallace's invoking of a "queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness" (133) in his "fictionalized manifesto for a new direction in fiction writing" (Timmer 102), that is his short story "Octet" (2001). It is no coincidence, therefore, that Smith ends her essay addressing her readers directly employing the same words, "So decide," employed by Wallace to end his short story. Both Smith and Wallace are concerned with writing that offers readers an encounter with otherness to produce a feeling of (interhuman) sameness.

So, how to reconcile this idea that the author has the "capacity to know and represent social others" (Hale 29) with the current practice implying that to provide fiction with authenticity an author-character autobiographical connection is required? The ethical framework governing the character narration in *Luster* is compatible with the ethical framework governing the author's social media profiles, confirming that digital epitexts like those appearing in Leilani's shared online material imbue the narrative co-construction with a sense of authenticity. By showing a connection between author and character made of a shared background of lived experiences, *Luster's* digital epitexts provide a glimpse of the author elaborating on her personal experiences in her creative process. When these digital clues are encountered, they provide further paratextual knowledge to interpret the authorial communication conveyed through the literary narrative. For example, the centrality of the political and social matters addressed in *Luster* is reinforced by the author-character connection established through social media as it makes Leilani's fictional discourse even more "earnest" because grounded on the supposed authenticity of personal experience that emphasizes the truth-value of the novel beyond the fictional. In other words, digital epitexts participate in this interplay of fictional and extrafictional clues, while shortening the distance between storyworld details and the actual world.

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Earnestness and Digital Epitexts in Leilani's *Luster*
Virginia Pignagnoli

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Earnestness and Digital Epitexts in Leilani's *Luster*
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