

Post-Postmodernist
Fiction and the
Rise of Digital Epitexts

Virginia Pignagnoli

POST-POSTMODERNIST FICTION AND
THE RISE OF DIGITAL EPITEXTS

THEORY AND INTERPRETATION OF NARRATIVE
James Phelan, Katra Byram, and Faye Halpern, Series Editors

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Virginia Pignagnoli



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INTRODUCTION

Extratextual author-audience interactions are not a new phenomenon, as the long tradition of authors' interviews and individual correspondence demonstrates. Nevertheless, what is commonly known as "epitext," namely, paratextual material "not materially appended to the text within the same volume, but circulating [. . .] in a virtually limitless physical and social space" (Genette [1987] 1997, 344), has gained exceptional centrality in the last few years. The variety of forms and modalities at an author's disposal to exploit the material affordances of new media—from websites to social media platforms—has been multiplying exponentially within today's context of media convergence or "convergence culture," as Henry Jenkins calls it (2006). "At every stage of the production and consumption of contemporary literature," as Katherine N. Hayles points out, "digital media are transforming the functions of writers, readers, publishers, printers, distributors, and booksellers" (2016, 209). Certainly, the transformations digital media brought and are still bringing to twenty-first-century fiction are extremely varied and multifaceted.

Over the last few decades, new devices, new software, and new narratives have emerged: from the first examples of hypertext novels such as Michael Joyce's *afternoon: a story* (1987) and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995), to interactive fiction and multimodal novels such as Steve Tomasula's *TOC* (2009), enhanced e-books that require an electronic device to be read, or novels that are born on fan fiction sites, like *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E. L. James

(2011), originally written as fan fiction of the Twilight series by Stephenie Meyer (2005–8). Consequently, narratives on new media have attracted much investigation and new fields of studies have emerged, from transmedial narratology (see Ryan and Thon 2014; Ensslin and Bell 2021) to multimodal narrative analysis (see Page 2010) and studies on fan fiction (see B. Thomas 2014). Other scholars have been discussing the way digital media are changing how we read. Hayles, for instance, describes the kind of reading practice we adopt when we juxtapose, fragment, scan, and scam texts online as “hyper-reading” (2012, 12). Sven Birkerts (1994) and Nicholas Carr (2010) focus on questions such as whether digital media are affecting our ability to concentrate in order to read a novel and whether the new forms of literary production and fruition are inevitably changing an idea of literary narrative born before the digital revolution (see also McGurl 2021; Andersen, Kjerkegaard, and Pedersen 2021; Baron and Mangen 2021). Alongside this scholarship, other studies, like the present book, have started attending to epitextual material appearing in the digital world (see McCracken 2013; Birke and Christ 2013).

Such phenomena are widespread: digital media are used by authors to profile their works and their practice, and many contemporary authors interact with audiences publishing digital material about themselves or their novels through websites and social media. Examples include Susan Choi, who, on her Instagram feed (@susanmchoi), shares personal thoughts, memories, and reflections on “currently-reading” books, and Hanya Yanagihara, author of the novel *A Little Life* (2015), who manages an Instagram profile, @alittlelifebook, meant to share scenes and moments inspired by it. Similarly, on the website for Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), <https://goonsquad.jenniferegan.com>, for each chapter of her novel, Egan shared a personal note about it, including what she was doing when she was writing it, where she was physically located, and what music she was listening to (see chap. 3). On Ryan Gattis’s website, <https://ryangattis.com>, for both his novels *All Involved* (2015) and *Safe* (2017), there is a “Story Behind the Book” section and an interactive soundtrack to be listened to on Spotify. On Twitter, Lauren Groff (<https://twitter.com/legroff>) has been alternating between book recommendations and personal thoughts on contemporary issues on a weekly basis. On Vero, Michael Chabon shared music, articles, personal thoughts, and photographs. On TikTok, John Green has been publishing videos of himself talking about various issues, including his own novels.

This intensification of extratextual author-audience interactions is certainly symptomatic of the current changes in the publishing industry, which include the fact that “maintaining a social media presence has become an expectation rather than an exception for contemporary authors” (Thomas

2020, 99). As these interactions happen in the digital world, they are inevitably defined by the specific qualities and affordances that characterize the new media through which they are realized, including immediacy, ephemerality, fragmentarity, and intimacy. In her extensive study on performative authorship in the digital literary sphere, Simone Murray highlights that “the digital domain offers authors the possibility of rapid or even real-time interaction with readers irrespective of their geographic location, and publicly accessible *archiving* of such interactions. This includes the use of both ‘push’ (websites, blogs, vlogs) and ‘pull’ (RSS feeds, Facebook updates, Twitter followings) digital media technologies to maintain quasi-intimate connection with readers” (2018, 29). Thus, the new possibilities for author-audience extratextual interactions occurring in the digital world are, to some extent, shaped by the medial specificities of digital media. “Digital world,” I want to clarify, is an umbrella term I will use throughout this book interchangeably with the expression “digital space” to indicate the digital ether where so much of our current communication takes place.¹

While recognizing these medial specificities, the aim of this study is not to provide a systematic classification of all the possible new forms of author-audience interactions in the digital world. Rather, its focus is on the relation between these interactions and the poetics of contemporary literary narratives. Other scholars foreground the relevance of this connection for inquiries into contemporary narratives and their techniques. Liesbeth Korthals Altes, for instance, mentions a “pervasive demand for [authorial] presence and concreteness, a longing for the real” within a context in which “public media, talk shows, photo shoots, interviews, blogs, Facebook, and live performances all have become sites for the fabrication of a work’s meaning and literary or other value (such as its ethical, historical, or informative value)” (2014, 156–57). The present book, more specifically, explores the connection of twenty-first-century fiction with epitextual material in the digital world to investigate the relationship between the current widespread practice of digital author-audience interactions and the emerging poetics succeeding postmodernism.

Postmodernism, as it is generally agreed, ended sometime between the late 1980s (McLaughlin 2012, 212) and September 11, 2001 (McHale 2015, 175). But literary historical change, as Brian McHale emphasizes, “rarely involves the wholesale replacement of outmoded features and values by new ones”; more

1. This digital ether used to be called “cyberspace” (Barlow 1996). Today, however, as Sue Thomas points out, “the growth of mobile wireless internet and the increasing ubiquity of the cloud mean that the notion of cyberspace is in decline” (2014, 30), and we are somehow left with the idea that “the rules that define the relationship between information, places, and daily life are going to be rewritten” (Pang 2010 qtd. in S. Thomas 2014, 31).

typically, in fact, it “involves a reshuffling of existing features in the light of a new dominant function” (2005, 457). Among the current “reshuffling” is, for example, the blurring of boundaries between fiction and nonfiction in light of an interest in sincerity, relationality, and intersubjectivity (see Moraru 2011; Kelly 2016; Schmitt and Kjerkegaard 2016; Alber and Bell 2019). Following this principle, in this book I approach digital epitextual material as an exemplary reshuffling of an existing feature—paratexts—in light of a changing dominant function.

In post-postmodernist fiction (McLaughlin 2012; McHale 2015), I argue, the paratext, that is, the “additional” material a book contains “around” its text, both within the (printed/electronic) book and outside of it, interacts with—and at times intensifies—the changes happening at the textual level: the reshuffling of existing features and the concern with a new dominant. This means that the digital world is assuring paratexts, and epitexts in particular, a key position in the communicative exchange between author and audiences. Other narrative theorists already argued for the necessity of recognizing the new centrality of the multiplicity of extratextual discourses entering today’s author-audience relationship. Paul Dawson, for instance, presented a bidirectional model of narrative communication that includes the totality of exchanges between author and readers at a textual, peritextual, and epitextual level (2013). Unlike epitexts, peritexts are the paratextual elements situated *in proximity* of the text (Genette [1987] 1997). According to Dawson, the totality of these communicative exchanges (textual, extrafictional, extratextual) must be part of the narrative analysis, not so much to anchor a biographical reading of a book, but because the narrative communication produces meaning precisely thanks to these ongoing transactions (2013, 239). Working from similar premises, my contention here is that while epitextual material itself is not a novelty, the current digital era is facilitating an increased interaction that reinforces the current changing of dominant function interested in sincerity, relationality, and intersubjectivity.

The concept of the dominant McHale employed to define postmodernist fiction—a concept he draws from Roman Jakobson (1971) and that describes the focusing component of a work of art—is a useful reminder that when scholars describe a new poetics, the features and strategies employed somehow respond to an overarching principle, a principle that for McHale is floating and depending on the questions we aim at answering (1986, 56). According to McHale, the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological and the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological (1987). This means modernist fiction “deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as [. . .]: What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with

what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; [. . .] What are the limits of the knowable?” (McHale 1987, 9).

The ontological questions underlying postmodernist fiction, instead, include: “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? [. . .] What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?” (McHale 1987, 10). As others have already pointed out (Konstantinou 2017; Moraru 2011), many twenty-first-century narratives are concerned with problems and principles that differ from these set of questions. Today, ontological issues of “*world-making* and *modes of being*” (McHale 2015, 15) have lost their centrality in light of the emergence of “a significant wave of cultural production” characterized by sincerity (Kelly 2016, 198) or earnestness (Kirby 2009, 1). Competing with postmodern irony, the contemporary turn to sincerity, as Adam Kelly argues, tends to be regarded as “a sturdy affirmation of nonironic values, as a renewed taking of responsibility for the meaning of one’s words” (2016, 198).

As we approach the dominant of post-postmodernist fiction, therefore, the set of questions these narratives foreground seems to be of the like: What is it to communicate? What is it to communicate earnestly and sincerely? Is it possible to communicate earnestly through a text? Does earnestness help to convey the ethical and political issues presented in a text? Which kind of encounter or relationship does a text project? What is an intersubjective relationship? Which modes and strategies contribute to the realization of a truly intersubjective communication? These questions do not exclude other a priori epistemological or ontological ones, but they emphasize a switch of dominant toward issues of communication, intersubjective relationship, earnestness, and sincere exchange.²

Sincerity, according to Lionel Trilling, is “the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one’s own self” (1972, 5), and contemporary narratives are interested in displaying this subjective enterprise. Significantly, genres that blur the fact/fiction divide seem particularly apt for expressing this idea of truth, “however *subjective* that truth may be,” as Alison Gibbons (2017, 118) notes in relation to contemporary autofiction. Indeed, it is in light

2. A seminal essay for the exploration of the dynamics of this “turn to sincerity” in contemporary narratives is David Foster Wallace’s “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” (1997). In his critique of television’s appropriation of irony, Wallace urged writers to “dare to back away from irony watching” and to “endorse single-entendre values” (192). See also chapter 4.

of this longing for subjective truth that David Shields, who describes it as a “reality hunger,” declared that fiction/nonfiction is “an utterly useless distinction” (2010, 63). Therefore, as mentioned earlier, among the strategies currently employed—and reshuffled—within this new dominant is the blurring of generic boundaries. Postmodernist narratives already played with the distinction between fiction and reality, but contemporary literature also saw the rise and popularity of hybrid-genre narratives such as memoirs, personal essays, and autofictional novels, with the present being labeled both the age of the memoir (Miller 2007, 545) and the age of the fraudulent memoir (Phelan 2017, 67). Regardless of the specific characteristics of each genre, the use of this technique is now linked with the idea of “earnestly engag[ing] with the moral, ethical and political issues affecting contemporary society,” as Jan Alber and Alice Bell remark (2019, 124).

If the current shift to sincerity makes the fiction/nonfiction distinction subordinate to the purpose of representing (subjective) truths, a similar claim is to be found in James Phelan’s (2017, 69) discussion of fictionality, meant as “a nondeceptive departure from the actual.” According to Phelan, the reason for nonfictional narratives to venture into fictionality (as it happens in the case of memoirs, for instance) is to express “subjective truths within a representation ultimately bound by reference to actual people and events” (2017, 32). The reference to actual people and events, namely, the elements that frame these narratives as nonfiction, can be momentarily suspended without this suspension necessarily creating a disruption in the reading process. According to Phelan, the use of fictionality in nonfiction does not necessarily “provide a denial or an escape from the actual but rather a richer, more nuanced way of both representing and dealing with it” (2016, 25; see also Walsh 2007; Nielsen 2017). That is, the need to represent and deal with the actual in a sincere way, in Trilling’s sense, overcomes the fact that the narrative’s generic frame is bound by reference to actual people and events.

A standpoint in line with Phelan’s argument about the memoir is Serge Doubrovsky’s views on autofiction. As Marjorie Worthington notices, Doubrovsky’s definition of autofiction as “a highly intimate yet referential portrait of a narrativized self, would be classified not as a novel but as a *memoir*” (2018, 10). Worthington explains that, for Doubrovsky, “autobiography retraces a *life*, while autofiction presents a self. Because the postmodern conception of self is not logical or orderly, Doubrovsky’s autofiction aims to represent the self truthfully, even if doing so requires taking liberties with pure referentiality” (Doubrovsky [1997] 2001, 9–10). In this “truthful” representation of the self, Worthington outlines a connection between autofiction and postmodernism. Similarly, Gibbons highlights a continuity between contemporary autofiction

and certain postmodernist stylistic tropes, such as “the sense of subjectivity as fragmented, socially constructed and textually fabricated” (2017, 130). However, in line with Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal’s description of the trope of sincerity as “an indispensable *affective* (hence, social) process between subjects” (2009, 5), Gibbons also defines contemporary autofiction as ruled by an “affective and situational” logic (2017, 118). Thus, she signals a departure from postmodernism and connects “the prosperity” of autofiction as a genre to “metamodernism as a cultural dominant” (118). According to her, contemporary autofictional texts such as Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick* (1997) are moving from the postmodern to a “metamodern sensibility” (124), an oscillation “between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony” (see van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017 qtd. in Gibbons 2017, 124). This confirms that despite the continuity with postmodernism, today’s autofictions and memoirs are guided by an interest different from postmodernism’s use of metafiction to hinder the reconstruction of a “stable storyworld” (McHale 2015, 73) and emphasize the artificiality of every artifact.

Post-postmodernist fiction does not deny its artificiality but exploits genre-blurring to emphasize the possibility to communicate sincerely, through a text. Contemporary narratives such as Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?* (2012), Ben Lerner’s *10:04* (2014), Heidi Julavits’s *The Folded Clock* (2015), and Michael Chabon’s *Moonglow* (2016), to name a few, attend to the categories of fiction and nonfiction insofar as they can be mixed and matched, combined, transformed, and modeled to fulfill a sincere or postironic purpose. Lee Konstantinou argues that some of these postironic narratives focus on “relationality, the reader-writer relationship, and intersubjective problems” (2017, 100) and includes Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?*, generically framed as a “novel from life” (100) in a strand of postirony referred to as “relational art” (98). These relational (or affective) narratives “draw attention to the gap between reader and writer, showing the difficulty of deciding whether an utterance is ironic or sincere in the absence of tonal or affective cues, staging the author’s failure to communicate,” that is, they display “failures of intersubjectivity” (98). Exploring similar issues, Arnaud Schmitt and Stefan Kjerkegaard include Karl Ove Knausgaard’s autobiographical novel in six volumes *My Struggle* (2009–11) within a framework of contemporary narratives interested in “a more sincere vein” (2016, 556). They diverge from Konstantinou’s definition of relational art meant as the exploration of failures of intersubjectivity and highlight an intersubjective *relation* between authors and audiences, which occurs when intimacy is forced in such a way that “we cannot remain neutral” (569). Whether intersubjectivity fails or not, these studies show that it is central to these narratives.

The use of an existing technique such as the transgression of genre boundaries to respond to a longing for sincerity, intimacy, and intersubjectivity is exemplary of the changes currently happening in contemporary fiction. These changes, as I will explore throughout the book, are intersecting with and foregrounded by the widespread use of paratextual—and in particular epitextual—material in the digital world. For instance, the authorial sharing of details about the writing of a novel (see Egan’s example above and chap. 3), or of personal narratives on social media (see chap. 4) can be understood as responding to the current autofictional phenomenon and guided by the same longing for sincerity, intimacy, and intersubjectivity, which represents a shift in contemporary literature toward relationality as the new dominant.

In addition to genre blurring, another way to emphasize the need to communicate earnest, subjective truths is by foregrounding the medium that materially realizes a literary narrative. This foregrounding is achieved through the use of a multiplicity of semiotic modes, in addition to language, such as unconventional typography or images. Exemplary of this current metamedial interest are multimodal novels such as *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) by Dave Eggers, *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) by Jonathan Safran Foer, *Austerlitz* (2001) by W. G. Sebald, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) by Mark Haddon, *The Selected Works of T. S. Spivet* (2009) by Rief Larsen, *The Autograph Man* (2002) by Zadie Smith, and *Nox* (2010) by Anne Carson (see also Gibbons 2012; Hallet 2009; Nørgaard 2010). Like genre blurring, the technique of word-image combinations is not new. It is a characteristic feature of the Italian futuristic movement at the beginning of the twentieth century and of the French avant-gardes (Dadaism, Surrealism). Since then, the merging of textual and visual forms has continued to be explored by, for example, the Oulipo group, William Burroughs and his cut-up method, and several postmodernist writers. Indeed, the practice of “foregrounding the materiality of the text instead of effacing it” was already a hallmark of postmodernist novels (McHale 2005, 459). In postmodernist fiction, according to McHale, graphic experimentations are connected with the tension created by the juxtaposition of the real world of the material object and the fictional world projected by the narrative. What he calls “iconic shaped texts” either stress the ontological tension between the book as object and its narrative or simply “illustrate [. . .] their own existence” (1987, 184).

Today, however, the use of unconventional typography or images does not typically come with a sense of playfulness as in postmodernist fiction. Firstly, as Gibbons points out, the multiple semiotic modes “constantly interact in the production of meaning” (2012, 2). So, they are employed not to dis-

rupt mimesis but to enhance it. Secondly, the use of unconventional modes allows the print medium to become noticeable within a context in which, as Heike Schaefer and Alexander Starre observe, “the printed book is no longer a medium of necessity; it is a medium of choice” (2019, 3). Jessica Pressman aptly describes a “contemporary cultural phenomenon and aesthetic strategy that expresses desire and appreciation for books in the moment of their supposed obsolescence due to digital media” as *bookishness* (2019, 156). Post-postmodernist novels, in other words, manifest a self-reflexive discourse about their own mediality (and not just about their own modality) in a period in which the future of such mediality seems (seemed) at risk. A similar claim is found in Daniel Punday’s *Writing at the Limit: The Novel in the New Media Ecology* (2012). Punday states that “in a significant portion of contemporary fiction, references to other media are more than just backdrop or theme” (2). On the contrary, these other media “provide writers with a way of talking about what it means to write and read a print novel” (2). Hence, multimodality allows for a metamedial discourse which, in turn, draws attention to the way in which that discourse is created.

The reasons for this renovated metamedial interest are not only to attribute to the interest in communicative issues or to the anxiety about the cultural status of literature and the future of the printed book in the age of e-books (see Fitzpatrick 2006). Rather, it is also the current digital media ecology that pushes contemporary authors to be more aware of the mediality of their fictional creation. Moreover, the digital media environment of post-postmodernist narratives offers contemporary writers the possibility of further communicating with their readers through websites, blogs, and social media—a possibility that entails a further metamedial discourse on what it means to communicate through a text in the digital age. Within this cultural context, some writers are responding by exploiting the possibilities of the affordances new media offer by extending their narratives online.

Digital epitextuality, in the form of social media posts or tweets and various multimodal material, may therefore intersect with or foreground the metamedial discourse of post-postmodernist fiction. There is, in fact, an ongoing attempt to explore the consequences of digitization both textually and extratextually. Contemporary authors contribute with novels engaged with issues related to new media, and with various declarations on the changes these are bringing or warnings against an acritical use of digital technologies and the negative impacts these can have on privacy, human interactions, and literature itself (see also coda). One exemplary such declaration is in a footnote contained in *The Kraus Project* (2013), where Jonathan Franzen expresses all his disappointment for the status of literature today, namely for the way

American multinational company Amazon is influencing readers and book prices and ultimately affecting booksellers and writers themselves. Franzen talks about social media in terms of panoptical surveillance and goes as far as comparing Amazon's founder and CEO with one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Another example is the essay published in the *New York Review of Books* by Zadie Smith, who claims: "When a human being becomes a set of data on a website like Facebook, he or she is reduced. Everything shrinks. Individual character. Friendship. Language. Sensibility" (2010, n. pag.). Her essay contains a cautionary moral instruction for her generation, raised on TV in the eighties and nineties: "Our denuded networked selves don't look more free, they just look more owned." Or again, novelist Jonathan Safran Foer has recognized that it is not a matter of being "anti-technology" or "unquestioningly 'pro-technology,'" "but a question of balance that our lives hang upon" (2013, n. pag.). "We often use technology to save time," he continues, "but increasingly, it either takes the saved time along with it, or makes the saved time less present, intimate and rich." Foer adds, "Each step 'forward' has made it easier, just a little, to avoid the emotional work of being present, to convey information rather than humanity."

Franzen, Smith, and Foer expressed their critiques in essays and interviews, but others have conveyed similar messages in their novels. In his dystopic novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), Gary Shteyngart, for example, ironically highlights the comparison between books and phones: "I'm learning to worship my new äppärät's screen," the protagonist says, "the colorful pulsating mosaic of it, the fact that it knows ever last stinking detail about the world, whereas my books only know the minds of their authors" (76). And Dave Eggers already in his second novel *You Shall Know Our Velocity!* (2003) was concerned with surveillance and had one of his novel's characters complain about "how soon enough, everyone would know—for their own safety [. . .]—where everyone else in the world was, by tracking their cellphone. But again: for good not evil. For the children. For the children. For grandparents and wives. It was the end of an epoch, and I didn't want to be around to see it happen; we'd traded anonymity for access" (62). Eggers's belief uttered through mask narration (see Phelan 2017, 99) finds a connection—or a *continuity* in Dawson's terminology (see below)—with Eggers's extratextual and extratextual declarations that "our feeling that we're entitled to know anything we want about anyone we want" is the greatest threat to our freedom today (2013b, n. pag.). "Over the last twenty years," he states, "it's been interesting to see how little resistance there is to the merging of our organic selves and the devices that we attach to ourselves to enhance our capabilities." If these fictional and nonfictional discourses remind us of Jaron Lanier's description

of the dominant ideology of the digital world as “cybernetic totalism” (2010), Eggers’s novel *The Circle* (2013a; see coda) explores, as he puts it, the implications of technology “for our sense of humanity and balance” (2013b).

As this brief description highlights, whether contemporary writers engage thematically or with extratextual declarations on the current debate on literature in the digital age or not, their choices to engage with digital epitextual material—assuming that “opting out” from internet/social media communication is still possible—is often self-revelatory of their authorial posture in that regard. Thus, the current reshuffling of paratextual devices in the digital world carries a self-reflexive dimension that gestures toward a wider meta-medial discourse inclusive of the preoccupations with the future of literature as we knew it and the willingness to explore new ways to communicate. Currently, author-audience interactions in the digital world are—directly or indirectly—in dialogue with the changes the impact of digital media brought and are bringing to contemporary literature: digital epitextual material may guide potential readers toward the narrative they are “attached” to, as well as a narrative may engage with the digital through the themes it explores or, more straightforwardly, through digital material itself.

A further feature post-postmodernist novels use to gesture toward the digital is omniscient narrators, as argued by Dawson (2013). According to him, the return of the omniscient narrator in contemporary fiction is symptomatic of the “public authority of the novelist” (9). The intrusive commentary of omniscient narrators functions as an invocation of the authorial voice, and it is thanks to these authorial intrusions that the narrative voice of a text “gestures *outwards*” to the authority of its extrafictional voice (244; emphasis added). The author’s extrafictional voice is to be found in the peritext of a novel, which is then linked—via a discursive continuum exemplified by the intrusive commentary of omniscient narrators—to the authorial voice readers can find in the epitext. Dawson’s study highlights the necessity of recognizing the multiplicity of extratextual discourses entering the author-audience relationship in our digital age. For instance, the discursive continuum between a novel and all of an author’s extratextual declarations can of course include the author’s declarations on social media (see also chap. 1). As I will argue throughout the book, however, to establish a connection between a novel and its digital epitexts, contemporary narratives do not *necessarily* need an invocation of the authorial voice: it is the digital world that allows that connection thanks to its social media, apps, and websites, which contemporary authors can choose to employ, extending the narrative act occurring at the textual level while self-reflecting on such an act of communication (see chap. 1). Omniscient narration is not linked with a longing for sincerity or relational issues per se, but its

use in post-postmodernist fiction underlines a multiplicity of discourses that leans toward them, while calling attention, once again, to the role of digital interactions.

Omniscience, genre blurring, and metamedial devices, including digital epitextual practices, are some of the strategies and resources currently employed and reshuffled in light of the new dominant function of post-postmodernist fiction. They are exemplary of both the taking shape of a new poetics and the twofold gesture from the digital world to contemporary fiction and from contemporary fiction toward the digital that I explore in the following chapters. But reflecting on author-audience interactions in the digital world means to investigate also the audience's possible contribution to that exchange. The Web 2.0 "offers greatly enhanced opportunities for an author to directly engage readers in close to real time in the form of blog posts, Facebook updates, and Twitter messages," but "readers can now also reply directly" (Murray 2018, 27). By sharing reviews, opinions, and photographs of novels they are currently reading, many readers today participate in the gesture that directs new readers from the digital toward a fictional narrative. These instances of performative readings do not constitute features of a new poetics succeeding postmodernism, but they contribute to the creation of a cultural environment authors are aware of and may respond to with specific textual or paratextual resources. Recognizing the role of the audience is indeed central to the theory of rhetorical paratextuality I present here to address and examine what digital epitextuality actually is (chap. 1).

Attending to the new centrality of author-audience interactions in the digital world, the theory of rhetorical paratextuality builds on rhetorical narrative theory to focus on the communicative exchange between authors and readers. Rhetorical theory considers narratives communicative acts between a teller and an audience, and the rhetorical approach to narrative is invested in the study of the functioning of such communicative acts between authors and audiences and in applying its principles to the analysis of narrative texts (of any media/medium). A narrative, borrowing Phelan's words, "is ultimately not a structure but an action, a teller using resources of narrative to achieve a purpose in relation to an audience" (2017, x). This definition highlights the collaborative process between the two agents, which makes the audience not just a passive recipient precisely because "the presence and the activity of the somebody else in the narrative action is integral to its shape" (2017, x). Such collaboration results in author and audience co-constructing a narrative, which means that the audience works collaboratively with the author's transmitted text to co-build worlds according to the author's blueprints (Effron, McMurry, and Pignagnoli 2019, 335).

Working within this framework, this book argues that digital paratextual material is one of the features currently characterizing the shifting of dominant succeeding postmodernism. To attend to the study of this digital material within a rhetorical approach to narrative and within current studies of narrative fiction after postmodernism, I build on Genette's concept of paratext. While in recent years many scholars have been working in the same direction (e.g., Birke and Christ 2013; Dawson 2013; McCracken 2013, as seen above), my revision of Genette's paratext focuses not just on accommodating the digital practices missing from his categorization. Rather, I propose a reconsideration of the concept of paratext within the communicative act between author and audience to address the questions of whether, how, and why these digital practices found on authors' websites and social media profiles are contributing to the communicative purposes of their narratives and to a post-postmodern poetics.

Chapter 1 introduces Genette's concept of paratext together with a discussion of some recent critiques and suggested revisions, in particular with regard to the interrelation of text-specific paratextual devices and digital resources. On the one hand, Genette's concept can be adapted to include new kinds of digital paratexts; on the other hand, it is challenged by the multiplication of possible paratextual elements the digital world is bringing about. Thus, while Genette's paratext serves as a starting point to frame new digital practices, I propose an approach to paratextuality focused on the author-audience communicative act. At the core of the rhetorical theory of paratextuality is the distinction between paratexts that are rhetorical resources (see Phelan 2017) and those that are not. As I argue, this distinction cannot be equated with the other principles categorizing paratexts; rather, it comes first—and becomes particularly relevant for the study of paratexts in the digital world—because these new, online interactions challenge Genette's original subordination of the epitext to the peritext. I distinguish between communicative and epistemic paratexts: communicative paratexts concern the communicative act between author and readers *for/around a particular narrative*; epistemic paratexts concern the paratextual knowledge that readers may bring to their various, situated reading experiences. This distinction acknowledges that both communicative and epistemic paratexts show an intrinsic functionality (i.e., an illocutionary force), but also that only communicative paratexts display a functionality in dialogue with the other resources employed in a given narrative. A further distinguishing criterion is temporal and relative to the actual audience's encounter with the paratextual element, whether before or after reading. This

is especially relevant for the assessment of the different situations in the collaborative processes of narrative co-construction.

Chapter 2 presents the analysis of a contemporary novel, *Moonglow* (2016) by Michael Chabon, employing two post-postmodernist devices: the blurring of the fiction/nonfiction distinction and communicative digital epitexts. In dialogue with some current modes and interests of post-postmodernist fiction (e.g., autofiction and earnestness), the chapter presents a reconstruction of *Moonglow*'s storyworld that calls attention to Chabon's mix of temporal levels and framing clues. Secondly, it introduces Chabon's profile on Instagram and presents the context of how digital epitexts come into being. There is a larger personal narrative made of posts not necessarily connected to his novel *Moonglow* that embodies an idea of social media practices concerned with both an archival function and the focus on an ongoing conversation among users. Then, the chapter delves deeper into the kind of digital epitexts shared through Instagram, showing different functionalities and their relevance for the readers' co-construction of Chabon's novel. For example, I claim that through the digital epitexts Chabon further supports his novel's main purpose of how to earnestly engage with memory and trauma. Finally, the chapter reflects on Chabon's combined use of genre ambiguity and digital epitexts within the current interest in sincerity and relationality, highlighting the relevance of both rhetorical resources for the co-construction of *Moonglow*.

In chapter 3, I present an analysis of Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* focusing on the metamedial discourse that underlies the novel not only thematically but also thanks to the use of unconventional communicative peritexts and of communicative digital epitexts. The communicative digital epitexts, in particular, further emphasize the novel's metamedial discourse online, as well as the novel's lack of a definitive ethical stance with regard to new technologies. The chapter explores the different communicative dynamics these epitexts elicit, the experimental quality they display, their being aligned with the sincere account of the novel's "behind the scenes," and also their inherent ephemerality. Egan's choice to extend her narrative through digital epitexts signals authenticity and an interest in the post-postmodern need for earnest communication. Yet, audience members may employ the communicative digital epitexts to reconstruct or to revise the novel as a cautionary tale: Egan's reflection on technology innovation in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*—complete with its communicative digital epitexts—is imbued with nuances.

Chapters 4 and 5 expand the focus on communicative digital epitexts with the study of two specific kinds of epistemic digital epitexts: those coming from authors (as already partly seen in chap. 2) and those coming from audiences. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of Catherine Lacey's *The Answers* (2017), a

novel that attends to intersubjectivity by calling attention to characters within the storyworld and communication between authors and readers within a sincere narrative mode: mask narration (Phelan 2017), direct questions, and a nod to dystopic fiction are employed to express an urgency to communicate real-world ethical and political issues. The analysis of Lacey's epistemic digital epitexts then shows a consistency with the fictional exploration of these issues and modalities that reinforces the discursive authority (Lanser 1992; Dawson 2013) of *The Answers*. In this chapter, I highlight how epistemic digital epitexts coming from authors are a fuzzy area within rhetorical paratextuality, because even if they are not resources of narrative communication, the paratextual knowledge they provide is more and more relevant for contemporary reading practices. In the case of *The Answers*, the novel attends to post-postmodern earnestness, but Lacey's epistemic digital epitexts provide her fictional discourse with a context made of instances of connection and intimacy that reinforces that discourse.

Chapter 5 completes the investigation of post-postmodernist fiction and digital epitexts by exploring how actual readers may participate in the creation of a novel's social context and how their participation may still affect the reconstructive and evaluative efforts of other readers who co-constructed the same novel. The chapter presents an analysis of Meg Wolitzer's *The Female Persuasion* (2018) to understand how audiences' epistemic digital epitexts today are part of a collective creation of a digital archive of reading experiences. This collective gesture is often performative, but audiences' epistemic digital epitexts provide other readers with a paratextual background knowledge that, when activated, may shape the assumptions readers bring to their reconstructive efforts—in Wolitzer's novel's case, about the feminist issues presented in the narrative. The feminist issues presented in *The Female Persuasion* may also be reevaluated after the reading experience is concluded if audiences' epistemic digital epitexts are encountered. Although those analyzed in this chapter are not the only kinds of epistemic digital epitexts, they are exemplary of the cultural context of post-postmodernist fiction.

This study ends with a coda that summarizes the aim of *Post-postmodernist Fiction and the Rise of Digital Epitexts* to provide a new framework to investigate author-audience interactions in the digital world in relation to the changing poetics of contemporary fiction. It also addresses a final, possible situation concerning these interactions and intersections: the deliberate avoidance of digital epitexts as a means to further reinforce a novel's discursive authority. I present an analysis of Eggers's *The Circle* and its interest in a metamedial discourse that occurs both thematically and through the privative use of digital epitexts. As I argue, the absence of digital epitexts today is the exception

rather than the rule, and their absence implies a metamedial discourse, too: in Eggers's case, a refusal of the openness to further change that the use of digital epitexts implies, as well as a political stance against the growing power of the corporations that own the digital media where these interactions take place. Most of the phenomena I describe here are multifaceted and keep evolving, so this book cannot possibly provide a complete account of digital epitexts and their effects. The tools and theories I present, however, do provide a new approach to explain the functioning of the communicative dynamics underlying the co-construction of literary narratives in the digital age within the changing dominant of post-postmodernist fiction.

CHAPTER 1

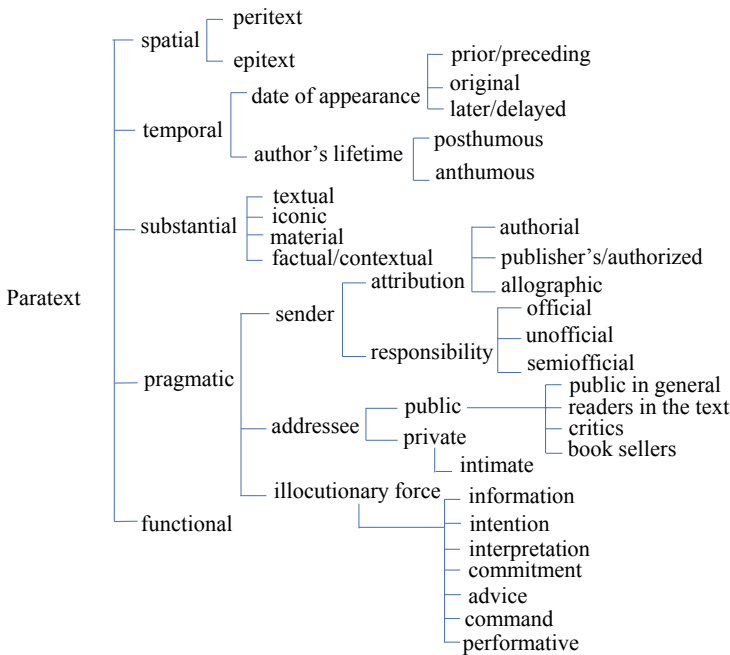
A Rhetorical Theory of Paratexts

PARATEXTS: THEORIES, LIMITS, REVISIONS

Proposed for the first time in *The Architext: An Introduction* ([1979] 1992, 82), Genette's paratext was briefly introduced in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* ([1982] 1997). Here, Genette describes the second type of transtextual relationships as "one of the privileged fields of operation of the pragmatic dimension of the work—i.e., of its impact upon the reader" ([1982] 1997, 3).¹ In *Paratexts* ([1987] 1997), his definition broadens and encompasses a "heterogeneous group of practices and discourses characterized by an authorial intention and assumption of responsibility, that functions as a guiding set of directions for the readers" (2–3). His study presents a detailed description of such a set, with the elements composing the whole category classified according to five main criteria: spatial, temporal, substantial, pragmatic, and functional, often further categorized into subcriteria, as exemplified in figure 1.

Together with such structural taxonomy, Genette combined the idea of an indeterminate quality of the paratext, which he allocated to the prefix "para." According to him, the elements forming the paratext have no clear-cut boundaries, as they belong to an undefined and also undefinable zone. "Para" is meant to express this uncertainty: "*Para* is an antithetical prefix which indi-

1. The other four types of transtextual relationships are intertextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality, and architextuality (Genette [1982] 1997, 1–5).

FIGURE 1. Genette's paratext: criteria and subcriteria from *Paratexts* (1997)

cates at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority [. . .] a thing which is situated at once on this side and on that of a frontier, of a threshold and of a margin, of equal status and yet secondary, subsidiary, subordinate” (Miller 1979 qtd. in Genette [1987] 1997, 1).

Despite the wide usage of the concept, the combination of Genette's belief in the fuzziness of its borders together with the very systematic classification of its elements as they appear in *Paratexts* has, among other contradictory elements in his analysis, brought the theory to be often revised and challenged. Some scholars criticize Genette's typology for not being sufficiently descriptive to accommodate the many hybrid or unconventional elements that can be found in literary narratives, as if despite his claims of indefiniteness, his taxonomy would not in fact leave the necessary room for all existing paratextual elements. For instance, according to Jan Baetens, Genette fails to recognize “what is characteristic of modern literature: the paratextualization of the text and the textualization of the paratext, i.e., not the breakdown of boundaries, but the multiplication of relations between two poles that are no longer antag-

onistic opposites” ([1987] 1997, 713–14). Other scholars suggest reformulations and extensions. Edward Maloney, for example, provides an extensive discussion of the use of footnotes in fictional narratives where they are “incorporated into the story as part of the internal narrative frame” (2005, ii; see also Efron 2010).

Werner Wolf, instead, proposes an alternative concept of framing borders with six functions: text-centered, self-centered, context-centered, sender-centered, recipient-centered, and self-referential or meta-referential (2006, 30–31). In line with Baetens’s remark, Wolf’s critique is especially directed toward the excessive attention Genette dedicates to paratextual elements with a “text-centered” function, such as generic markers, at the expense of those with a “self-centered function,” that is, defamiliarized framings that foreground “conventions of paratexts or constitute a space for experimental games” (2006, 29–30). In fact, although the unconventional use of typographical elements or other visual interventions were scarcely contemplated in Genette’s typology, defamiliarizing or iconic elements are not necessarily less relevant to the concept of paratext. Genette is explicit in this regard: “No reader should be indifferent to the appropriateness of particular typographical choices, even if modern publishing tends to neutralize these choices by a perhaps irreversible tendency toward standardization” ([1987] 1997, 34). Indeed, some paratextual elements such as the cover, the typesetting, the title, the dedications, the epigraphs, the prefaces, the postfaces, and the footnotes are necessary precisely to “present the book and [. . .] *make it present*, assuring its presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and its consumption” (1; emphasis added). Some decades later, encouraged by the current media ecology, many contemporary authors exploit the medium at their disposal (a computer) for expressive purposes (Ryan 2006, 30; see also Hayles 2010; Gibbons 2010; Pignagnoli 2018).

As seen in the introduction, narrative theorists have started to explore the concept of paratext to investigate not so much those paratextual elements that Genette considers necessary to present the printed book, but the interrelation of text-specific paratextual devices and digital resources. Dorothee Birke and Birte Christ, for instance, start to “map the field” for paratexts and digitized narrative, arguing that paratext “can be a highly productive tool for the analysis of medial difference and medial change” (2013, 66). Birke and Christ’s main concern is not to resolve the “classificatory problems” and to improve the “differential exactness” (66) of Genette’s definition. Their primary aim is to highlight “the specificities of digitized narrative texts in comparison with the printed book” (66). They propose a theoretical modification of Genette’s category of function, which they describe as an interplay of three different functions: *interpretative*, associated with paratextual elements that “suggest

to the reader specific ways of understanding, reading, interpreting the text” (67); *commercial*, connected with paratextual elements that “advertise a text, label it with a price and promote the book’s sale” (68); and *navigational*, linked with paratexts that “guide the reader’s reception in a more mechanical sense” (68). The latter is a function Genette bypasses probably because “he does not perceive the book as a technology requiring user instructions” (68), but it surely becomes relevant when dealing with different media. Indeed, Birke and Christ’s essay focuses on DVDs and e-readers, as it introduces two further articles focusing on the two media (i.e., Benzon 2013 and McCracken 2013). Also working with screen media, Jonathan Gray adapts Genette’s concept of paratext to argue that paratexts not only “start texts, for they also create them and continue them” (2010, 10). Paratexts, according to Gray, give us continual information, ways of looking at a film or show, and frames for understanding it or engaging with it (10; see also Murray 2018, 171–73).

Ellen McCracken’s work is more related to the question of narrative fiction in the digital age, as she expands Genette’s epitext/peritext model for literary narratives read on e-readers such as Kindles and iPads. McCracken argues that “elements such as covers, epigraphs, footnotes, auto-commentaries and publishers’ ads take on new paratextual functions in the age of digital reading and join a large array of new paratexts not developed in print literature” (2013, 106). According to McCracken, the concepts of epitext and peritext “continue to be useful for the analysis of digital literature on portable electronic devices but need expansions as categories” (106). She thus proposes two new concepts: *centrifugal* paratexts, which “draw readers outside the text proper” (106), for instance to “engage with blogs, other readers’ comments, or an author’s web page” (107), and *centripetal* paratexts, which modify the readers’ experience with “format, font changes, word searching and other enhancements” (107). This new subdivision describes a movement from the narrative storyworld to the digital world, an idea that is in line with Paul Dawson’s proposal for a discursive narratology (2013) that, although not focused on the interrelation of narrative fiction and digital media, provides an interesting framework to discuss it.

Dawson elaborates on Genette’s concept to present a bidirectional model of narrative communication that includes the totality of exchanges between author and readers at a textual, peritextual, and epitextual level (2013). He highlights the continuity between his proposal and Genette’s theory of the paratext, especially vis-à-vis the emphasis Genette places on the pragmatic status of the paratext “as a form of authorial communication in which the addressee is the public” (235). According to his model, the paratext is not subordinate to the text but is “a type of discursive formation, a set of textual

statements in which the relations between these statements construct the text as its object” (237). The text, the peritext, and the epitext constitute “the paratextual zone of transaction, the discursive formation, in which what is being ‘transacted’ is not so much textual meaning, but the significance of the text to public discourse” (238). In other words, Dawson’s model tries to account for all those communicative exchanges among the various agents involved in the multiplicity of discourses occurring not only at a textual level but also in a paratextual universe: there is an exchange at the textual level between narrator and narratee that intersects with the extrafictional voice of the author in the peritext and with what the author, but also the audience, communicates in the epitext. Exemplary to understanding Dawson’s discursive narratology are novels with omniscient narrators, as mentioned in the introduction.

As Dawson’s, Birke and Christ’s, and McCracken’s studies show, the concept of paratext has gained renewed attention in investigations of narrative fiction in the digital age. However, while showing the influence Genette’s framework exerts on narrative theory, they also expose the issues that still prove to be problematic. Indeed, the advent of digital technology and the internet highlighted both the concept’s potential and limits. On the one hand, it can be adapted to include new kinds of paratexts, such as the ones accompanying e-books. This has been shown by Birke and Christ and by McCracken, all of whom suggested new categories and focused on their functionality. On the other hand, the concept’s subordination to the original text as initially conceived by Genette is challenged by the multiplication of possible paratextual elements the digital world brought about, as Dawson also points out.

The following reconfiguration stems from the need to better understand the functioning of paratextual resources in order to then be able to analyze the way new online practices influence the narrative communication. Genette’s paratext serves as a starting point to frame these digital practices, but a revision to accommodate them cannot overlook the ambiguities that the concept itself still carries, especially with regard to its categorizing principles. Many of these ambiguities, I believe, can be solved if we approach paratextuality focusing on the author-audience communicative act.

A RHETORICAL THEORY OF PARATEXTS

The first step toward a rhetorical theory of paratexts is to distinguish, among the multiplicity of paratextual elements, those that *are* resources of narrative communication. Rhetorical resources refer to the elements of narrative James Phelan lists in his author, resources, and audience model of narrative com-

munication, abbreviated as “ARA” (2017). Rhetorical resources include a wide variety of elements such as character narration, character-character dialogue, occasions of narration, narrative speed and progression, ambiguity, unreliability, and paratexts. Paratextual resources are, like all resources, elements that “the teller can deploy in order to connect with the audience” (Phelan 2017, 26) or to “achieve certain effects on audiences” (59) so that “the effects of those author-audience interactions relate to the authors’ overall purposes” (59). Since Genette’s definition of paratexts is broader—he subdivides the sender into authorial, publisher, and allographic, as well as into official, semi-official, and unofficial ([1987] 1997, 8–10; see also fig. 1)—it is important to acknowledge that nonauthorial paratexts cannot be considered rhetorical resources of narrative communication. Genette does recognize that the sender being authorial describes a phenomenon that is very different from the one in which the sender is the publisher or a “third party.” This distinction, however, cannot be equated with the other categorizing principles, as Genette does; rather, I argue, it must precede them. This is true for all paratexts, but especially relevant for digital paratexts, which are the focus of this study.

Distinguishing paratextual resources from other modes of paratextual interactions means acknowledging that there are “accompanying productions” (Genette [1987] 1997, 1), which are both attributable to the author and directed from the author to the audience in the act of narrative communication. This is the case, for example, with titles, unconventional typography, and authors’ afterwords, but also of multimodal texts authors publish on their personal websites about their novels. The distinction does not exclude that a preface written by a critic, an author’s interview available on YouTube, or a reader’s review on a website like Goodreads can still tangentially affect the narrative communication. My argument, however, is that these two sets of paratexts do not respond to the same set of questions. The tellers are different, and so are the occasions. One concerns the communicative act between author and audience; the other concerns the extratextual knowledge that readers may bring to their reading experiences, knowledge that is, in this case, paratext-based. The distinction between the two groups of paratexts shows that some—authorial communications explicitly tied to the narrative—are rhetorical resources that the author may employ for communicative purposes, while others are not. Genette was right in implicitly suggesting that we account for both paratextual events, and he was right in considering the authorial and official paratexts as somehow more relevant for the readers whose main interests lie in the text rather than in the paratext. However, if we do not distinguish between “communicative” paratexts employed as resources of narrative communication and paratexts that are not communicatively employed as resources, then we run

the risk of conflating qualitatively different functions of paratexts or otherwise introducing unhelpful ambiguity into the account.

In Genette's study, this ambiguity is most evident with regard to the epitexts. Genette maintains that "by definition, something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it, although the degree of responsibility may vary" ([1987] 1997, 9). But then he describes unofficial or semiofficial paratexts as "most of the authorial epitexts," such as "interviews, conversations, and confidences," whose responsibility "*the author can always more or less disclaim with denials*" (10; emphasis added)—a description that, despite the previous disclaimer of the varying degree of responsibility, seems in contradiction with his own definition. Furthermore, despite declaring functionality as "the most essential of paratext's properties" (407), Genette's whole study proceeds from a spatial criterion that answers the question of *where* the paratextual element is located and presents a subdivision of peritexts as the elements in proximity of the original text, and epitexts as the elements that are *not* in proximity of the original text. The spatial distinction, locating a paratextual element with respect to the text it is attached to, is presented as so important that it is able to transform a purposely fuzzy area defined as "para" into two quite sharply delimited groups. Genette dedicates eleven chapters of *Paratexts* to describing different kinds of peritexts and only two chapters to describing different kinds of epitexts—epitexts, according to Genette, have already been explored at length by critics and literary historians ([1987] 1997, 346). Digital media, however, as discussed in the introduction, have provided authors and audiences with a new array of modes and practices, and these challenge Genette's subordination of the epitext to the peritext.

Establishing that differentiating between communicative and noncommunicative paratexts is the primary principle preceding any further distinction means rebalancing the two categories, peritexts and epitexts. And focusing on paratextual resources—rather than on the totality of possible paratextual activities—means prioritizing the analysis of the effects these have on audiences. Moreover, distinguishing communicative from noncommunicative paratexts is not only useful to define paratextual practices that are not part of the narrative communication *per se*; attending to both phenomena explains how some paratextual practices that are not part of the narrative communication *per se* can still influence it. Noncommunicative paratexts include all those paratextual elements that are not resources of narrative communication: textual material related to a given narrative that the audience may encounter before, during, or after reading.

While material such as authors' interviews or reviews of a given text is certainly not new, the relevance of these noncommunicative paratexts today

seems particularly prominent especially because of the proliferation of social media and blogging sites (see also Thomas 2020). I suggest calling these paratexts “epistemic” because they contribute to a reader’s paratextual “knowledge,” by which I mean the set of assumptions readers bring to the text, thanks to paratexts. Today, epistemic paratexts often come from other readers who take the storyworld’s blueprints as created by authors in their narratives and extend it, creating new material and publishing it online with or without the authors’ approval: a reader’s review on Goodreads is not a communicative paratext, but it still performs a paratextual function.² But they can also come from authors who engage with digital and social platforms in ways that do not focus on a specific narrative communication occurring through a literary narrative.

Both communicative and epistemic paratexts contain an intrinsic functionality that Genette called an illocutionary force ([1987] 1997, 8). This means that paratextual elements such as genre indications, for instance, can “make known an *intention*, or an *interpretation*”; the name of the author, or the date of publication, instead, can communicate “a piece of *information*” (11). This functionality is for Genette “the most essential of paratext’s properties,” since “whatever aesthetic intention may come into play as well, the main issue for the paratext is not to ‘look nice’ around the text but rather to ensure for the text a destiny consistent with the author’s purpose” (407). Each paratextual element, whether communicative or epistemic, shows illocutionary functionality. For example, communicative epitexts can be used to communicate further *information* on the authors’ writing process or on the novels, as well as to offer *interpretative* cues in the form of references to works that inspired them and to personal stories, and to share *performative* instances of their public figures. And epistemic epitexts can too be employed to offer *informative* material

2. My approach to storyworlds and the actual world follows the use of the two concepts as explicated in “Narrative Co-Construction” (Efron, McMurry, and Pignagnoli 2019). In this article, the term *storyworld* follows David Herman’s definition of a framework within which inferences about parts of the narrative make sense: “Storyworlds can be defined as the worlds evoked by narrative; reciprocally, narratives can be defined as the blueprints for a specific mode of world creation” (2009, 105–6). Storyworlds are “mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse” (105–6). Such mental representations highlight the constructed nature of storyworlds, regardless of these worlds’ distance from one’s understanding of the actual world, whether one is the author, the authorial audience, or the actual audience. Moreover, these worlds only truly come into existence when the audience constructs the world(s) with the author (Efron, McMurry, and Pignagnoli 2019, 333–34). We use the term *actual world* following Marie-Laure Ryan’s glossary in *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*: “The actual world, the center of our system of reality. AW is the world where I am located. Absolutely speaking, there is only one AW” (1991, vii).

on a novel or *interpretative* cues, as most reviews do, as well as to *perform* a response to a reading experience on social media.

While understanding the illocutionary force of the various paratextual elements is certainly helpful, distinguishing between communicative and epistemic paratexts allows us to acknowledge that the functions of communicative paratexts depend also on the interaction these have with the other resources employed in the narratives (conversely, epistemic paratexts do not have this kind of functionality). My contention is that the functions of communicative paratexts must always be understood within the overall author-audience communication. Indeed, in any given narrative not only do authors *choose* which resources are more valuable for their communicative purposes (Phelan 2017) but also the “value” of each resource is negotiated by its intersection with the other rhetorical resources and with the narrative’s overall communicative purposes. Paratextual resources are peculiar in this sense because some of them are somehow required—and therefore neutralized—by publishing conventions: for instance, the choice to use a communicative paratext such as a title, compared to the choice of using some unconventional paratextual elements, is not particularly revelatory of the author’s decision to give it more or less value.

For example, the title of Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015) informs readers of an intertextual reference, which is further confirmed at the beginning of the narrative with the sharing of Roland Barthes’s passage involving the Greek heroes (5). The title, therefore, displays an informative illocutionary force. Nothing, however, is revelatory of a particular choice made for specific communicative purposes. She does, instead, employ in the margins of her book, in grayscale, the references to the quotations she merges with her own writing in her narrative. In turn a reference to Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse* (1978), this paratextual element displays an illocutionary force informing the actual sources of the citations. Both the title and the references in the margin contain illocutionary functionality, but only the references are functional at a metalevel. By employing a paratextual resource unconventionally, Nelson is communicating something with that choice—an interest in experimental writing and in calling attention to the manufacturing of her narrative (see also the discussion about metamediality in the introduction)—bringing that resource into the foreground. By bringing a paratextual resource into the foreground, authors emphasize its value to their narrative’s communicative purposes. Moreover, as I will show throughout this study, some paratextual elements include a self-reflexive function on what constitutes the suspended space and time called “para,” a space and time that both intersects with the narrative communication and stops at its margins. These may include unconventional paratextual elements that, like literary experiments, are committed to “raising

fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself” (Bray, Gibbons, and McHale 2012, 1; see also Wolf 2006).

In short, all paratexts show an illocutionary force that involves informing, performing, and interpreting, but only communicative paratexts can be foregrounded within a given narrative communication. Furthermore, while many communicative paratextual elements are accepted as such by the audience, as in the case of titles or dedications, others include a metadiscourse on their own nature and their relation with the prime narrative communication. Distinguishing between communicative paratexts whose function is limited to their specific illocutionary force and paratexts whose function exceeds such specificity in a self-reflexive way is relevant to understanding the connections among the authors’ rhetorical choices of employing communicative paratexts in relation to their overall purposes and in combination with other resources.

Up until now, I have discussed how to analyze the effects of paratexts on audiences based on their distinguished functionality according to the distinction between communicative and epistemic paratexts. At this point, I want to focus on another criterion affecting the functionality of paratexts, a criterion that regards its reception over time. Genette did outline a temporal criterion based both on the paratextual element’s date of appearance (whether prior, together with, or after the “original” text’s publication) and on the author’s lifetime (whether the paratextual element is anthumous or posthumous; see also fig. 1). However—and perhaps because of the greater attention given to peritexts—Genette’s typology does not attend to the occasion in which audiences encounter a given paratextual element, whether it is before, during, or after reading a narrative. The current rise of digital epitexts, instead, makes this further distinction necessary to better understand the actual effects paratexts produce. As far as communicative paratexts are concerned, this temporal criterion underlines the fact that, unlike other resources, communicative paratexts may stretch the narrative time by multiplying the occasions of narration before and after the actual occasion of reading. That is, the author can stretch the time of the narrative communication by employing paratextual elements before and after the date of appearance of the text, as Genette notices. However, we also need to account for the fact that the actual audience stretches that time too and may encounter the paratextual elements employed by the author before, during, or after reading the narrative text.

This temporal criterion produces at least two different situations. If the actual audience, that is, the “flesh-and-blood readers in all their differences and commonalities” (Phelan 2017, 7), encounters a given communicative paratext before or when the narrative communication takes place, they will incorporate such a paratextual element into their *reconstructive* efforts, namely, in

their efforts to reconstruct the narrative storyworld according to the author's blueprints. If the actual audience encounters a given communicative paratext after the narrative communication took place, it will take that paratextual material as an *extension* of the communicative act and/or employ it to *revise* its reconstructive efforts. This will happen regardless of the author's communicative intentions, that is, whether the author meant the paratextual material to be encountered before or after the reading of the text. As far as epistemic paratexts are concerned, two similar situations occur. If the actual audience encounters a reader's review before or during the reading experience, readers may *activate* the paratextual knowledge it contains during their reconstructive efforts, for instance if they find difficulties in entering the narrative audience. If the actual audience encounters a reader's review after the reading experience, when its reconstructive efforts are over, readers may employ the paratextual knowledge the review contains to *evaluate* the result of their reconstructive efforts and their *application* of these efforts in the actual world.

Application refers to the idea that the process of co-building a particular narrative storyworld (re)constructs authors' and audiences' ideas of reality so that the actual world is constructed along with the storyworld (see Effron in Effron, McMurry, and Pignagnoli 2019). Co-constructing a narrative means that the author's communicative act enables the audience's co-construction of the storyworld, as well as of the actual world. This step, the (re)construction of the actual world, can range from learning new facts to experiencing defamiliarization, or from adopting new ideas to refining the bases of ethical judgments, and underpins the importance of narrative communication as a means for change (Effron, McMurry, and Pignagnoli 2019). While such recognition might be trivial in the case of nonfiction narrative, co-construction calls attention to its relevance across all narrative forms (see also Effron's apparatus to assess the collaborative reconstruction of the actual world called *realism effect*; Effron, McMurry, and Pignagnoli 2019, 341–42).

All four situations (see fig. 2) may affect the audience's co-construction of the narrative communication, but only reconstructive and extensive/revising paratexts *necessarily* involve both authors and readers, because only the communicative ones belong to the narrative act.

As a level of vagueness is inevitable when considering paratexts because it is inherent to the concept itself, I want to underline that distinguishing between communicative and epistemic paratexts is meant to foreground the communicative nature of narratives and to provide analytical tools to better understand the effects achieved on audiences. As mentioned earlier, the widespread practice of epitexts in the digital world increases the chance that they are encountered before or after the reading experience. And this tempo-

Paratexts and narrative communication		
Whom/To Whom	Communicative	Epistemic
When		
Before/during	Reconstructive	Activating
After	Extensive/revising	Applicative/evaluating

FIGURE 2. Co-constructive paratextual dynamics

ral criterion is particularly relevant for digital epitexts, because their material distance from the source narrative makes them available to readers in a unique way. Rhetorically, in fact, Genette’s spatial criterion is not really relevant except for the understanding that a paratextual element in proximity to the source narrative is more likely than one located elsewhere to be delivered to the audience.

Digital media put Genette’s spatial criterion to the test because the notions of proximity and distance are less straightforward when a novel, for instance, is read on an e-book, whose links to “distant” paratexts are just one click away (see also McCracken 2013). This is not to say that the spatial criterion is not helpful to describe different kinds of paratextual practices, but that, rhetorically, knowing where a paratextual element is located is relevant only insofar as this location offers clues on the communicative dynamics it elicits (posited that that element is encountered at all). Indeed, if we go back to thinking about how paratextual resources can be used in a way that foregrounds their value within a narrative’s communicative purposes, we could speculate that the author’s choice of the location of the paratextual element, namely, in proximity of the text, distant from it, in the digital world, and so on, may be revelatory of that value. In other words, authors may choose where to deliver their paratextual material based on the value this has within the narrative’s communicative purposes. Besides, digital media are challenging the notion of peritexts as the privileged location for paratextual material because the digital world reduces the spatial distance between text and paratext. Today, most epitextual elements appear in a very specific space—the digital world—through very specific media, apps, websites, and social media. In other words, the accessibility that once was a prerogative of peritexts has now extended to

epitexts. And contemporary authors may actually be encouraged to explore new ways and new locations to communicate paratextual meaning, especially because digital media allow new specific affordances such as multimodality, interactivity, ephemerality, and so forth.

Some digital paratexts are transmedial transpositions of existing kinds of paratexts, such as the title of a novel on an e-book or the digitization of existing epitexts (e.g., Edgar Allan Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" [1846]), exemplary of what Genette called "delayed autonomous epitext, or autocommentary" ([1987] 1997, 367), appearing digitally on the website of The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore (<https://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm>). Others, instead, are new kinds of born-digital paratextual activities, such as the interactive options and the "liner notes" in the downloadable application software for Jennifer Egan's novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (developed in 2011), and the section called "Fact vs. Fiction: Learn More about the Historical Facts on Which *Love and Treasure* Was Based, with Links to Additional Information" on Ayelet Waldman's website (<https://ayelet-waldman.squarespace.com/book-clubs/fact-vs-fiction>) for her novel *Love and Treasure* (2014). These are examples of communicative peritexts and epitexts, but the advent of digital media affected epistemic paratexts, too. Epistemic paratexts in the digital world can appear as transmedial transpositions of existing types of communicative activities, too (e.g., a critic's afterword to a novel published electronically or an interview with an author appearing on YouTube). But again, they can also include new kinds of born-digital paratextual activities such as the notes by Margaret Guroff on Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) on the website "Power Moby-Dick: The Online Annotation" (2008, <http://www.powermobydick.com>) and the "community reviews" of Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018) on Goodreads (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/33590210-an-american-marriage>).

All these distinctions provide a new vocabulary to analyze narrative fiction in the digital age. Nevertheless, my proposal of rhetorical paratextuality is meant as a heuristic framework, not as a categorization with rigid boundaries. While many paratextual elements in the digital world are easy to understand as either communicative or epistemic, there are others that are harder to distinguish, partly because the digital world has amplified the phenomenon of performing authorship³ and more and more authors are actively present on social media. There, tweets or posts not related to their novels are not necessarily paratextual elements employed communicatively, but it can happen that

3. On this phenomenon before the internet, see Glass 2004. For a comprehensive study on performative authorship in the digital era, see Murray 2018.

authors employ them as a platform to further display an interest in sincerity and intersubjectivity they also show in their literary narratives.

As stated in the introduction, my main interest in this book is on the way contemporary authors employ digital rhetorical resources to connect with or achieve certain effects on the audience, not only because these are new kinds of paratextual activities, but also because their use intersects with the other resources predominantly employed in post-postmodernist fiction. To attend to paratextuality rhetorically means to understand how paratexts are contributing to the communicative purposes of a narrative. Therefore, this study does not aim to provide a comprehensive list of all kinds of paratexts, digital or otherwise, as their functionality can be generalized, rather than understood in relation to the texts to which they are attached, only to a certain extent. At the same time, a rhetorical understanding of paratexts is particularly relevant for the analysis of twenty-first-century fiction and the emerging poetics succeeding postmodernism: as communicative digital epitexts are employed widely, their modes and functions can become key features of the new dominant.

For instance, as the digital world provides new layers to the author's channel of communication whenever the author employs digital epitexts, their use may be revelatory of an interest in narratives open to further extensions and additions. But the digital world is also becoming a place where one can observe how the reading experience can exceed the actual occasion of reading. Indeed, an audience's epistemic epitexts can reveal how audiences apply storyworld details to their understanding of the actual world, for instance by taking up some thematic and ethical messages, engaging with them in their lives, and sharing content-related material for other readers to access. In this sense, epistemic epitexts from audiences are an effect of the co-construction process that occurs when the narrative communication takes place that, once shared, are still able to influence the co-construction process. On the one hand, when audiences' epistemic epitexts are rendered in the digital sphere, other readers can encounter them before or during their reading process, and they can possibly activate paratextual knowledge that affects the (re)construction of the storyworld. On the other hand, the audience's epistemic epitexts also generate new texts that provide evidence of co-construction. Therefore, attending to the audience's epistemic epitexts is important to show how the audience receives the narrative communication within a changing cultural dominant (see chap. 5).

To conclude, the rhetorical approach to paratextuality includes two main categories, communicative and epistemic paratexts, to which various properties

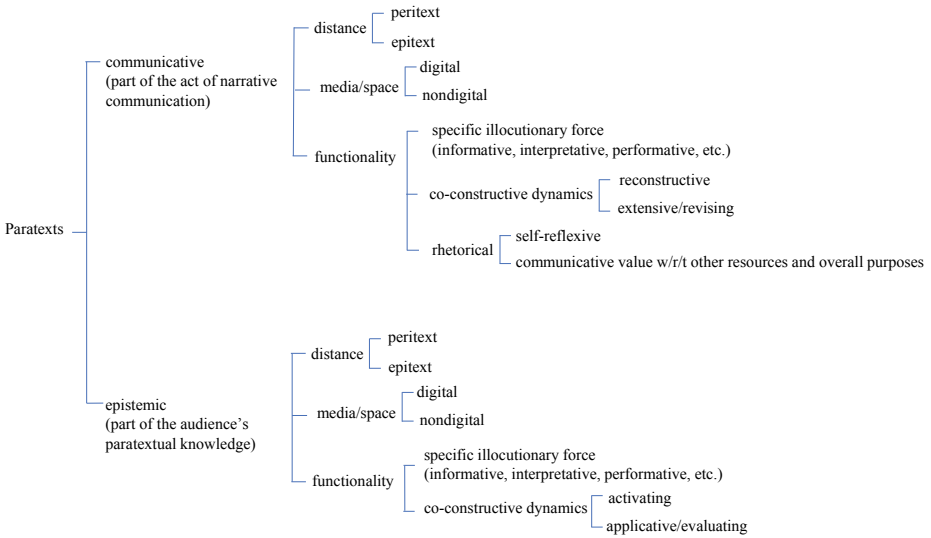


FIGURE 3. A rhetorical theory of paratexts

correspond (see fig. 3).⁴ Some of these properties are shared by the two categories: both communicative and epistemic paratexts can appear in proximity or not to a certain narrative (peritexts/epitexts), and both can appear in the digital world/be realized as digital media or not (digital/nondigital).

These spatial/medial properties, in turn, display specific affordances, such as, in the case of digital paratexts, interactivity, multimodality, and ephemerality. As far as functionality is concerned, both categories show an illocutionary force concerning their providing of material that, for instance, informs about or interprets the source narrative. And both communicative and epistemic paratexts may influence the narrative communication with regard to the occasion in which readers encounter them (see fig. 2). Only communicative paratexts, however, display “rhetorical” properties. These are: (1) the possibility that the author’s choice to employ a paratextual resource is self-reflexive and revelatory of a functionality exceeding the paratextual element’s specific illocutionary force, and (2) the understanding of the paratextual element’s functionality and communicative value in connection with the other resources employed in the narrative communication to achieve some purposes.

4. Some of Genette’s categories (see fig.1) are not necessarily excluded from the rhetorical theory of paratexts (e.g., the temporal criterion), but figure 3 is meant to highlight the main criteria and properties that characterize my revision.

In the following chapters, I apply the rhetorical model of paratextuality presented here to five selected contemporary novels. While the examples I offer cannot possibly represent the whole variety of digital epitexts and the communicative dynamics they elicit, their analyses provide distinctive, valuable insights both into the multifaceted phenomenon of authors and readers interacting through the internet and social media, and into the intersection of this phenomenon with the modes and interests currently employed in the post-postmodern novel. In other words, the following analyses build on the theory of rhetorical paratextuality presented in this chapter to provide a study of the communicative dynamics created by the intersections of author-reader interactions in the digital world and a post-postmodernist poetics.

CHAPTER 2

Earnestness

This chapter analyzes the use of communicative digital epitexts in connection with the novel *Moonglow* by Michael Chabon (2016). I will focus on a specific kind of communicative digital epitexts: the thirty-something posts relative to *Moonglow* that Chabon shared on his Instagram profile (<https://www.instagram.com/michael.chabon/>) between 2015 and 2018. As I will argue, these digital epitexts are particularly relevant in connection with another rhetorical resource amply employed in *Moonglow*, namely, the blurring of the fiction/nonfiction distinction “reshuffled” in light of the current post-postmodernist interest in earnest communication.

MICHAEL CHABON'S *MOONGLOW* AND THE BLURRING OF THE FICTION/NONFICTION DISTINCTION

Moonglow starts playing with its generic status in the peritext. The book cover describes it as fiction (a novel). Such generic framework is later confirmed by a peritextual disclaimer on the copyright page, which declares:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons,

living or dead, is entirely coincidental. *Scout's honor* (2016, copyright page; emphasis added).

However, in the “Author’s Note” placed before chapter 1, *Moonglow* is described as nonfiction (a memoir):

In preparing this memoir, I have stuck to facts except when facts refused to conform with memory, narrative purpose, or the truth as I prefer to understand it. Wherever liberties have been taken with names, dates, places, events, and conversations, or with the identities, motivations, and interrelationships of family members and historical personages, the reader is assured that they have been taken *with due abandon*. (2016, Author’s Note; emphasis added)

While according to the note on the copyright page *Moonglow* is a work of fiction, according to the “Author’s Note” *Moonglow* is a work of nonfiction with incursions of fictionality (what he calls “liberties”). The expressions “with due abandon” and “Scout’s honor,” however, signal a playful posture vis-à-vis the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. In these peritextual elements, Chabon undermines such distinction by simultaneously making a claim for and challenging the sincerity of the preceding statements. Moreover, in order to support the nonfictional framing, placed right below the “Author’s Note,” there is the reproduction of an advertisement for a 1:20-scale model of a US Navy’s Aerobee-Hi rocket produced by a company named “Chabon Scientific Co” and allegedly published in October 1958 in *Esquire* magazine. The rocket advertisement, whether authentic or not, signals the presence of extratextual referentiality, thus supporting the nonfictional framing of *Moonglow*.

Moonglow opens with the sentence, “This is how I heard the story,” followed by a description of the narrator’s grandfather’s arrest on “May 25, 1957” (Chabon 2016, 1). The narrator goes on explaining that the grandfather told him parts of this story during the last week of his life, when he went to say goodbye to him at his mother’s house in Oakland, California. At that time, dying of bone cancer, the grandfather is receiving pain medication, which makes him very talkative, in contrast to his much more common “habit of silence” (5). His grandson, the narrator, stays with him until his death, listening to his recollections: “He started talking almost the minute I sat down in the chair by his bed. It was as if he had been waiting for my company, but I believe now that he simply knew he was running out of time” (5). These recollections, we are told, “emerged in no discernible order” (5). It is not specified if the order in which the grandfather recounted them is the same indiscernible order in which they

are presented in the narrative. Indeed, the narrative communication unfolds through a mixed temporal order, as there are two main temporal levels that correspond to the two main *tellings* in the narrative.¹ One mainly revolves around the life of the narrator's grandfather, from his childhood in Philadelphia to his retirement in Florida and death in Oakland. The other comprises a confessional and metafictional mode through which the narrator reveals further details on his decision to write his memoir. The narrator changes accordingly, switching from heterodiegetic and omniscient when telling the grandfather's ventures, to a homodiegetic narrating-I with different degrees of resemblance with the actual author, comprising an onomastic connection between the two: Michael is "Mike" when switching to the memoirist mode. The fictionalized memories of the narrator's grandfather are complemented with the telling of other events involving the narrator's grandmother, and the mother's and the narrator's own recollections. These two main telling situations are then further complicated by a narrative occurring on a third temporal level. This level presents the narrator at the time he receives most of the information he will then fictionalize and include in the first telling situation: during the grandfather's last week of his life in Oakland, California, in 1989/1990. This third temporal level works as a watershed moment, separating the memories around the narrator's family and the memoirist's effort to recount such memories. It is this third, watershed telling that provides the primary framing for the telling unfolding around the life of the narrator's grandfather.

The telling of the narrator's family history is framed as fiction; the telling of the narrator as the grandson who dutifully listened to his grandfather's recollections and many years later decided to transform those into a narrative is framed as a fictional memoir. However, mixed generic clues are disseminated throughout the narrative progression, in spite of the confessional telling emerging more predominantly toward the ending and despite the "Oakland's telling" functioning as *myse en abyme* device. For instance, while the advertisement for the Aerobee-Hi rocket below the Author's Note seemed to indicate an extratextual referentiality—namely, a company named "Chabon Scientific Co" existed in the actual world—when the narrative refers to it again (i.e., other than in the peritext), the description of its inception seems more fictional than nonfictional. The grandfather is serving his time at Wallkill Prison, which was an actual-world correction facility strongly oriented toward the rehabilitation of its inmates. There, a man named Sam Chabon (the narrator's great-uncle, also known as Uncle Sammy) sees the grandfather giving a

1. I use "telling" following Phelan's definition of a narrative involving somebody *telling* to somebody else, as well as his own use of the term (see Phelan 2017).

kid a model rocket and decides to invest in their production, hiring the grandfather in his company, Chabon Scientific Co. The narrator does not specify if the narration of this event comes from a memory his grandfather or someone else told him, nor does he specify how much of his retelling is fictionalized.

Chabon's combined use of mixed framing clues and different temporal levels allows for ambiguity vis-à-vis the narrative's fictional status to be constantly present throughout the progression of *Moonglow*. The narrative progresses with the three telling situations continuously intermingling and challenging the audience's co-constructive efforts as the two main telling situations juxtapose in the storyworld. *Moonglow's* storyworld, as reconstructed from the various nonsequential telling situations, is the following. A man described as the narrator's grandfather grows up in South Philadelphia with his parents of Jewish and German origins and his younger brother, Reynard, also known as "Uncle Ray." On December 8, 1941, the grandfather enlists in the Army Corps of Engineers (28), and later studies "mayhem and spycraft" at an OSS training facility in the Maryland mountains (116). In 1944 he spends some months in London and then France, where he will be traumatized by the death of his friend Alvin Aughenbaugh, a lieutenant whose lighter he would carry with him for the rest of his days (129). In Germany, he is part of a military unit on a mission to find Wernher von Braun, the engineer who invented the V-2 rocket, together with other "Nazi professors" (131).

The grandfather goes to the concentration camp of Nordhausen, where the V-2 rockets were made by thousands of prisoners kept in unspeakable conditions. He won't find von Braun, but he will manage to recover the files containing the studies that brought him and his team to the construction of the V-2 (269). In the telling of this episode, the narrator engages with the trope of "truth in fiction." When the grandfather tells him he went to Nordhausen, he refuses to describe what he saw and experienced: "You want to know what happened at Nordhausen? [. . .] Look it up," he says (246). When Mike does look it up, he discovers that beyond Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), "there was not a lot" (258). Pynchon's novel is "accurately researched" (247), and the accounts of the US troops entering the camps and the tunnels under Kohnstein Mountain had been "followed closely by Pynchon when he had his engineer Pökler tour KZ Dora" (253). Then, following Pynchon's example, Chabon offers a fictionalized, but (apparently) accurately researched, account of Nordhausen through his grandfather's memories: "Between the impressment of the local citizens as gravediggers and the beginning of the end of my grandfather's war," he says, "I can offer only informed speculation, combined with a few little facts that he inadvertently dropped over the course

of the next few days” (253).² The telling of Nordhausen, as Francisco Collado-Rodríguez highlights, “aims at a clear moral target related to the importance of collective memory: Americans should not have forgotten that von Braun was a Nazi and that landing on the Moon had meant earlier experiments with the destructive power of the rocket in its original version as the V-2 weapon” (2019, 1).

Later, in February 1947, the grandfather meets the narrator’s grandmother for the first time in a synagogue in Baltimore, dragged along by his brother, Uncle Ray (56). The grandfather will eventually marry the grandmother, who presents herself as a Holocaust survivor and a widow. She speaks with a French accent and arrives in the United States with a four-year-old daughter, the narrator’s mother (91). At this point, the grandfather starts working as an “aerospace engineer,” first for a company called Glenn L. Martin and then “at a firm of his own, Patapsco Engineering, designing inertial guidance and telemetry systems” (85). In the meanwhile, the grandmother is “an on-air personality” (181): a “frequent guest on WAAM’s *Home Cooking*, giving lessons in French cooking to Baltimore housewives” (46) and reading horror fiction impersonating a witch in a late-night show called *The Crypt of Nevermore*, which “aired weekly from October 7, 1949, the centennial of Edgar Allan Poe’s death, to October 24, 1952” (182). In 1952, she has a mental breakdown, probably ignited by a miscarriage, which leads her to be hospitalized until “late 1954” (44). To pay for her treatments, the grandfather seeks a more lucrative job, and their now ten-year-old daughter goes to live with her paternal grandparents.

For a couple of years, he works as salesman in a company called Feathercombs, Inc., and they all live in a farmhouse outside of Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey. After her hospitalization, the grandmother “emerged from that first time at Greystone in a fragile and quiet state, holding herself like an egg balanced on a spoon, but for the next twenty-eight months they lived on the farm in relative contentment” (44). In 1957, however, the grandfather gets arrested for the attempted strangling of his employer with a telephone cord. He had been fired for no particular reason, but it was also “the day after the first time [the grandmother] tried to burn down a tree” (348) in front of their house, thus showing signs of a relapse. The grandmother is hospitalized in a mental institution for the second time, and the grandfather serves “thirteen months” in Wallkill Prison. Their daughter, now fourteen years old, is left with Uncle Ray, who, in the meanwhile, had become a hustler and a gambler. As the grandfather recounts, “Your mother was fourteen when I went in, Mike. Stuck

2. For an accurate account of this intertextual level, see Collado-Rodríguez 2019.

in Baltimore, where she didn't know a soul. Living with a pool hustler and a grumpy old lady" (292). While in prison, he builds a model rocket for the warden's grandson. Sam Chabon (Uncle Sammy), a businessman with a "production floor at the prison where [the] grandfather served his sentence" (311) sees the model rocket and decides to invest in their production. The grandfather becomes the "managing partner of MRX, Inc., with Sam Chabon as a partner and principal investor and a contract to supply Chabon Scientific with five thousand 1:20-scale solid-fueled Aerobee-Hi rockets" (331), whose "advertisement" in *Esquire* readers encountered in the peritext.

Right after getting out of prison, the grandfather goes to the mental institution where the grandmother is hospitalized to bring her home. Here, he speaks with Dr. Medved, who reveals to him that the grandmother's past is different from what she has been telling him. He replies that he doesn't need to know everything: "She's broken, I'm broken. Everybody's broken. If she's not in misery anymore, I'll take it" (352). They now live in Riverdale, New York (18), and the narrator's mother meets Sam Chabon's nephew, "a dark-eyed good-looking kid, crown prince of his family, not yet twenty and already in medical school" (332), who will soon become the narrator's father. In 1972 Sam Chabon's nephew/the narrator's father invests money in Uncle Ray's chain of billiard clubs, which were slightly connected to the Philadelphia Mob. This results in Uncle Ray being a fugitive for the rest of his life and the grandfather losing his interests in his company, MRX. In 1975 the grandmother dies of endometrial cancer. She was fifty-two, and the narrator, who is now known as Mike, was eleven. The same year, Mike's parents get divorced, and the grandfather eventually meets Wernher von Braun at the Twelfth Space Congress in Cocoa Beach, Florida. He will also move to Fontana Village, a retirement community in Coconut Creek, Florida. There, in 1989, he meets Sally Sichel, a fellow retiree, and falls in love. A few months later, he discovers he has bone cancer, but keeps it to himself until the day, in March 1990, he breaks his leg and the narrator's mother flies him to California, to live with her in Oakland. In the "last week of his life" (4) or "its final ten days" (91), he will recount some of these events to his grandson, Mike. In Oakland, Mike listens to his grandfather, who confesses that he is "disappointed" in himself. Mike replies that, on the contrary, he is "proud" and that his story is "a pretty good story" (241). The grandfather therefore tells him: "You can have it. I'm giving it to you. After I'm gone, write it down. Explain everything. Make it mean something. Use a lot of those fancy metaphors of yours. Put the whole thing in proper chronological order, not like this mishmash I'm making you. Start with the night I was born. March second, 1915" (241). The grandfather, in other words, authorizes Mike to use his memories and "make them mean something," even if that means fictionalizing them.

As compared to the extent of the grandfather's telling, Mike's is limited, and the episodes narrated within Mike's telling situation are those in which the autobiographical connections are more evident: Mike is a novelist "about to start a reading tour for the paperback edition of [his] first novel" (48). Mike, like the author Michael, graduated from the University of California, Irvine, got divorced, and then settled with his second wife in Berkeley. The *mise en abyme* story of the grandfather, as mentioned above, is incepted in a fictional nonfictional framework. Mike tells us about some episodes that took place many years after his grandfather's death. For instance, when Mike "had long since become a resident of Berkeley, California," his mother pays him a visit while packing up to "move out of the house where [his] grandfather had died" and brings him some old liquor boxes full of his "old junk" (177). One of the boxes actually belongs to her and its content triggers some memories involving her mother's hospitalization: "They dropped me with Bubbe and Zayde and then he took her to the hospital. She was really, you know. Something was really out of whack" (179). The telling of the mother's own memories supports the truthfulness of the grandfather's story, that is, its truthfulness within the incepted narrative telling of his life.

Examples of these veiled metalepses abound. At one of Mike's readings, at "Books and Books in Coral Gables," a dentist who reconstructed the grandmother's teeth tells him that "he never entirely recovered from the shock of the ruin he found" in her mouth (65). At another reading in Coral Gables, after he has published his second book, his grandfather's later love interest, Sally Sichel, shows up and they end up having dinner, chatting about the grandfather and their six-month relationship. And again, in 2014, Mike interviews Barry Kahn, the director of the show the grandmother was starring in. Earlier, in 2013, Mike "tracks down" Lorraine Medved-Engel, the eldest child of Dr. Leo Medved, the doctor who treated his grandmother at the psychiatric hospital, Greystone Park, as he "had been thinking of writing a novel based on what [he] knew about [his] grandmother and her illness" (353). Here, he finds a notebook where Dr. Medved annotated a few paragraphs about his grandmother's case.

As the grandfather's telling had anticipated, these notes offer an account of her experiences during the war very different from the one she had given during her life. Mike had "heard the story" of his grandmother as follows:

Sometime after the fall of France my grandmother, unwed, not yet eighteen, and pregnant with my mother, had been taken in by Carmelite nuns in the countryside outside of Lille, where her family were prominent Jewish dealers in horses and hides. On learning that she was pregnant, and with the bastard of a Catholic—unappeased by knowing that the father was a handsome

young doctor—her family had disowned her. It was the family of the handsome young doctor who had arranged things with the nuns. Shortly after my mother's birth, my grandmother's family was deported to Auschwitz, where they perished. After the handsome young doctor had treated the injuries of some local members of the Resistance, the SS had shot him. (43)

Mike knows, because his grandfather told him (and warned him not to mention it to his mother) that this version probably did not contain the whole story. But the revelations contained in Dr. Medved's notes are still shocking: the father was not a handsome young doctor, but a local SS captain who raped the grandmother. She had suffered from "*prolonged, acute depression postpartum,*" and after the convent of the Carmelite nuns was destroyed by a V-2 rocket, she was "*forced into months of vagrancy, cold, near-starvation*" (355). She stole and prostituted herself for "*food and money*" (355). She adopted a dead friend's name and identity and lied about being interned in Auschwitz—"*US soldier w/ sewing needle and pen ink tattooed numbers on patient's arm in return for sex*"—so that she could be brought to the US by HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) agents (355).

Dr. Medved's notes prove to have an enormous impact on Mike. "This discovery," he writes, "—that my genetic grandfather had been a Nazi, that my grandmother had been born to a life, with a biography, very different than the one I had always been told, that she had perpetrated such a charged deception on everyone for so long—messed me up for a long time" (356). Although he had previously briefly referred to the narrative as his own "manuscript" (168), it is only after this discovery that Mike offers a fuller explanation of its genesis:

One by one I began to subject my memories of my grandmother, of the things she had told me and the way she had behaved, to a formal review, a kind of failure analysis, searching and testing them for their content of deceit, for the hidden presence in them of the truth. I kept what I had learned from my wife until I returned from Mantoloking. I kept it from my mother and the rest of the world until I began to research and write this memoir, abandoning—repudiating—a novelistic approach to the material. Sometimes even lovers of fiction can be satisfied only by the truth. I felt like I needed to "get my story straight," so to speak, in my mind and in my heart. I needed to work out, if I could, the relationship between the things I had heard and learned about my family and its history while growing up, and the things I now knew to be true. (356)

This passage is full of pathos, but it is also full of irony. Mike seems very serious about choosing to write this story as nonfiction in order to be truth-

ful, but, at this point, readers have already co-constructed *Moonglow's* story-world and accepted its genre ambiguity and playfulness with regard to the fact and fiction distinction. Readers are aware of the fictional framework not only because the peritext describes *Moonglow* as a novel: Chabon has been signaling it throughout the narrative by including details and dialogues that clearly bear no referentiality and by switching to omniscient narration. The memories of the grandfather are told in a novelistic and not in a memoiristic way. As the narrative cues the readers' attention toward its overall fictional nature, the narrator's insistence on truth-telling in nonfiction becomes ironic.

The main purpose Chabon's use of genre ambiguity seems to communicate is that neither fiction nor invention make the narrative communication less authentic or sincere. Rather, borrowing Stefan Kjerkegaard's remark about Philip Roth's *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988), *Moonglow* "intends to tell the truth, but the truth must sometimes be framed by fiction in order to come across as truth" (2016, 127). Playing with the fiction/nonfiction distinction in order for the narrative to express some truth emerges because the ambiguity on the generic framing of the narrative, together with Chabon's use of a mixed temporal order (see the page numbers throughout the reconstruction of *Moonglow's* storyworld to observe the extensive use of this resource) guides readers' interests in thematic issues such as identity, trauma, and memory. The temporal gaps convey a sense of fragmentariness that the audience can ascribe to the narrator's own effort to reconstruct his identity through some blurred family tales recounted over many decades. The events recounted are not only intermingled and fragmented, sometimes they are told more than once, the way family stories often are. *Moonglow*, therefore, is about the telling of a family history as it is about the retelling of family histories: sometimes filling the gaps deepens the understanding of the past, sometimes it makes the past even more blurred.

Furthermore, Chabon includes temporal inconsistencies concerning the year or the duration of certain events. It is not clear, for instance, if the grandfather dies in 1989 or in 1990, nor if the grandmother dies in 1975 or in 1974, whether the narrator spent a week or ten days with him in Oakland, and even whether the grandfather met his wife in 1944 or in 1947. But such inconsistencies are functional to Chabon's thematic interest in identity issues and the way trauma can affect memory (see Caruth 1995 and Hirsch 2008). As Collado-Rodríguez points out, "Mental gaps, trauma and nostalgia are features that Chabon frequently uses in *Moonglow* to draw a portrait of his narrator as somebody who incessantly challenges our human ability to know the truth about past experiences" (2019, 92). But Collado-Rodríguez also notices that "there is always a certain level of distortion; there are gaps, smaller or bigger inaccuracies induced by different factors which may go from physical

handicaps or psychic trauma to the feeling of nostalgia” (92). Thus, beyond the problem of the collective memory of the Holocaust, there is also a more intimate or family-related ethical question that *Moonglow* conveys: How can we know who we are if it is not possible to be sure about our past, as our memories and the memories we pass on generation after generation are not fixed entities and inevitably contain so many inaccuracies?

Trauma, memory, and historical fiction are not new modes and themes for Chabon. Rather, they are well embedded into his investigation “into [his] heritage—rights and privileges, duties and burdens—as a Jew and as a teller of Jewish stories,” as he explains (Chabon 2010, 158) and as it is evident by his similar exploration of the same modes and themes in his previous works, most notably in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000) and *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (2007). In this regard, Marjorie Worthington’s definition of “trauma autofictions” (2018) provides a further explanation for Chabon’s investment in blurring the lines of the fiction/nonfiction distinction in *Moonglow*. As she argues, “Onomastic connection between author and author-character implies that the authors have indeed suffered a trauma,” and “defining the character’s authenticity as one who has indeed suffered a trauma [. . .] serves as a claim to authority” (Worthington 2018, 132–33).

Partly linked with historiographic metafiction, partly “filtered by the insistent focus that trauma narratives have put on the difficulties or even impossibility to narrate past traumatic events” (Collado-Rodriguez 2019, 92), *Moonglow* does have a “patina of factual accuracy” as “the author-character places [himself] in the rhetorical position of someone authorized to tell a story of trauma” (Worthington 2018, 131). And Chabon *authorizes* Mike to talk about the collective trauma of the Holocaust through another (fictionalized) personal trauma—his grandmother’s lies, which deconstruct his own Jewish origins. So, like trauma autofictions, *Moonglow* draws its authority from “the depth and universality of story-truths,” of its being fictional, but also “remains yoked to referentiality through the author-character’s onomastic connection to the author” (Worthington 2018, 133).

Finally, the novel ends with a third peritextual element, a final metalepsis in the form of acknowledgments. These include a list of people mentioned in the narrative, such as Barry Kahn or Lorraine Medved-Engel, who “if they existed, would have been instrumental to the completion of this work,” and the revelation that the memories of the grandfather actually belong to Chabon’s “mother’s maternal uncle, Stanley Werbow (1922–2005), a professor of medieval German at the University of Texas and a former staff sergeant operating in the field with the 849th Signal Intelligence Service at the Battle of Monte Cassino.” According to the acknowledgments, Stan Werbow was “per-

sueded by one of his daughters to dictate some memories of growing up Jewish in Philadelphia and Washington in the early part of the twentieth century. Though fragmentary and rambling, that narrative, [. . .] provided the spark that kindled this one, along with some crucial bits of atmosphere” (Chabon 2016, n. pag.). As mentioned earlier, Chabon signaled the presence of fictionality in his “memoir” throughout the whole narrative. But the revelation of the different identity of the “grandfather,” analogous to the effect Dr. Medved’s notes have on Mike, forces the authorial audience to reframe the narrative communication through a final layer of ambiguity toward *Moonglow*’s generic status.

The ambiguity of *Moonglow*’s generic status does not hinder the narrative interest to engage with ethical issues; rather, the mixing of fiction and nonfiction is meant to represent the most earnest way to engage with the subject of trauma. This does not mean that irony disappears completely, as seen above, but that, when it is present, it appears within what Korthals Altes has called a “double play of sincerity and irony,” which means ironically reflecting on the authorial longing for sincerity. “Make them mean something,” is the ultimate goal, showing the author’s interest in creating a narrative able to “be about something, to matter, to communicate meaning, to foster the sense that language connects us more than it estranges us, so that we can come together in ways that build relationship and community” (Holland 2013, 6). *Moonglow*, thus, responds to a post-postmodern dominant that asks about earnest communication. And Chabon’s answer is performative: his novel is meant to show how to earnestly tell someone else’s story to make it mean something, that is, by mixing fact and fiction.

#MOONGLOW AND MOONGLOW

In this section, I turn my attention to the digital world, where Chabon is actively present on social media. I will focus mainly on the communicative digital epitexts Chabon shared on his Instagram feed (<https://www.instagram.com/michael.chabon/>), specifically, the posts with an explicit connection to his novel *Moonglow*, a connection often emphasized through the use of the hashtag #moonglow. An Instagram post is primarily made up of a photo—or multiple photos or a video—that can be edited by adjusting the light or shape or adding “filters” and frames; the post can contain tags or @mentions of other users as well as a caption containing text, hashtags, emojis, and a geotag with location information. Hashtags have become a way on social media of “indicating textually keywords or phrases especially worth indexing” (Hala-

vais 2014, 36). These digital epitexts occur in the context of a larger personal narrative built through a series of mainly epistemic digital epitexts that form Chabon's Instagram feed (for a discussion of authorial epistemic digital epitexts, see chap. 4). This, at the time of writing, is composed of 2,542 posts, creating a raw archive of his daily life, comprising his reading, listening, and viewing habits and preferences.

To analyze digital epitexts on social media, we can generalize their current logic as governed by ephemerality, fragmentarity, constructed spontaneity, immediacy, (performed) intimacy, and phatic communication. Particularly exemplary of this logic is Chabon's post shared on November 16, 2020, where he reveals that he employs Instagram to "keep a kind of visual record of [his] days, [his] life and the life of [his] family, stuff [he is] into, current creative projects, passing obsessions, random thoughts and observations triggered by the act of seeing and then capturing an image." In a confessional tone, Chabon praises the affordances of Instagram, which allow him to create such a personal archive, which he compares to the writing of a journal, highlighting the intimacy of his sharing: "I make my art and my living by words, yet had always been unable to sustain any of the many attempts I had made to keep a written journal. The visual, picture-taking aspect of Instagram turned out to be the key to enabling me to document my daily experience, to create a record" (Nov. 16, 2020; geotag: Brooklin, Maine). Then, he also underlines a rawness and spontaneity linked with his practice: "A record, that is, for *me*. I've never pruned or edited my feed to produce some desired esthetic effect, or coherence, for other eyes. I'm the only one who ever goes scrolling back through the 2,500+ posts, reminding myself of where I was, what I cared about, on almost any given day in the past decade" (Nov. 16, 2020).³ And Chabon's pictures do mostly appear "unfiltered," meaning that stylistic editing is not evident. They are, to borrow Lev Manovich's terminology, "casual" photos employed to "visually document and share an experience, a situation, or portray a person or a group of people" (2017, 52). As Manovich remarks, "This does not mean that these images are in reality 'unpremeditated, unintentional, spontaneous'—but it also does not mean that they are 'staged, planned, calculated'" (55). This duality happens because, according to Manovich, "in contemporary culture (including Instagram), such categories are neither in opposition, nor are they 'blurred'" (55). Moreover, as Thomas remarks, "it is often the very rawness and lack of polish of the stories related that makes them so powerful" (2020, 51).

3. On Instagram and other social media, it is common practice to use asterisks to emphasize a word or a sentence.

Through this staged or what we might call constructed spontaneity, most events are recounted as if they have just happened or they are still happening. Many posts show Chabon's children at home, on vacation, in shops, or at museums. Some contain short captions such as "New haircut" (a photo of one of his sons posted on Apr. 22, 2014) or "Puppy love" (a photo of one of his dogs and a dog posted on Sept. 3, 2016), while others contain longer verbal descriptions. For instance, a post dated April 3, 2016, contains an image of Chabon's four children sitting at the family table with the youngest child opening presents. The caption reads as follows:

18 months of hard work and study learning to chant in an ancient language without vowels. A week of writing a wise and surprising teaching on a notoriously thorny Torah portion (Shemini). Two hours of intense focus in front of family, friends and classmates. And now: Sit back, and count the money. #howwedo.

In this case, the hashtag #howwedo is employed to emphasize what the post is about rather than to unite posts that are concerned with the way people "do." The "we" in the hashtag refers to the Chabons as a family unit, but in the context of the picture and the caption describing his son's Bar Mitzvah, it serves to affirm their Jewish cultural identity, too. Indeed, sometimes hashtags "can allow certain types of communities to emerge and form" because they digitally collate posts containing the same hashtag, but sometimes they are not used with that intention (Bruns and Burgess 2011 qtd. in Highfield and Leaver 2015, n. pag.).

As it emerges from the apparent choices he makes regarding which elements of his daily life are worth posting, Chabon's "journal" conveys a self-portrait of a loving father and husband. There are dozens of pictures of Ayelet Waldman, his wife, in the kitchen, writing, reading, and eating, and pictures of the two together, with captions such as "Nothing in the world makes me happier than to crack this lady up" (Nov. 6, 2015). Sometimes he reports dialogues, either as screenshots of text messages exchanged with his children or his wife, or as actual dialogues, such as in a post dated January 21, 2016, accompanied by an image of him as teenager:

#tbt ROSE (disbelief) Dad had a mullet! MC I never had a mullet. ROSE (quiet horror) Oh, my God. Dad. You had a mullet. MC Let me see that thing. Grabs snapshot from circa 1989, found by Rose in attic. Stares at it. Disbelief. Horror. MC Oh, my God, I had a mullet. An awful silence fills the house.

Posts containing old pictures are shared quite regularly among those of Chabon's current everyday life. The content of the old images is often similar in so far as it focuses on his family life: we see him with Waldman (their wedding day, during their first dates, during her pregnancy), his children when they were younger, him with his parents, him with his grandparents, and him as a child. Many intimate, autobiographical details are thus revealed through these “throwback” pictures—for instance, that he once played in a band, that he went to the University of Pittsburgh, that he lived in Key West, that his parents divorced, and so on.

Throwback posts, while not original per se (a very popular hashtag on the platform has been #throwbacktuesday or #tbt accompanied by pictures from the users' past), have the function of interrupting the stream of posts that illustrate the users' current daily life and fill the gaps with background information about them. That is to say, if not distinctly edited, the effect created by these throwback photos is still that of staged spontaneity, a spontaneity that, however, does not purport to represent an event as if it had just occurred. Rather, these posts are used to add material that belongs to a pre-Instagram age but that is relevant to the feed's purposive autobiographical design. For instance, through these throwback posts, @michael.chabon recounts his love story with his wife, such as in a post dated October 11, 2017, where a photograph of the couple on their wedding day is accompanied by the caption: “So, Michael Chabon, you gonna marry me?”—@ayeletw, talking in her sleep, three weeks after the first date. I said yes but then the next morning she had forgotten. #10101993.” Again, in this post, the hashtag #10101993 is used to emphasize the date of the couple's wedding and thus restate its importance.

Chabon's identity is also shaped by the narration of other personal details such as his passion for music, his admiration for other novelists, his democratic political views (these mainly emerge after the 2016 presidential elections), and his passion for “nerd” memorabilia. For instance, in many posts there are self-portraits or “selfies” with captions including references to music that Chabon says he is listening to. These references include lyrics or longer explanations such as:

Remind me to talk to you about the song “Lisa Anne” by Bill Lloyd, which I am listening to in this picture, which I cannot stop listening to, and which may be among the top five greatest most neglected singles ever produced by #powerpop, rock ‘n’ roll's greatest most neglected sub-genre. #billlloyd #kossportapro. (Posted on Jan. 28, 2016; geotag: Oakland, California.)

Other posts display his friendships with fellow writers Neil Gaiman (@neil-himself), Andrew Sean Greer (@asgreer), Rebecca Skloot (@rebeccaskloot),

Ben Marcus (@mathgun), and Heidi Julavits (@heidijulavits; account now disabled or deleted). Still others show him traveling around the world (to Australia, Sri Lanka, Israel, Palestine, Dublin, Paris, Venice, Florence, and Japan) or participating in events related to his job, like hosting Medal Day at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire.

The reiteration of themes like family, friendships, work, or music; of captions and hashtags; and of certain kinds of images such as throwbacks and selfies shows an ongoing redefinition of his identity. Chabon's feed is devoted to representing his life (like autobiographies) and a self (like autofictions). In particular, through the throwback posts, Chabon's feed looks at a self in the past, as do autobiography and memoirs. For the most part, however, like Ruth Page remarks on the use of the present tense in Facebook's status stories as "pull of the present" (2011, 429), it is the immediacy of the story told that is emphasized: the temporal distance between the narrating-I and the experiencing-I is extremely reduced with events recounted as they happen, and the narrative representing a self in the present as unfinished and ongoing as the feed itself. In short, Chabon's digital journal created through Instagram is a self-narrative made of single posts that attend to his feed's overall design as fragments of a coherent narrative.

This narrative, therefore, has an archival function but, at the same time, could disappear anytime because it is inherently ephemeral. Indeed, in an attempt to raise awareness around Facebook's policies, Chabon interrupted his flux of posts for a bit more than a year, sharing his motivations in a last post before the hiatus:

In 2012 Instagram sold itself to Facebook, which has since proven corrosive and toxic to liberal democracy at home and around the world to a degree equaled only by @foxnews. Indeed given Facebook's global dominance and instrumentalizing of algorithmic social control, its malignancy has arguably been more far-reaching and destructive. [. . .] I'm only going to suspend, for now. Maybe something will change. Maybe #markzuckerberg will repent and atone. Maybe the Feds will eventually break up the FB octopus, and IG will be sold off to less objectionable owners. (Nov. 16, 2020)

The interruption of his life writing through Instagram was undoubtedly a powerful gesture to highlight a political message,⁴ but it also shows off how ephemeral digital epitexts on social media can be, because the content is easily erasable. Individual posts or entire accounts can be deleted at anytime. Indeed, as Thomas notices: "One of the challenges of writing about new tech-

4. For a recent critique of Facebook, see Vaidhyanathan 2018.

nologies is the rapid pace of change and the ephemerality not just of individual contributions but of the very platforms and technologies themselves” (2020, 22). The fact that these two opposing qualities, the archival and the ephemeral, coexist on Instagram is linked to the current reclaiming of digital media by the ephemeral that started with Snapchat, as Jill Walker Rettberg points out, and that aims at “reemphasizing social connections through phatic communication” (2018, 2–3). In other words, there is an ongoing switch in social media storytelling that foregrounds a connecting function over an archiving role of social media practices. Chabon’s social profile on Instagram comprises both the “old” idea of the internet as archive and the new one of social media as sites that put the phatic communication of conversations and oral cultures to the fore, as Rettberg highlights. Significantly, similar issues of connection and relation are emphasized by contemporary fiction, too, as seen in the introduction.

It is within this digital journal narrative that Chabon inserts his communicative digital epitexts for *Moonglow*. These are about thirty posts directly related to *Moonglow* that Chabon shared on his Instagram feed between September 1, 2015, and May 2, 2018: about half of them were shared before the publication of the novel, one was shared on publication day, and the others were shared after publication, with higher frequency in the weeks immediately following the day the novel was published. As far as the illocutionary force of this paratextual material is concerned, one of the main functionalities is to inform of the forthcoming publication, as in the posts containing the picture of a rocket and the caption “This is a clue. This is only a clue. @petermendelsund #moonglow” (Sept. 1, 2015), the picture of three cartomancy cards and the caption “This is a clue. This is only a clue. #moonglow #lenormandcards” (Feb. 29, 2016), a few pictures of the moon or moon-related drawings (e.g., Nov. 17, 2016, and Nov. 18, 2017), and a few other posts contain images from the printed book and captions informing of the publication date (see Oct. 24, 2016, and Nov. 2, 2016). Taken individually, these posts seem simply devoted to a promotional gesture, but they do appear in that flux of epistemic digital epitexts that is Chabon’s feed. They are, in other words, inserted within a communicative framework in which, on top of the actual illocutionary force, there is a sense of an ongoing, sincere, behind-the-scenes intimacy.

Other posts display the screenshot of a manuscript page with the caption “Editing and revising *Moonglow*, novel, forthcoming 11/3/16,” the screenshot of a style sheet with the caption “Style sheet. Copy-edit of #moonglow arrived today!” (May 18, 2016), a self-portrait with the image of two rockets and the caption “My V-2 plans. #Moonglow #madscientist #prisma” (Aug. 16, 2016), and a picture of the print edition of *Moonglow* with a longer caption that says:

The day you hand in a book is a relief, but you never really do finish it. The day you get the edited manuscript just means more work, and another, in my case quite prolonged, confrontation with the book's, and your own, failings. The day the finished hardcover arrives falls much too close to pub date, that holiday of dreadful hope or hopeful dread. The day the first ARE shows up is the best day. #moonglow." (Jul. 15, 2016)⁵

This caption is an example of performing authorship in the digital literary sphere linked to the idea of the illusion of intimacy or *performed* intimacy (see Murray 2018), but it also recalls David Shields's statement that "contemporary narration is the account of the manufacturing of the work, not the actual work" (2010, 36). Indeed, these communicative digital epitexts extend the narrative communication occurring in the actual occasion of reading *Moonglow* with, in this case, the sincere account of how his writing process works: these posts assume a functionality that intersects with the overall sincere purposes of Chabon's narrative, foregrounding his earnest communication through a different device: the paratext.

Even more significantly, other communicative digital epitexts appearing in Chabon's Instagram feed extend the blurring of the fiction/nonfiction distinction present in the narrative communication of *Moonglow*. In particular, Chabon employs this resource to further emphasize the onomastic connection between him and the narrator of *Moonglow*: Michael is "Mike," like in his post shared on November 22, 2016. This happens somehow organically through the confirmation of factual details such as Chabon's actual father being, like in *Moonglow*, a doctor, through the post dated October 13, 2017, displaying a photo of his father from Pittsburgh Press published in 1964 with the caption "#Currently thinking and writing about my father as a young doctor"; of his parents, like in *Moonglow*, being divorced (see post shared on Nov. 22, 2016); of his mother, like in *Moonglow*, living in Oakland (see post shared on Mar. 30, 2018; geotag: Oakland, California); and of himself living in Berkeley (e.g., a "selfie" published on Dec. 14, 2015, and a photo of his studio published on Oct. 10, 2017). In *Moonglow*, the onomastic connection necessary to prove the narrator's authenticity is not too explicit: the first-person narrator remains unnamed for most of the narrative, and he is eventually referred to as "Mike" only toward the ending. Through these communicative digital epitexts, instead, Chabon confirms many autobiographical details, thus reinforcing that connection and, consequently, the narrator's authenticity. A further example is the post shared on January 13, 2017, in which Chabon shares the

5. "ARE" is the abbreviation of "advance reader's edition."

merged images of a screenshot from a street on Google Earth, including its actual location (137 27th Ave.), and the picture of a “Whip truck.” The caption is explanatory and includes an excerpt from *Moonglow*: “When I was little and we still lived in Flushing, the Whip used to come shambling down our block, a hectic fanfare blowing from its loudspeaker horn [. . .]—Chapter 32, #Moonglow, #fbf [Google Earth boyhood home h/t: @sharonchabon].” Such a communicative digital epitext confirms the referentiality of some of the elements included in the fictional memoir, a confirmation that may affect the actual audience’s reconstruction of *Moonglow*’s storyworld or its consequent revising of the narrative co-construction as more autobiographical than fictional.

Also explicit in creating a further layer of referentiality are the posts that mention Chabon’s actual grandfather. In *Moonglow*, the grandfather character is always referred to as “grandfather”: a proper name is never disclosed. But many posts on his Instagram feed mention Ernest Cohen, Chabon’s actual grandfather, in connection with *Moonglow*. These include a post displaying a photograph of Chabon as a little child, smiling between a man and a woman, with the caption: “Ernest and Nettie Cohen and me, circa 1964. This, too, is a clue. #tbt” (Sept. 3, 2015). Then, there is a post emphasizing the autobiographical inspiration even more by displaying the picture of a man, presumably in his sixties, with grey hair, standing close to a tree near a suburban house. The caption under it states: “This week marked the *yahrzeit* of my grandfather, Ernest Cohen—very, very loosely the inspiration for #moonglow—who died in 1989. He was a cool dude and a good grandfather, smart, curious and funny. I still think of him almost every day” (May 15, 2016). Finally, a post shared on *Moonglow*’s publication date shows a picture of an old high school yearbook portraying a young man named Ernest Cohen. The caption this time is much longer and again pays tribute to Chabon’s grandfather:

No #Moonglow without this man. Trained as an engineer and a lawyer, employed most of his life at the US Patent Office, he loved wordplay, bad puns, etymologies, and the parsing of odd idioms and figures of speech (“I wonder what else I could eat a *dollop* of?”) with legalistic rigor. He taught me to use dangerous tools, to be comfortable as a man in a kitchen, to read science fiction for the science, and to revere Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*. In my mother’s childhood, unlikely toys, compounds and implements emerged from the dank Maryland basement workshop of my grandparents’ house at 10304 Cherry Tree Lane in Silver Spring, Maryland: a wooden periscope for seeing around corners, heavy and long as a small bazooka. A pair of stilts-cum-crutches that doubled a child’s height. A pine-wood photo enlarger like some kind [of] scale-model cross between a tele-

scope and a medieval siege engine. The famous “magnetic paint,” for which he received US Patent number US3826667 A.

After this memoiristic description, Chabon continues with a confessional mode, explaining the important role his grandfather played in his life:

Stepping up for young Mike Chabon at a time when my father was stepping out, he became the most important, certainly the most dependable male adult presence in my life. If he thought my ten-year-old’s theories about the world held water, he would entertain them. If not, he would shoot them full of holes or dismiss them with the merciful swiftness of a hangman. He was proud to be American, a Socialist, and a Jew, and not ultimately persuaded, in the end, that people with opposing political views were necessarily deserving of scorn and contempt. He had a way of looking at you, when you went off on Nixon or Kissinger or, later, on Reagan or Oliver North, and giving his shoulders a pained little hunch that seemed to say, “How can you be sure that you wouldn’t see it the same way if you knew what they think they know.” He knew, unquestionably, what is what. [Bronx High School Yearbook, 1915.] (Nov. 22, 2016)

In a crescendo of (performed) intimacy, Chabon reveals details of his life readers will find in *Moonglow*, too, or that they may recognize from their reading experiences.

Moonglow tells the story of “Mike’s grandfather.” But, while the novel does not include a name for him, the communicative digital epitexts reveal Ernest Cohen to be “Mike’s inspiration,” establishing a connection between the grandfather character and Chabon’s actual grandfather. Not only do these epitexts extend the narrative through visual material, they also provide a further layer of authenticity to the narration: Ernest Cohen, like Mike’s grandfather in *Moonglow*, died in 1989 (see post above, published on May 15, 2016). Other correspondences between the grandfather character and the actual grandfather described on Chabon’s Instagram profile include the references to Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (1924) and Silver Spring in the post published on November 22, 2016: Mann’s novel is cited as the grandfather’s “favorite” one (136); Beth El is a synagogue in Silver Spring mentioned as a place where the grandfather went to “say *kaddish*” and where he took Mike “a couple of times” (385).

The “confirmations” on *Moonglow*’s telling situations expressed through the digital epitexts not only concern the autobiographical nature of some of the events narrated or details about the characters (e.g., the grandfather’s love

for science fiction and his background in engineering), they also provide evidence that the main generic framework is fictional. The actual grandfather is, after all, only an “inspiration” for the character, and there are also many discrepancies between the two, such as the former having worked at the US Patent Office for most of his life, as Chabon tells on his post dated November 22, 2016. However, the posts about Michael/Mike’s grandfather abound: on January 26, 2017, and on September 7, 2017, Chabon shares two portraits of a man with the captions: “#Myrealgrandfather, Ernest Cohen, selfie pioneer. Circa 1987. #tbt #Moonglow” (Jan. 26, 2017) and “My maternal grandfather, Ernest Samuel Cohen, inspiration for the protagonist of #Moonglow (in paperback from @harpercollinsus 9/17/17). Circa ≈ 1933, aged ≈18? (@sharonchabon?) #tbt” (Sept. 7, 2017). These communicative digital epitexts, in line with *Moon-glow*’s blurring of the fiction/nonfiction distinction, provide visual extensions for the grandfather character, creating an autobiographical connection that is both confirmed by the reference to the novel through the hashtag #Moonglow and dismissed through the stating of him being only an “inspiration.”

Indeed, on May 2, 2018, Chabon shares another old picture of a man and a woman with the caption: “One more lovely shot, new to me. My great-uncle, Stanley Werbow, an inspiration for the grandfather character in #Moonglow, with his wife, my Aunt Naomi. Sometime in the 1940s, I’m guessing.” Thus, he confirms not only the existence of the uncle mentioned in the acknowledgments but also his being an inspiration for the grandfather character in his novel, information that may seem at odds with the previous posts that reveal the inspiration to be his grandfather Ernest but that is in line with the acknowledgments in *Moonglow*. This last post further foregrounds Chabon’s interest in the mix of fact and fiction for communicative purposes, an interest he further pursues thanks to these communicative digital epitexts. Their relevance is emphasized by the abundance of paratextual elements shared.

Chabon, therefore, establishes autobiographical connections through communicative digital epitexts that directly mention, often with a hashtag, his novel, within a feed itself devoted to the fragmented and repetitive telling of a family history. Here, Chabon repeats personal stories/images (e.g., his post of a photograph of him and his father, published on Dec. 2, 2016, and June 19, 2017) and “clues” about #Moonglow. Indeed, if fragmentariness is linked with the affordances of the social media platform (see also Thomas 2020, 51), so is repetition: if the reverse chronology of the feed, together with the ephemerality and the abundance of the elements shared make users focus on the communication in real time, repetition of content is a way to ensure its delivery. In this sense, the paradigms of communication on social media exemplified above—ephemerality, fragmentarity, constructed spontaneity,

immediacy, (performed) intimacy, and phatic communication—are inherent to communicative digital epitexts, too.

But the continuous references to either the fictional or factual status of *Moonglow* also serve as an invitation for the readers who possibly encounter them to further reflect on the generic blurring at play in the novel and the sincerity behind it. Chabon's earnest purpose to make his grandfather's supposed memories "mean something" is further supported by his posts extending that generic blurring within a sincere, intimate self-narrative. At the same time, these posts emphasize author-audience interactions beyond the material borders of the print narrative. A post published right after the publication of *Moonglow* is emblematic in this sense: it displays a screenshot from a review published in the *Edmonton Journal* with a highlighted sentence confirming the fact that *Moonglow*'s epigraph, "There is no dark side of the moon, really. Matter of fact, it's all dark," is a quotation (ironically) misattributed to van Braun, instead of the band Pink Floyd, and a caption, "We have a winner" (Nov. 24, 2016), confirming the accuracy of the reviewer's observation but also promoting further dialogue and interaction with the novel itself.

Taken as a whole, these communicative digital epitexts for *Moonglow* that appear on Chabon's Instagram feed cannot but amplify the set of questions underlying post-postmodernist fiction about earnest communication and the self-reflexive inquiry on what a novel in the digital and social media age is, partly because of the logic behind the media in which they appear (e.g., ephemeral, phatic, promoting intimacy, etc.). The role of the actual audience engaging with these communicative digital epitexts is not just active but interactive in readers' search for further "clues" within the flux of possibly new information emerging from the feed. Yet, the communicative dynamics these communicative digital epitexts elicit are not the same whether they are encountered before or after reading *Moonglow*.

Encountering these communicative digital epitexts before reading *Moonglow* allows members of the actual audience to incorporate them in their world-building efforts. This means, for instance, paying special attention to the themes Chabon puts to the fore through his posts, for instance, the referentiality of some people and events. In their co-constructive efforts, readers will incorporate the information they find more helpful, including visual information and onomastic connections that, in turn, underline the authenticity required by trauma autofiction. For example, readers unsure about the fictional status of the novel or simply frustrated with the constant switching may incorporate some of the information included in the digital epitexts and juxtapose the fictional grandfather character with Chabon's actual grandfather. Additionally, they may find confirmation of Chabon's clues on his Ins-

tagram, confirmation that rewards their active—and interactive—role outside the physical borders of the novel.

Encountering the “clues” and referential details after having read *Moon-glow*, instead, produces a dynamic in which actual readers further revise their reconstruction of the storyworld, for instance, through speculating further about its genre. Actual readers may apply new, multimodal elements to the co-construction of the novel’s storyworld, elements that thus extend the narrative communication beyond the physical boundaries of the print book. This may also mean simply adding a visual component to one’s reconstruction. But it may also mean possibly judging some of the author’s choices differently. The feeble onomastic connection in *Moonglow* emphasizes the relevance of its fictional framework, despite the potential presence of nonfictionality. By encountering elements that, instead, reinforce that connection, readers may further judge Chabon’s interest in the mixing of fact and fiction and its role in communicating narrative meaning. They may ask, for instance, if, as Shields declared, that distinction is utterly useless today. Or, they may speculate on Chabon’s digital extensions as a way to ensure that the narrative would “mean something.” In either case, these communicative digital epitexts acquire a new, central stage that brings the readers’ attention toward their possible interactions with a narrative communication that expands and continues in the digital world.

As the analysis of *Moonglow* shows, the blurring of the fiction/nonfiction distinction is a rhetorical resource that is central to the co-construction of Chabon’s narrative. The actual, authorial, and narrative audiences need to allow for the coexisting telling situations, although at times they are at odds. This device, common in post-postmodernist fiction, allows Chabon to convey his overall message about how to earnestly engage with identity and trauma issues. Nevertheless, it may also disorient some audience members who find it difficult to allow for the three telling situations to coexist in the same storyworld. Encountering Chabon’s numerous communicative digital epitexts on his Instagram feed may help these hypothetical members to understand the relevance of the contradictory clues in *Moonglow*. That is, by employing the same genre-blurring strategy both in *Moonglow* and in his communicative digital epitexts, Chabon further supports his novel’s main purpose concerning how to engage earnestly with trauma, memory, and historical fiction. In this sense, his posts extend the narrative purpose through digital media, providing a continuation of a (mainly) fictional discourse for readers to explore and experience.

Chabon's narrative communication in *Moonglow*, in other words, is completed thanks to the communicative digital epitexts that provide it with a further layer of authenticity. The photographs of Chabon's grandfather, grandmother, and uncle, as well as of the places of his childhood, combined with the captions containing further clues on the autobiographical elements present in *Moonglow*, offer evidence of the earnestness behind his authorial choices, choices he made to make some memories—partly fictional, partly not—mean something to his audience. The communicative digital epitexts are a further resource to ensure the delivery of such a message. Experiencing them before reading would mean acknowledging the earnestness of his telling—albeit ambiguous—situations beforehand, giving it priority within their subsequent co-construction. Experiencing Chabon's digital epitexts after reading would mean further revising one's co-construction and possibly reassessing the overall narrative communication to make space for the author's further sincere, communicative gesture.

CHAPTER 3

Materiality

Chapter 2 illustrated how a contemporary author might use communicative digital epitexts to reshuffle the fiction/nonfiction distinction and emphasize the earnest communication at the heart of post-postmodernism. The present chapter presents the analysis of a novel, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), that employs unconventional communicative peritexts, which self-reflexively reflect on its mediality and on its enhancing illocutionary force. As I will show below, Egan's use of unconventional communicative peritexts foregrounds questions on a thematic level, questions that are further emphasized through her use of communicative digital epitexts.

POST-POSTMODERN METAMEDIALITY IN JENNIFER EGAN'S *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD*

Confirming Alber and Bell's remark about twenty-first-century fiction engaging with specific ethical and/or political issues (2019, 125; see also the introduction), *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, as many scholars point out (e.g., Schober 2016; Johnston 2017), addresses the ethical issues of the changes new technologies are bringing to humankind. The narrative maps the evolution of the music industry, from the late seventies punk rock bands to a not-so-distant future where people have never heard live music, to allude to the evo-

lution of another artistic expression: the question of reading and writing in the twenty-first century. Such an allusion has been confirmed by Egan in an interview: “Will language and literary creation be debased by texting shorthand and the plagiaristic ‘sampling’ mentality of Web culture, as the music industry has been?” *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan says, is “my attempt to answer” such a question (*BookBrowse* 2010).

In this interview (an epistemic epitext, see chap. 1), Egan offers a clear paratextual cue. However, judging the ethics of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is not straightforward: co-constructing the events recounted in the novel involves attending to several characters and narrators whose story lines intertwine as the narrative progresses. The story lines of the two main characters, Bennie Salazar and Sasha Blake, function as larger narratives around which the other embedded stories are narrated. Their story lines are repeatedly put on hold, affecting the audience’s reconstruction of the storyworld with gaps and pauses: Bennie’s story line is present in chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, and 13 (in chronological order: chapters 3, 1, 7, 2, 5, 13); Sasha’s story line is present in chapters 1, 10, 11, 12 (in chronological order: chapters 11, 10, 1, 12). The numerous chronological deviations and complicated character relations indeed require remarkable efforts for audience members to be able to reconstruct the storyworld of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

It is the accomplishment of these reconstructions, however, that ensures the rhetorical effectiveness of the overall narrative and its concerns with the representation of the consequences of the passing of time (time is the goon of the title, as revealed by Bennie’s line: “Time’s a goon, right? You gonna let that goon push you around?” [332]). What is helpful for the audience’s successful co-construction of the novel is the presence of “a shared pattern of eddying leitmotifs,” including the exploration of “loss and memory” (Edwards 2019) that emerges despite the multiple, and at times loose, interconnections among the various characters, and the continuous analepses and prolepses. The narrative does display “interlocking characters at different points in their lives,” as Sarah Churchwell puts it (2011), but their “individual voices combine to create a symphonic work that uses its interconnected form to explore ideas about human interconnectedness” (n. pag.).

Churchwell refers to human interconnectedness, which is a key idea in Corinne Bancroft’s study of the braided narrative as “a central genre that helps contemporary readers to imagine a globalized *interconnectedness*” (2018, 270–71; emphasis added). Bancroft argues that the various threads make the readers actively “negotiate the intersubjective field between the many fictional minds” (Bancroft 2018, 274) populating the novel’s storyworld, and this negotiation is evident in Egan’s novel. As James P. Zappen notes, pauses “are frequent

throughout the novel, and they appear at critical moments, leaving readers to infer that the characters have made important decisions that connect them to each other and lead them to the next stage of their lives” (2016, 300). Building on Bancroft’s argument, this means that, as the narrative progresses, the strands that compose each narrative braid also present the narrative audience with continuous gaps that, in spite of being essential for the audience’s active negotiation of intersubjectivity between the characters, also inevitably destabilize the readers’ ability to reconstruct the novel’s storyworld.

The presence of the various narrative threads, together with the gaps/pauses between them, foregrounds the audience’s reconstructive (and co-constructive) activity. Chronologically, Bennie Salazar’s story line begins in the late seventies/early eighties, when he is a teenager living in San Francisco and plays in a punk band with his talented friend Scotty Hausmann (chapter 3). He later moves to New York and has a successful career as a music industry executive, a wife named Stephanie, and a nice house in the New York City suburbs (chapter 1). Later, the couple will divorce (chapter 7), and Bennie will sell his own music label to a multinational oil corporation (chapter 2). Meeting up by chance decades later, Bennie and Scotty are forced to face how much different their lives look now: instead of being a musician, Scotty works as a janitor in an elementary school (chapter 5). However, in an undefined near-future (chapter 13), the final scene of the novel sees Scotty performing live, thanks to Bennie, who organizes a concert at the World Trade Center site for a generation that has never heard live music and has never seen the original World Trade Center, something Egan hints at in her communicative digital epitexts, as I will show below. This concluding chapter, “Pure Language,” is set in a slightly dystopian future, where technology has been interiorized by humankind to the point that even the ability to communicate orally is threatened. Thematically, it is an explicit reflection on how new technologies have changed and are changing human relationships, starting from the way we communicate, up to the way we produce art: music, in this case, or literature, by extension.

Music, in Bennie’s narrative thread, goes from being a passion, a way “of being,” to being a job that ends up disappearing in one of its central manifestations (live concerts), because of the way new technologies changed human interactions. Children are known as “pointers” (313) because they all use “kiddie handsets” allowing them to download music just by “pointing.” In this futuristic America, a war of fifteen years “ended with a baby boom” (313), and these babies not only “revive[] a dead industry, but become the arbiters of musical success” (313). People have thousands of virtual friends, but they are aware that their “opinions [a]ren’t really their own” (315). Reminiscent of Sherry Turkle’s remark that “as we instant-message, e-mail, text, and Twitter,

technology redraws the boundaries between intimacy and solitude” (2011, 11), texting makes communication easier even with intimate partners. English is now full of “empty words,” “words that no longer had meaning outside quotation marks” (323), such as “friend,” “real,” “story,” and “change” (324). In this near dystopic future, Scotty’s live concert ends up being a success as “it may be that two generations of war and surveillance had left people craving the *embodiment* of their own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on a slide guitar” (335; emphasis added). In keeping with the music/literature allusion, the thread, and the braided narrative as a whole, have their resolution with the narrator telling of the *physical* performance of an artist that brings music back to its original form.

In the other main story line, Sasha is a runaway teenager rescued by her uncle in Naples, Italy (chapter 11). Years later, when she is at college at NYU, her best friend drowns in the East River, despite Sasha’s boyfriend Drew’s desperate attempt to rescue him (chapter 10). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, now thirty-something, Sasha is working as an assistant to Bennie (chapter 1). She suffers from kleptomania, and Bennie ends up firing her for stealing. She then reconnects—through Facebook—with her former boyfriend, Drew; they get married and move to the desert. In the year 202-something, Drew is a doctor who spends most of his time at the hospital and finds it difficult to communicate with their son Lincoln, who is a “slightly autistic” (233) boy obsessed with rock songs that have pauses in them. Their older daughter, Alison, is a young teenager who keeps track of her family life through a digital journal, written using Microsoft’s presentation software PowerPoint (chapter 12). Chapter 12, titled “Great Rock and Roll Pauses by Alison Blake,” is graphically realized as the printout of Alison’s journal made of seventy-five PowerPoint slides. The material inclusion into the narrative of an unconventional medium—a presentation software, which becomes itself part of the narrative world—is somehow justified by the futuristic setting (the year 202-something). The story level of a possible near future in which writing is more and more multimodal is thus materialized in its graphic realization. The telling of the slide-journal is substituted with its material reproduction, as if the material presence would make it more real, more authentic.

Adapting Genette’s description of paratextual “Typesetting, Printings,” which mentions those cases in which the “graphic realization is inseparable from the literary intention” (Genette [1987] 1997, 34; see also Mallarmé or Apollinaire), I consider the slide-printout to be an unconventional communicative peritext.¹ The graphic realization of multimodal writing has a clearly iconic power. The pauses in the rock songs are graphically represented as

1. Elsewhere I called these *material* peritexts (see Pignagnoli 2016).

empty frames so that their visual dimensions influence Lincoln's—and the audience's—perception of duration. But the empty frames also *metamedially* recall the gaps left by the pauses in the progression of the braided narrative. Furthermore, Lincoln's obsession with pauses in rock songs is linked with their ability to reproduce sounds, like “smokiness” (247), that are still non-replicable in digital formats. By extension, readers could speculate that the gaps/pauses among the various narrative threads cannot be reproduced in other media formats, as if they had a quality, like smokiness for analog music, impossible to replicate.

This speculation is then further supported by the fact that the novel displays another unconventional peritextual choice: two title pages that divide the thirteen chapters that form the narrative into two parts. One page shows the letter “A” right before the first chapter, while the other shows the letter “B” before chapter 7. This graphic choice would not be so significant in itself but, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the two letters yet again intermedially mimic the structure of LP records, with the two letters standing for the two sides of the disk, the chapters standing for the musical tracks, and the gaps/pauses in the reconstruction of the narrative threads represented intermedially through the graphic realization of the pauses in the rock songs. An ethical stance leaning toward a cautionary attitude with regard to new technologies can thus be gathered from the explicit reference to digital “unreproducibility.”

This stance, however, is further complicated by Egan's choice to employ a digital medium, namely, PowerPoint slides, whose modes (e.g., movement, sound, and interactivity) cannot be accurately replicated—or remediated, to use David Bolter and Richard Grusin's terminology (1999)—in print.² That is, to talk about the impossibility of replicating analog music in a digital medium, Egan employs a digital medium, the software PowerPoint, that cannot be fully reproduced in an analog format. Further, she adds another thematical layer to her discourse around technology by having Alison write multimodally. While an older generation, represented by Alison's parents, tries to resist the idea of

2. Introduced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999), remediation describes the way in which media refashion other media forms (Grusin 2005, 497). The double logic of remediation identifies two strategies, transparent immediacy and hypermediacy. In the former, the goal of a medium is “to erase or eliminate the signs of mediation,” whereas in the latter, it is “to multiply and make explicit signs of mediation” (497). Contemporary digital media remediate previous media according to this double logic that makes mediation “simultaneously multiplied and erased” (497). As Irina O. Rajewsky points out, remediation is “a particular kind of inter-medial relationship” and an essential facet of current medial practices (2005, 60). The internet, according to Marie-Laure Ryan, “remediates all other media by encoding them digitally in order to facilitate their transmission” (2012, par. 14).

a life fully dependent on new technologies, the younger one, represented by Alison and her brother Lincoln, deals with it more spontaneously. Alison's mother, Sasha, seems not to understand her daughter's writing habit to the point that she does not even consider this activity as writing at all. As Alison reports in her journal, Sasha would ask her, "Why not try writing for a change?" A question to which her daughter replies, laconically: "Ugh! Who even uses that word?" (253). In Egan's novel, in the near future, writing without including other modes is disappearing. And the question of whether the slides are a "valid" substitute turns back to the readers, who can judge them in their positive role enabling "a father to identify affectively and thereby improve his relationship with his son" (2016, 304), as Zappen notes.

But the audience can also judge the slides "extra-diegetically" in their own experience reading a multimodal narrative. PowerPoint slides are not a new medium in themselves, but rather, borrowing Werner Wolf's terminology, a defamiliarized one (2006). The slides are, at the same time, generally familiar per se, but uncommon in fictional narration. By choosing to employ them, Egan reinforces her narrative's overall thematic dimension, devoted to showing how much digitization is already part of our lives, thanks to devices that are becoming, whether one likes it or not, increasingly familiar. Moreover, the slides—and the physical turning of the book pages necessary to read them (they are printed horizontally)—become a constant visual reminder of the material object that frames the narrative and, to borrow Genette's words, "make[s] it present" ([1987] 1997, 1). So, the question relative to whether a slide format is a satisfactory mode of expressing meaning overlaps with an ontological incertitude, oscillating between the actual world of the artifact and the storyworld of the narrative.

As this analysis shows, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* carries out a metamedial discourse both on a thematic level and through the use of unconventional communicative peritexts that bring to the fore the materiality of the print narrative. In the novel, the thematic *fil rouge* of the changes new technologies are bringing to our life alternates between different cultural practices, from the producing and the fruition of music to language, both written and oral: written language is now complemented with images, and people's ability to communicate is threatened by texting habits. Then, the transformation that the passing of time entails is further explored through an uncommon use of peritextual elements, such as layout and graphic matters, which are normally neutralized by convention (both the PowerPoint slides and the A/B pages are meant to underline the difference between analog and digital media). Egan employs unconventional communicative peritexts that foreground the novel's materiality in order to self-reflexively draw attention to its own mediality and

thus offer a reflection on the modes and media of narrative communication in the digital age.

Yet, Egan's reflection on how new technologies have changed and are changing human relationships, starting from the way we communicate, up to the way we produce art—music, in this case, or literature, by extension—is not univocal. As Regina Schober highlights, the narrative displays an “ambivalent attitude towards the information age, both warning against its dehumanizing effects, while displaying a particularly ‘American’ affinity to new technology in embracing the new media’s potential” (2016, 359–60). New media are central to the characters of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which, as Zappen notes, both “enable and entrap them” (2016). Readers are indeed offered negative comments such as: “The problem [is] digitization, which suck[s] the life out of everything that [gets] smeared through its microscopic mesh. Film, photography, music: dead. An aesthetic holocaust!” (23). Or, reminiscent of Dietmar Kammerer's argument that “surveillance today comes not in the shape of a centralized and threatening state, but as manifold ‘little brother’ who do not affect us so much as citizens, but as consumers” (2012, 101): “He never could quite forget that every byte of information he'd posted online (favorite color, vegetable, sexual position) was stored in the databases of multinationals who swore they would never, ever use it—that he was *owned*, in other words, having sold himself unthinkingly” (316). These comments, together with the victory of live music over technology with no human interaction represented by Sasha's concert, may frame the novel as a cautionary tale. But the narrative, in line with Bancroft's description of braided narratives, is more concerned with exploring ongoing transformations at a thematic and material level than with offering a conclusive critique. Moreover, as I will show in the following section, Egan's use of communicative digital epitexts foregrounds such a lack of a definitive ethical stance and further extends the novel's metamedial discourse.

A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD'S COMMUNICATIVE DIGITAL EPITEXTS

The slides in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, as discussed above, foreground the presence of mediation. The peculiarity of their appearing as a printout, rather than as a slideshow on a digital presentation, however, also highlights the very limits of the printout itself. The narrative both fights the properties of print (see Ryan 2006) and, at the same time, limits those of the presentation software, through a medium “remediated in reverse” (Gibbons 2019, 181). On the other hand, Egan did provide a version of Alison's slide journal as a

slideshow, able to fully exploit the properties of the presentation software. The printout, in the digital world, is transmedially transformed in its original format and becomes a communicative digital epitext for *A Visit from the Goon Squad* available on her website, <https://goonsquad.jenniferegan.com>, in a section called “Court Street, July 2009,” as well as in another one, aptly entitled “Great Rock and Roll Pauses.” In this online version, the slides embed the actual sound of Lincoln’s rock and roll songs with pauses. That is, slides 11, 16, 30, 43, 45, 54, and 62 contain excerpts of the actual music the chapter refers to intermedially. They also appear in full color, increasing their iconic power as compared with the printed, black-and-white ones. Their illocutionary function, therefore, is to extend the narrative both visually and with sound; an extension that also guides the actual audience to further judge the novel’s investment into a metamedial, and intermedial, discourse about technology.

In fact, the digital slides on Egan’s website entail a metamedial discourse on their own materiality. As posthumanist studies have shown, “the digital realm is material in the same ways as earlier forms of communication” (Bolter 2016), especially in our social media age. In this sense, both communicative digital epitexts and communicative unconventional peritexts involve issues of materiality, medium, and mode and force us to recognize that media are, borrowing Ryan’s words, “material supports of information whose materiality, precisely, ‘matters’ for the type of meanings that can be encoded” (2004, 1–2). Post-postmodernist narratives that employ these paratexts in combination foreground the metamedial discourse implied both by the use of each resource, and by their joint use, since their joint use entails a self-reflexive concern about their combined mode of existence, print and digital. If, as J. D. Bolter highlights, “digital communication in the 2000s is not a refuge from the physical and social world, but fully implicated in it” (2016, 6), so communicative digital epitexts are implicated in the materiality of the prime narrative delivered through a (print/electronic) book and the consequences the proliferation of media delivery channels have for the author-readers narrative communication.

As far as the temporal dynamics are concerned, encountering the slides in their digital format after the actual occasion of reading means being led to question which of the two versions is the “right” one and to reflect upon the materiality of the narrative delivered through an analog medium and through a digital one. However, encountering this digital epitext *before* the actual occasion of reading *A Visit from the Goon Squad* means reconstructing the storyworld from a different starting point: namely, from Alison’s thread in the near future, instead of from Sasha’s kleptomaniac episode some twenty years before. This “different” beginning would emphasize the metamedial focus of

the novel even further, given the privileged position that beginnings, as well as endings, hold for the readers' co-constructive efforts (see Rabinowitz 2002; see also Richardson 2008).

The digital version of the slides, however, is not the only communicative digital epitext for *A Visit from the Goon Squad* to be found online. Rather, these include further material shared on Egan's website, such as short autobiographical narratives on her creative process of writing the novel. More specifically, for each of the thirteen chapters of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan provides additional details: an "original" title; the location where she came up with the idea of writing that story, and/or where she experienced a personal life event that triggered the idea of writing such a story, and/or where she actually wrote it (e.g., a café, a room, an armchair); a short life narrative about that event; a soundtrack, either as a verbal suggestion or as a link on the iTunes Store, YouTube, or Amazon.com; and some memories about her experience related to the thematic component of the narrative. To exemplify: the first chapter, "Found Objects," opens with Sasha stealing a wallet left unattended on the lavatory in a hotel bathroom; on the author's website, readers are provided with the information that Egan personally experienced a similar situation. She was at "The Regency Hotel, on Park Avenue and 61st Street" when, "washing [her] hands in the bathroom, [she] noticed a fat green wallet inside a wide-open bag beside the sink"; afterward, she "sat down with that wallet in [her] head and a pen in [her] hand, to see what might happen." In addition, Egan indicates that the original title for the story was "Happy Ending"; she provides another personal narrative about her experience as the victim of thefts in Spain, Lisbon, and New York; and she suggests a soundtrack through a link to the iTunes Store for Death Cab for Cutie's concept album *We Have the Facts and We Are Voting Yes* (2000).

Similar to Michael Chabon's behind-the-scenes posts, these additional details extend the narrative communication occurring in the actual occasion of reading *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, with a sincere account of how her writing process works, inclusive of discarded ideas, and creative stimuli. The sharing of details around the birth of her novel (e.g., "As I was writing "The Gold Cure," I got curious about Bennie's failed life in the suburbs [. . .] only as I was working on the piece did I realize that it was the story of the end of Bennie and Stephanie's marriage") is again reminiscent of Shields's remark about contemporary narration being *the account of the manufacturing* of the work, not the actual work (2010), as was the case for Chabon (see chap. 2). And, like Chabon's communicative digital epitexts, these, too, provide the prime narrative communication with a layer of authenticity that intersects with the novel's overall purposes. The autobiographical tellings participate in the cre-

ation of that sincere authorial posture that contemporary digital culture and post-postmodernist fiction require.

For instance, Egan stresses her connection to and affection for New York and offers a reflection on 9/11, which can be connected to the various references to both contained in the novel. Her digital epitexts are thus employed to foreground the relevance the city has in the novel as the space where most of her characters move and live:

My husband and I moved out of our apartment on West 28th Street in January 2001, three weeks after our first child was born. We made the jump to Brooklyn, a place I hardly knew except from trips to BAM. Before we sold our co-op, we learned that the two squat buildings east of us had been bought by a hotel company, which planned to build a skyscraper there. For years after we moved, nothing happened. And then, maybe three years ago, getting off the 1/9 train at my old stop on West 28th Street, I noticed construction beside our old building. The skyscraper was beginning to go up. Our apartment had four windows, all facing east; through one of them, where I'd placed my desk, I could look almost straight up at the Empire State Building. I remember that building [being] so many different colors—a beautiful prong of New York, reminding me of why I'd come here in the first place, without family or job—with nothing more than a desire to be here. By now, that window must be covered up.

[. . .] It was only as I wrote about Alex not having seen the original World Trade Center that it struck me in a deep way that a whole generation of young New Yorkers has never seen those buildings—their experience of the city is purely post 9/11. Which of course is a strange idea for those of us who were here before.

Further examples include Egan's telling about going to Madison Square Park in 2008 and recalling the first job she had close to Madison Square Park in New York City while trying to become a writer, in relation to chapter 10, "Out of Body":

After the foam couch on West 69th Street, I moved into a 5th floor walkup studio on East 27th Street. It was a glorious apartment: a narrow room facing south, quiet and flooded with sunset at the end of each day. I lived there for two years, but in my mid-twenties time seemed to pass more slowly, so according to my current perceptions it felt more like five or six years. I worked from 1:00 to 6:00 pm as a private secretary, and wrote fiction from 8:00 am to noon. On weekends I went running along the East River. After

the Williamsburg Bridge, I followed exactly the path that Rob and Drew take, past the warehouse, under the FDR. That's when I discovered the garbage beach where the last scene of "Out of Body" takes place. Whenever I reached it, I would stop and stand on the garbage for a while, watching boats pass along the river and listening to the roar of traffic on the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges. That garbage beach seems to have disappeared. I've looked for it from the Brooklyn Bridge—where I run now—but there's no sign of it; the space between the Manhattan Bridge and the Brooklyn Bridge looks as sparkingly refreshed as Madison Park.

And for chapter 2, "The Gold Cure," Egan tells of an episode of her life she fictionalized in her novel, but she also adds, as in the short narrative above, other personal details of her life in New York:

Only one of Bennie's shame memories (which I ended up cutting) was based on fact: in a meeting with some hip hop artists at a Greek Restaurant in Queens, Bennie inhales a flake of filo dough and can't cough it back out, leading to much hacking, teary-eyed embarrassment. In my case, this happened in 1992, in Astoria, where I'd gone after work from my temp job at the Tribeca Film Center to sample spanakopita in a few bakeries before ordering some for my boyfriend's thirtieth birthday party. I inhaled a flake of filo dough and it hunkered down in my lung and would not depart. I had to leave the bakery and stand on the sidewalk, under the elevated subway tracks, trains grinding over my head as I coughed in a panic, wondering if a single flake of filo dough could kill me. It seemed almost miraculous when the flake finally dislodged and my life resumed. My boyfriend was directing a production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and the birthday party happened after his show, in the massive, dilapidated loft that our friends Alex and Rebecca were renting on lower Broadway. Toward the end, we wheeled out a huge cake from Carvel, layers staggered like a Ziggurat, decorated with Egyptian stencils I'd bought at the Metropolitan Museum Shop.

Both fragments juxtapose actual-world elements to the fictional storyworld of the novel. That is, Egan extends the storyworld of her novel with incursions from the actual world (e.g., the recounting of the fictionalization of some of the events told in her narrative). This puts to the fore a postmodernist ontological juxtaposition of the actual world and the fictional storyworld. The inclusion of Egan's personal details, however, is also in line with the post-postmodernist autofictional tendency to emphasize the need for earnest communication through the attempt to connect with the audience. Moreover,

the short digital narratives create new gaps/pauses in the co-construction, as the various relations between Egan's autobiographical tellings and the braided threads are left to the readers to infer.

If we consider that contemporary narratives move within a relational dominant interested in the foregrounding of the sincerity of author-audience communication, Egan's emphasis on her creational process of writing is not surprising. She signals authenticity and sincerity in her online self-presentation. And sharing personal information about her life and her writing fosters an intersubjective relationship with her readers, who may respond to Egan's sharing of personal narratives or hyperlinks to listen to her choice of songs, by sharing the author/novel's online material, thus incorporating it in their personal, online narratives (e.g., on social media pages, through hashtags, through reviews, etc.). Some readers even share ideas, comments, and interpretations about the narrative to "help" other readers: for instance, one reader created an "Interactive Character Map" for *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (available at <http://www.filosophy.org/projects/goonsquad>) that interactively visualizes the many evolving relationships between the characters; another created a website (available at <https://goonsquadtimelines.weebly.com>) that retraces the narrative timeline to "help to disentangle the novel by reconstructing the arcs of the characters in chronological order" (more about these epistemic digital epitexts in chapter 5).

Hence, some audience members may judge Egan's choice to extend her narrative through digital material as revealing of an "embracing" posture toward an extended, online author-reader communication. Such an assumption, in turn, may influence the reconstruction of her novel's purpose as a cautionary tale, especially because, as seen earlier, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* attends to the ethical issues of the changes new technologies are bringing to humankind, but Egan does not shape her narrative to offer a clear, distinct position concerning such an overall ethical situation. Some readers may employ the communicative digital epitexts to revise that cautionary tale, comparing the author's message toward digitization with the embracing posture Egan's choice to employ digital epitexts seems to entail: digital technologies can be useful to add content to a storyworld and to foster author-reader communication beyond the physical boundaries of the printed novel, as to create a sort of continuous braiding of offline printed narrative and online digital material.

The use of digital epitexts for *A Visit from the Goon Squad* further confirms Bancroft's idea that braided narratives highlight the overarching author-audience relationship behind the individual braids. As Bancroft argues, by asking readers to "adopt a new subjectivity with each new narrator, [and also

to] account for the third space the author creates between the narrative voices” (2018, 274), braided narratives bring the intersubjective relation between author and readers to the fore. In particular, they emphasize the active participation of audiences who need to “hold the different narratives together” (274) to co-construct the novel as a whole. When digital epitexts add yet another layer to the kaleidoscope of narrative situations, the intersubjective relation is emphasized even further (see also chap. 4). Because of digital epitexts, then, the narrative communication not only displays a continuity among a fictional and an extrafictional discourse (see Dawson 2013) but becomes an ongoing exchange happening on different media and that changes over time.

A final aspect to consider with regard to Egan’s choice of using digital epitexts and their participation in the narrative co-construction is indeed diachronic. As I argued in the introduction, and as Jørgen Bruhn also notes, digital epitexts (which he calls pre-texts and post-texts) “show some of the major changes in contemporary print culture—and consequently in literature, the arts, and criticism—that are taking place at this point in the history of literature and the book, where writers’ investigative explorations at least point to some of the aspects of our medial situation” (2016, 116). Today this phenomenon is expanding. Novelist Lauren Groff’s tweet, “Someone told me that they were at a literary conference a few months ago and all the editors and agents were saying that new writers absolutely *must engage* with social media” (Jan. 25, 2020, @lgroff; emphasis added), is representative of the widespread presence of digital epitexts and the presence of writers on the internet and social media (see also Laing 2017 and Thomas 2020; more on the presence of authors online in chap. 4). But when Egan shared her digital epitexts for *A Visit from the Goon Squad* in 2010, her choice was not mainstream. In fact, it may have also been linked to a commitment to experimentation, which was (is) also detectable from her use of unconventional peritexts, and the braided structure.

Because of the current increased circulation of digital epitexts, however, this experimenting effect may be fading now, just as the digital epitexts are fading because of their inherent ephemerality, which makes them unavailable or hard to find after some ten years. Indeed, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*’s communicative digital epitexts included material shared not only on her website (which one must first find through Egan’s current website, <https://jenniferegan.com>, as this incorporated the “old” one) but also on a blog site created with the opensource blogging tool WordPress and through an application software (app) for the novel. Both the blog and the app are now obsolete. The blog was available at avisitfromthegoonsquad.com and displayed music videos of the songs mentioned in the novel embedded in the website as well as a link to Egan’s Facebook profile (<https://www.facebook.com/jennifer>).

egan.3956). Through the blog, it was also possible to access a blogroll of interviews with the author, to read excerpts from the novel, and to download the novel's app. The app featured examples of communicative digital peritexts: additional elements as far as temporal ordering and sharing options were concerned. At the opening of the app, readers were asked to make a choice between "read, listen or liner notes." The "liner notes" section was interactive, and it displayed thirteen round drawings, each of which depicted an iconic object to represent the corresponding chapter. By choosing the "Original" option, the chapters' icons were displayed following the temporal (dis)order consistent with the original (printed) version of the narrative. Conversely, by choosing the "Date" option, readers were allowed to read the narrative without its continuous analepses and prolepses. The "Shuffle" option was meant to offer a casual temporal order. These options offered readers an experience that changed the way the "chapters play with the possibility of readerly 'discovery,'" as Dorothy Butchard puts it (2018, 361). Additional features in the app included several pop-up windows appearing when chapters' icons were pressed. These features allowed the sharing of chapter excerpts on the readers' Facebook walls and included the extra material that is to be found on the novel's website.

Digital paratexts, as mentioned in the introduction, change over time: they change because their media platforms can become obsolete, and they change because their cultural role changes while our society becomes more and more enmeshed with digital technology. Because of digital paratexts' ephemerality, employing communicative digital epitexts means relying on them not so much for their long-lasting presence but for the emphasis on the author-reader intersubjective relation they create: after all, anytime authors employ digital epitexts to communicate something that extends their narrative, they ignite a further channel of communication between authors and audience that can occur through the author-digital epitexts-audience channel. Through this channel, the author skips over the narrator, the characters, and the structural arrangement in order to communicate something to the audience that may extend or refine his or her narrative in the digital sphere. So, unlike other kinds of paratexts, communicative digital epitexts are not necessary to ensure that the narrative communication takes place, and they are subject to changes, such as the obsolescence of a given technology or media, as in some of the cases described above, over which their authors have little control.

Both Egan and Chabon expand on their novels' main themes and strategies through digital epitextual resources. Unlike Chabon's posts within his ongoing Instagram feed, Egan's communicative digital epitexts were not expanded

further, making them somehow limited in time. As compared to Chabon, Egan employed communicative digital epitexts through a wider multiplicity of media, including Twitter, where a short-story sequel to one of *A Visit from the Goon Squad's* threads was published in 2012 (later available in the *New Yorker* [2012] and then included in *The Candy House*, a novel that Egan published in 2022 and that continues the braiding of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*). Egan's reflection on technological innovation becomes more nuanced thanks to the ample material she provides online for her readers, spanning from behind-the-scenes information to guiding instructions about how to read her novel, that is, which background music to listen to, which facts actually happened, and so forth. But Egan's further reflection on technological innovation is also performative: she experiments with online engagement to create an experience for the readers who possibly encounter her communicative digital epitexts in a way that allows them to further reflect on that issue, too.

In this sense, the various communicative digital epitexts for *A Visit from the Goon Squad* are employed to intensify the questions raised by the novel's self-reflexive, thematic interests in what a novel in the digital age is. Egan's website, with interactive and multimodal background material for each chapter of her novel, is paradigmatic of a near future in which a novel may possibly become more and more inextricable from its visual, interactive, intermedial support. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is, thus, also exemplary of the relational/communication issues at play in post-postmodernist fiction. Encountering the author's earnest account of the crafting of her novel through digital epitexts means adding a layer of authenticity to the intersubjective exchange between authors and readers. As I will further explore in the next chapter, authors employ digital resources because it is a way to obtain authority, an authority that reflects back on their fictional narratives. But those connections are also meant to underline an open-endedness that calls for readers' interactive roles as they reconstruct the narrative, co-building from both the storyworld and the digital world.

CHAPTER 4

Intersubjectivity

In the previous chapters, I presented two exemplary cases of narratives employing communicative digital epitexts. In the next two chapters, I will broaden the focus of the present study to include two specific kinds of epistemic digital epitexts particularly relevant for the investigation of narrative fiction in the twenty-first century: epistemic digital epitexts coming from authors (this chapter) and audiences (chapter 5). In so doing, I will delve deeper into the poetics of post-postmodernist fiction (this chapter) and the theory of co-construction (chapter 5). To explore authorial epistemic digital epitexts, in the following sections I present an analysis of the dynamics they possibly elicit in connection with a post-postmodern novel displaying an interest in intersubjectivity, Catherine Lacey's *The Answers* (2017).

CHARACTERS AND QUESTIONS IN *THE ANSWERS* BY CATHERINE LACEY

Drawing on Corinne Bancroft's claim about braided narratives enabling readers to actively negotiate the intersubjective field between the numerous fictional minds populating a novel's storyworld (2018; see chap. 3), this chapter aims at showing that post-postmodernist fiction attends to intersubjectivity to show an attempt to connect with the audience. An intersubjective commu-

nication prioritizes the idea of a “subject meeting another subject” (Benjamin 1988 qtd. in Burks 2014, 38), and narratives concerned with intersubjectivity highlight the relation between the characters within a storyworld and/or between author and readers within a sincere narrative mode. The attempt to connect with the audience is obtained through narrators’, characters’, and authorial voices meant to be perceived throughout the narrative as earnest and intimate. Often the author projects her own subjectivity into the characters’ and the narrator’ voices as an invitation for the readers to do the same so that the author’s voice in the narrative is perceived as sincere and gesturing toward the readers as a way to display a need to be in “proximity to the other” (Timmer 2017, 105). Intersubjectivity is a means for post-postmodernist fiction to attend to the exploration of what it means to be human through a gesture toward “the other,” an attempt the author makes to “attune” with the readers, to seek connection, to expose intimacy and vulnerability—to expose the idea that the “other,” that is, the reader, is necessary to the self who is communicating.

Even if not braided, therefore, fictional narratives after postmodernism call attention to characters and their own subjectivity and, more relevantly, to what that subjectivity can communicate. Indeed, Dorothy J. Hale recently discussed a return to character (2020, 28), highlighting the connection between the social value of literature and the ethical encounter with otherness through fictional characters (and the readers’ experiences with them) and called this an “ethics of alterity” (5). And Toril Moi, in the context of postcritique, has underlined how contemporary literary narratives, in their longing for truth, reality, and authenticity, emphasize characters (2020). Moi calls these narratives “existential,” as a way to indicate their preoccupation with what it is like to be alive here and now, what it is like to exist in a specific historical and social moment. This “existential turn” appears to have two major forms: first, as explicit “autofiction,” and second, as character-driven fiction with strong existential investments (2020, n. pag.). These forms are different from modernist fiction’s interest in characters “as shredded, dissolved, and [displaying] a multiplicity of shifting and unstable identities” (Felski in Anderson, Felski, and Moi 2019, 92), and from postmodernist fiction’s foregrounding of characters as artificial constructs.

Characters as artificial constructs, I want to clarify, refers to James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz’s distinction of the mimetic, synthetic, and thematic dimensions of characters, according to which “characters do resemble possible people, they are *artificial constructs* that perform various functions in the progression, and they can function to convey the political, philosophical, or ethical issues being taken up by the narrative” (Herman et al. 2012, 111;

emphasis added).¹ But for rhetorical narrative theory, aside from these distinctions, characterization always serves the author's overall purpose. Characters are a resource contemporary authors can employ, for example, to help their narratives engage with ethical and political matters. Furthermore, they hold a special function with regard to the co-construction of the actual world and the audiences' ideas of reality (see Effron, McMurry, and Pignagnoli 2019), because, as Marie-Laure Ryan aptly points out, characters are textual entities that sometimes "speak so strongly to the imagination that they live beyond their text" (2018, 428). Indeed, co-constructing characters means that characters are rhetorical resources an author employs to convey a message and whose blueprints are employed by the audience to co-construct them along with the storyworld and the actual world (which are likewise co-built during the process of narrative communication). Calling attention to characters, therefore, is not only a way for post-postmodernist writers to attend to intersubjectivity. Rather, it is also a means to make the ethical and political issues expressed through them live beyond their storyworlds.

Catherine Lacey's novel *The Answers* (2017) displays an interest in characters to attend to both intersubjectivity, which shows her attempt to connect with her audience, and the expression of urgent, real-world matters. The former, intersubjectivity, is obtained mainly through direct questions and projections of the author's voice through a mode similar to what Phelan calls mask narration: "a rhetorical act in which the implied author uses the character narrator as a spokesperson for ideas that she fully endorses. [. . .] Indeed, the implied author employs the mask of the character narrator as a means to increase the appeal and persuasiveness of the ideas expressed" (2017, 99). The latter, the investment into ethical and political matters, in *The Answers* is achieved through her main character's existential quest and a hint at dystopic fiction.

The main character of *The Answers* is Junia Stone, renamed and reborn Mary Parsons at the age of seventeen. She is, to some extent, a heroine from another era: she is thirty years old and doesn't "watch things" (Lacey 2017, 31), neither movies, televisions, nor social media, and she does not own a mobile phone. But, to some other extent, she embodies a very common contemporary woman, living in a one-bedroom apartment in New York City, working at a job in a travel agency for which she is overqualified, earning a very bad salary, and struggling to pay off her student loans. Mary went to Columbia, thanks to her aunt Clara, who rescued her from a cabin in the woods in Tennessee where she grew up poor, a "homeschooled semi-orphan" (18), as she describes

1. See also Clark and Phelan 2020.

herself, with a Catholic-fanatic father who is violent with her mother. Because of her isolated upbringing, Mary's voice, as Joy Press points out, "is both intimate and dissociated, decoding ordinary experiences as if explaining human rituals to an alien" (n. pag.). Her problems, nevertheless, are very realistic: she suffers from "undiagnosable illnesses" (8), and she applies for a second job to pay her medical bills.

The solutions she finds for her problems comprise dystopic elements. For her illnesses she goes to expensive PAKing sessions, "*a form of neuro-psycho-chi bodywork*" (8), and to pay for the sessions she finds herself involved with an obscure but highly remunerating occupation. A famous actor and aspiring director, Kurt Sky, hires her, together with several other women, for a "Relational" or "Girlfriend Experiment," which is meant to "illuminate the inner workings of love and companionship" (66). Describing her reaction to her newly found occupation, she says: "I was briefly shocked, not that someone even had such an idea, but that it was feasible that *I* could be someone's girlfriend of any kind" (66). She believes she cannot be in an intimate relationship because, to her, so many things commonly considered normal were not: "I had forgotten, in a way, that I was a girl, that people had girlfriends, that girls like me were sometimes those friends. To be hired as a girlfriend, sure, that seemed abnormal, but then again so many things seemed abnormal to me that I'd long ago learned not to trust that instinct" (66). In other words, she is an outsider going around, as James Wood remarks, "decoding reality, only to discover how little sense it makes" (2020, n. pag.).

Mary takes up the role of the "Emotional Girlfriend," while "*sexual responsibility has been assigned to another team of specially trained women—the Intimacy Team*" (69). Other roles include the "Maternal Girlfriend," the "Intellectual Girlfriend," the "Mundanity Girlfriend," the "Sleeping Girlfriend," and the "Angry Girlfriend," roles other women take because they, like Mary, need the extra income. The experiment starts as the dystopic narcissistic vision of a troubled celebrity—hence the "almost sci-fi premise" mentioned by Yevgeniya Traps (2018, n. pag.). But its consequences on Mary and the other girls soon become unsettling. Kurt believes himself to be in love with Mary, so he hires her full time, and Ashely, the Angry Girlfriend, is affected by secretly transmitted "Internal Directives," "a series of something like electromagnetic pulses to send data into the body" (146) meant to mimic "the compassion and kindness of a long and well-built relationship" (205). These directives are sent by the Research Division occupying Kurt's loft while recording and analyzing data from his interactions with the girlfriends. Toward the resolution of the novel, Mary impulsively decides to go visit her aunt, now living in a nursing home. Once in Tennessee, she goes to see her parents, only to discover

that her mother died a year before. Mary returns to New York, where Kurt ends their contract, and discovers, a few weeks later, that he was finally able to finish his ten-year-long movie project thanks to all the video recording he did of himself and the “girlfriends.” He is also now selling “Identity Distance Therapy” for people to overcome romantic frustration, while Mary ends up living secluded in her own apartment.

This brief plot summary is enough to appreciate that the novel, in line with post-postmodernist preoccupation with bearing reference to real-world issues, thematically deals with many existential questions on contemporary living, such as, would people make the same choices if they were not led to them because of economic reasons? Is the technology people use every day changing their brain without anyone noticing? Are humans, like the girlfriends, part of a big experiment that should illuminate some parts of our being alive through data analysis? These questions are conveyed as the narrative progresses, from the moment Mary is forced to accept another job as a way to pay for her therapeutic sessions—as the other women involved in the experiment are: “They thought of their rents, their debts, their ailing parents, their families and their constant bills, tuitions, payment plans, groceries, all those endless appetites” (95)—to the moment the Research Division disregards whatever ethical concerns their experiment may have raised, to the ending of the novel, which focuses on how people can experience solitude and isolation while surrounded by millions of people.

Through her characters, especially Mary and the other girlfriends, Lacey touches upon other political issues, including growing up and living in a patriarchal society, with explicit commentary such as: “Didn’t they know that being a woman meant being at war?” (100), or “Boys grew up to be men, but girls just stayed girls as long as the whole world agreed to treat them this way, liabilities, precious objects, things to be protected or told what to do” (158). Further specific ethical questions include the trauma ensuing from sexual violence (both Mary and Ashely have been victims of sexual abuse), sexism, family relationships, the way technologies affect our behavior and our feelings, and, predominantly, love and romantic relationships.

Lacey, like Egan, hints at dystopic fiction, with the whole “Girlfriend experiment” being the result of Kurt’s belief that there had to be “a way to decode our disorganized reactions to partnership, the way two people can make each other so tremendously happy at one point only to reach new depths of misery or boredom only years, weeks, or months later” (137). This slight dystopia, as Joshua James Amberson remarks, is employed for Lacey to reach “outside her comfort zone to make a larger point that a purely realist tale wouldn’t be able to make” (2017, n. pag.). A larger point that is linked with the

actual precarity in which the characters live and move because of suffocating student loans and lack of career prospects but that is also linked with the precarity of the network of relationships that come and go, extremely fragile and volatile. Indeed, as most of the themes with which the narrative deals can be considered pressing issues nowadays, readers' interests are guided toward the understanding of Mary's life as revealing of something about the present, especially with regard to the need for human connection within a precarious life.

Perhaps to oppose the uncertainty and "spreading precarity" that characterizes the present moment, with no assurance that the life one intends can or will be built (see Berlant 2011), Lacey's novel seems to respond to one of the main preoccupations of post-postmodernist fiction: the establishment of an earnest, intersubjective communication, a communication that is not just about the subjective experience of characters, but also about what that experience can communicate to others. Literature today, according to Lieven Ameel and Marco Caracciolo, "works toward a destabilization of the real that mirrors sociopolitical fractures as well as concerns over human societies' precarious embedding in a more-than-human world" (2021, 316). The uncertainty Ameel and Caracciolo refer to and that emerges from twenty-first-century fiction often reveals an attempt to reach readers and their actual world, which emphasizes the way reading narratives is a socially situated event that takes place both through and beyond the text.

Confirming this attempt at reaching readers and their actual world, in the end, Mary summarizes her existential quest, bringing to the fore the post-postmodernist exploration of human connection and earnest communication: "There are so many ways to live and die, so many ways to tell that same story, over and over, but everyone keeps trying to find a better way to tell it, a more real way to look into someone else's face to say, *I am alive like you, was born without my consent like you, will someday die and be dead in the same way you'll be dead*" (290). She then addresses her narratee directly, saying: "I crawled onto my fire escape and felt the wet air. I closed my eyes and saw a face (perhaps *yours*, perhaps my own) and began to speak to it" (290; emphasis added). The use of the deictic "you" resonates with David Foster Wallace's use of the direct address.

Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram" manifesto (1997) and his short story "Octet" (2001), as it is commonly acknowledged (see, for instance, Konstantinou 2016), have contributed significantly to the switch of interest from postmodern irony to post-postmodernist earnestness (see also the introduction). In "Octet," a fictionalized need to share an "urgent interhuman sameness" (Wallace 2001, 133) takes the form of the direct question to the narratee: "Do you feel it too?" (131). Wallace wanted his direct question to have the effect of mak-

ing him (Wallace/the author) look “more like a reader” (136), so he gestures toward his audience, hoping to establish a narrative communication grounded on a shared experience. In “Octet,” a story that Nicoline Timmer defined as a “fictionalized manifesto for a new direction in fiction writing” (2010, 102), Wallace recovers the direct address, according to Paul Dawson, for the purpose of earnest communication, “the author’s desire to speak in his own voice” (2013, 81). Such desire seems all the more urgent today, as many contemporary authors are preoccupied with ethical and political issues. Therefore, like Wallace’s “Do you feel it too?,” Lacey is also trying to establish a direct contact with the “someone else” of her narrative communication, who is, at the same time, a member of the narrative audience, co-building and observing the storyworld “from within,” and someone outside of it, in his/her/their situated reading experience.

The emphasis the character places on her “sameness” exemplifies the novel’s preoccupation with fiction’s ability to earnestly communicate a self to another self, and with the overcoming of the distance mediation inevitably entails—an interpersonal distance that, as Mary says, she’d give “anything to cross” (89). Indeed, in the quasi-realist storyworld of *The Answers*, described as precarious both economic-wise and relationship-wise, the act of narration itself needs to be perceived as a sincere exchange between two selves, an act of co-construction that puts to the fore actual-world issues. The character narration is a resource employed to emphasize the existential meditations of Mary, which repeatedly punctuate her reporting of events with ideas such as: “Sometimes it seems all I have are questions, that I will have the same ones all my life. I’m not sure if I even want any answers, don’t think I’d have a use for them, but I do know I’d give anything to be another person—anyone else—for even just a day, an hour” (89). Or questions such as: “Someday I hope this is clear to me, that I can find the right end, the right moral to this story. Am I the sort of person who makes life harder than it has to be? Did I actively invite all this trouble into my life or was I just doing the best I could?” (70).

These statements and these questions again underline an existential quest within a reality made of human relationships that the character narrator is mostly struggling to decode. But they also interrupt the narration so often and with such a rhetorical investment that readers may wonder if they are the main discourse around which the rest of the narrative is built. This appears, for example, in the novel’s underlying discourse about love, with the narrative progression constellated by statements like: “I was spitting these words at him, but I did not recognize my own ferocity, so I stamped it out like embers. *It seems to me that we can be the angriest with those we love most—what a curse, what a trick*” (81; emphasis added); or “And how sad and stupid it was that I

believed it would always be that way, that our love wouldn't dissolve into the ordinary. *Believing in exemptions, maybe everyone has to make this mistake once*" (83; emphasis added). These statements are significant not so much in themselves but rather because of the fluidity according to which they amalgamate with the rest of the fictional narration while, at the same time, also standing out, suddenly allowing into the fictional conversation a projection outside of the storyworld, a nonfictional layer that highlights the storyworld–actual-world connection when audiences co-construct characters.

These projections punctuate the narration and dictate its rhythm, with readers who need to decide whether the narrative voice belongs to Mary or whether it contains a projection directed outside of the storyworld *per se*. When the narration is conveyed through her (parts I and III), it is a mode similar to Phelan's mask narration (see above).² Lacey employs her character Mary for the readers to perceive as her spokesperson so that the character's voice blends with the audience's projection of the author's voice. The beginning of *The Answers* is exemplary of this rhetorical purpose:

There was at least one morning I was certain, though only for a few hours, that everything that could really happen to me had already happened to me. I woke diagonal in bed, no place to go, no immediate needs to meet, no company expected or calls to make. I watched red tea steep in hot water. The mug warmed my hands. I believed it was over.

When I opened the blinds, she was standing in the middle of the street, staring hard at my second-floor window as if she'd known exactly where I was, had been waiting for this moment. We locked eyes—Ashely.

The tea slipped, shattered, and scalded my feet.

I try not to be so certain anymore. (4)

This beginning sees the narrator describing a dream-like mental state, "I was certain [. . .] that everything that could really happen to me had already happened to me," a certainty which is later retracted after she is surprised by someone staring at her through her window. This thought describes not just a mental state, but a kind of thought people usually would keep to themselves, an intimate reflection that frames the narrative communication, from its beginning, as the offering of the character narrator's self as sincere as possible, even if that means to expose her own idiosyncrasies and intimate thinking. So a marginal dialogue between Ashley and her friend, "*Yeah, you don't really seem like yourself*," Vicky said, to which Ashley nodded, a constant *No*

2. See also Rader 2011.

and a constant *Yes* running in her” (207), is followed by a consideration such as: “What a danger it is to love, how it wraps a person from the inside, changes all the locks and loses all the keys” (207). An evaluation that stands out, bringing to the fore the larger exchange between author and readers.

Perhaps not surprisingly then, many of these considerations projecting the narrative exchange toward the actual world take the form of questions: “But would she have even told him about the cabin, about Merle, his manifesto, her little lonely beginning? *But this was what people in love do, isn’t it? Give each other their stories as a way to re-hear them, as a way to re-understand their histories, what those histories did to them, what they do to them still?*” (236; emphasis added). Questions like these not only emphasize the subjectivity of the main character, Mary, but interrogate what the subjective experience of the main character Mary can provoke, communicate, and disclose. By inviting the actual audience’s answers to be projected into the narrative, the recurrent questions/existential statements are an attempt at bridging that distance between author and readers that mediated communication requires. Through them, the narrative and actual audiences are able to judge Lacey’s attempt at showing vulnerability through her existential character and at projecting Mary’s authentic subjectivity into their co-construction of the actual world.

EPISTEMIC DIGITAL EPITEXTS FROM AUTHORS

In chapter 1, I argued that the primary distinction for a rhetorical theory of paratexts is between communicative and epistemic paratexts, explaining that to the former category belong those paratextual elements that are employed by authors as resources of narrative communication for/around a particular narrative, and to the latter category belong all paratextual elements that are not part of the resources at an author’s disposal for the specific communicative occasion of a particular narrative. I pointed out how this distinction applies to any kind of paratexts, but that it becomes particularly relevant today because of the proliferation of paratextual material in the digital world. I also underlined how this reconfiguration of rhetorical paratextuality is meant as a heuristic framework to better understand the way paratextual resources are employed to achieve certain effects on the audiences, and the way their use intersects with the poetics of post-postmodernist fiction, as seen with *Moon-glow* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

In case of epistemic digital epitexts coming from other audience members, which we will see in chapter 5, there is no ambiguity in distinguishing them from communicative digital epitexts because the sender is different. But when

the digital material comes from the author, as I explore below, to distinguish the two categories may be more challenging. There are cases in which the communicative quality of digital epitexts emerges unambiguously, for example, the case of websites or social media dedicated to a given novel. There are cases, however, in which the connection between the paratextual material and the authors' rhetorical choice with regard to their novels is less unequivocal. As seen in chapter 2, for example, the communicative digital epitexts employed by Michael Chabon in his Instagram feed alternate with epitextual material apparently not employed as a rhetorical resource for *Moonglow*, but that in the economy of the communicative dynamics elicited by the audiences' encounter with that material and Chabon's novel do become relevant. There is no doubt, therefore, that the distinction between communicative digital epitexts and authorial epistemic digital epitexts is, for readers, often blurred.

The increasing presence of the digital world in our day-to-day lives brought an intensification of contemporary authors' presence through online activities. As the ultimate "paratextual performance" (Genette [1987] 1997, 408), these activities are often linked with issues of public persona. Authors' epistemic digital epitexts, for example, can be found on various social platforms from Instagram to Twitter and even TikTok (e.g., on Instagram, see the profiles of Gary Shteyngart, Chelsea Bieker, and Hanif Abdurraquib; on Twitter, of Alexander Chee, Sloane Crosley, and Lauren Groff; and on TikTok, of John Green and Michelle Zauner). These kinds of paratextual authorial interactions are not new, of course, but because of their current widespread circulation, they have been recently investigated in studies of contemporary authorship (e.g., Murray 2018). Authors today, as Liesbeth Korthals Altes highlights, "face an increased need to secure attention and authority" (2014, 71), and their online activities are paramount to creating those "ethos effects" or authorial posturing that can contribute to providing such "additional" legitimization. Korthals Altes's work highlights the importance of the social-cultural sphere for the "negotiations of literature's meanings and values" (164), and it is devoted to the investigation of the clues to authorial postures that authors inspire through their literary works and their paratexts and that audiences may pick up on (or not). Korthals Altes aptly points out that in our "overmediatized everyday life," it seems that there is a hunger for authors (figures) foregrounded by their lived experiences: "a longing for the real" (157), as mentioned in the introduction.

This demand for authorial presence and this need for shared lived experiences find a fertile soil in social media, designed for—and profiting from—the sharing of this kind of lived experience. Many contemporary authors' social media profiles constitute mines of paratextual evidence on many aspects of

their lives not necessarily related to their narratives. In fact, authors' epistemic digital epitexts do not aim at providing an assessment of an author's oeuvre, but because authors present themselves in a certain way, with a certain set of interests and a certain willingness to share details from their personal life, this material does possibly offer clues to interpret the authorial communication conveyed through a literary narrative. The personal material shared, and the kind of dialogic conversation conducted through these media, can possibly contribute to the audience (of one of these authors' narratives) activating evaluative or applicative paratextual dynamics (see chap. 1; see fig. 2).

While communicative digital epitexts participate in the narrative communication between authors and audiences, authorial epistemic digital epitexts contribute, like other kinds of epistemic epitexts, to the ongoing paratextual knowledge (with its set of assumptions) audiences can acquire and then *activate* in their co-constructive endeavors. The focus here is not so much on the material that is shared, because generalizing the kinds of functions or effects authorial epistemic digital epitexts elicit is just not possible nor helpful: not only do authors online may share similar material (e.g., personal photos, reading habits) while having distinctive agendas, but for different novels from the same author that material may assume different meanings. The idea at the bottom of this is that although authorial epistemic digital epitexts are not resources of narrative per se, they may still matter. The paratextual knowledge acquired through them can, for example, shape the readers' assumptions about the author and facilitate a connection between the author figure audience members come to know through his/her/their online activities, and the author figure audience members take as the one communicating through the textual resources and the dominant interests governing a given narrative communication. This happens because, as I explained in chapter 1, epistemic digital epitexts do exhibit an illocutionary force that adds to actual readers' paratextual knowledge—a knowledge that can be activated during the audience's reconstructive efforts or employed to evaluate the results of those efforts.

Significantly, unlike for communicative digital epitexts, the illocutionary force of epistemic digital epitexts, as far as the narrative communication of a novel is concerned, can only be supplemental. Epistemic digital epitexts, in other words, provide material that adds something to the narrative communication when that material is encountered. Not encountering epistemic digital epitexts, however, does not take anything away from the narrative communication. Overlooking communicative digital epitexts, on the contrary, deprives actual readers of paratextual material that is meant to be encountered and be part of the narrative communication, as much as its distance to the source narrative and its ephemerality do not guarantee that such an encounter will

in fact happen. Communicative digital epitexts are the actual novelty of narrative fiction in the twenty-first century: digital resources that, thanks to the immediacy of digital media and their popularity, widen the material space of authorial creation and narrative exchange of the print novel. But authorial epistemic digital epitexts, despite their ancillary role, do carry an illocutionary force, and to encounter them means adding to one's set of paratextual knowledge, knowledge that indirectly enters the situated acts of narrative co-construction. The following section exemplifies these dynamics through an analysis of the kind of paratextual knowledge and communicative dynamics some of Lacey's epistemic digital epitexts elicit in connection with her novel *The Answers*.

CATHERINE LACEY'S EPISTEMIC DIGITAL EPITEXTS

Discursive authority refers to “the intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value claimed by or conferred upon a work, author, narrator, character, or textual practice [that] is produced interactively” and thus must “be characterized with respect to specific receiving communities” (Lanser 1992, 6). As Dawson highlights, building on Lanser, “The rhetorical strategies authors employ to establish the authority of their narrative voices must be understood in the social context of their reception” (2013, 57). Today, many authors actively participate in the creation of the social context for their novels through both their communicative and epistemic digital epitexts, which are, in turn, interwoven with digital material of a different sort, from audience's (or other kinds of) epistemic epitexts, to digital peritexts. Perhaps not surprisingly then, by analyzing Lacey's epistemic digital epitexts, it is possible to observe a consistency between her fictional and her extrafictional discourses via digital epitexts reinforcing the discursive authority of her novel.

As I will show, Lacey communicates through social media in a straightforward manner, so that her epistemic digital epitexts promote bonding through online interactions. This refers to the idea, expressed within social semiotic analysis of online interactions, that bonding “is an intuitively attractive concept which implies shared values, interpersonal alignment and mediated connections between the tellers as a form of building common ground” (Page 2018, 83). Similarly, although within rhetorical narratology and not online interactions, Phelan talks of bonding strategies employed to reduce “the interpretive, affective, and/or ethical distance between the narrator and the authorial audience” (2017, 98). The bonding strategies to be found on epistemic digital epitexts, I believe, are partly embedded in the media itself, as Page

highlights (see also Zappavigna 2014). But they are also in line with the changing dominant after postmodernism and its attending to issues of earnest communication, as seen throughout this book.

A first consistency between her fictional and her extrafictional discourses via digital epitexts concerns the use of direct questions, amply employed in *The Answers* and to be found on her website, <https://www.catherinelacey.com>, and on some of her Instagram posts and tweets. To describe *The Answers*, Lacey uses the following three questions: “To what degree is a human emotional state measurable? Can we engineer a perfect relationship? Should pain exist?” In a similar vein, her homepage shows a direct question printed on a billboard: “Why do all my feelings come like street drugs cut with something else?” And, scrolling down, other questions appear, such as “When you have an idea, does it embarrass you?” or “How do you know when you’ve made yourself clear? Have you found a good criteria for this?” Then, clicking on a “more info” section, it was possible to read a longer personal reflection on the meaning of her novels and her readership: “A very small percentage of human beings who still read books in the 21st century have read this woman’s fictions and some of those readers approve of the existence and possible usefulness of those fictions” (n. pag.). She continued by addressing directly her audience among which are also those readers: “Perhaps you’re trying to figure out whether this Catherine Lacey person is good or bad or neither? Unclear. Very difficult to get a straight answer on such a question” (n. pag.). Her biographical statement seeks to elicit an empathic response by stating, “Writing a third-person biography of yourself is a very dislocating task” (n. pag.), meaning that what we are reading hasn’t been easy to write because, she adds, such a task as writing a third-person biography “might lead you to wonder: what is an identity? [. . .] Also: Identity . . . is it (any part of it) a fixed thing? Is yours stable, sir? How about when you were four? Three and a half? Last week? What about when you put a hat on? Tends to change people, I’ve found” (n. pag.).

As this brief description shows, the paratextual knowledge that emerges from this epistemic digital epitext concerns an author interested in establishing a connection with her readers, who stimulates a response, possibly empathetic, thanks to the frequent direct questions. These direct questions, in turn, highlight a sincere interest in the possible answers elicited and in earnest communication. The website as epistemic digital epitext, moreover, informs readers of Lacey’s interest in existential issues, which echoes those present in *The Answers*. In co-constructing her novel, activating this piece of paratextual knowledge means including in one’s co-building efforts an author image that juxtaposes with the image emerging from the narrative communication and attending to intersubjectivity in a consistent way.

However, because the internet is more about ephemeral communication than fixed content, the “more information” section has now been replaced with a more formal description of her main publications and awards. Something similar happened with her Instagram and Twitter profiles, whose links are contained in her website (@_catherinelacey on Twitter; @catherinelacey_ on Instagram). Many tweets and posts have been deleted. Still, she shares (and shared) material engaging with existential matters through a gesture toward intimacy and intersubjectivity. This gesture, if encountered before or after reading *The Answers*, reinforces the actual audience’s co-construction of the narrative as a fictional text whose author is committed to earnest communication. On her Instagram feed, intimacy and earnestness were, and in part still currently are, soon established through a series of posts that include long captions with personal reflections, “throwback” pictures of her childhood, pictures with her intimate friends, and so forth that shorten the distance between private and public and thus contribute to the building of an authentic self-narrative.

For example, in a post dated October 25, 2016, currently no longer available, she shared a picture of a man staring at some bookshelves in what looks like a library. The caption accompanying the picture resonates with the narrating voices in *The Answers*, stylistically and thematically:

books are evidence of how much thought has already passed on this earth, and yes, all that can be felt has already been felt and books are proof of that too, but all that can be known is not known, and perhaps will never be known in full, or perhaps what can be known is not fixed, is not a point we can reach but a point that is always moving and perhaps the same is true of feeling, the small and vast plane of human feeling. does it expand *for you*? does it grow pine trees, contain lakes? (emphasis added)

The caption contains two direct questions meant to connect the author’s feelings—in this case, incertitude and existential questions—with her audience’s feelings. She also explores identity issues in another post, dated January 5, 2017 (not available anymore), portraying a pink Post-it on the ground with a note saying, “This is not normal.” Again, she addresses her audience directly:

what, if anything, is normal about the passage of *your* mind through a day? perhaps there are several conflicting answers. *take you*, for instance. *you* are most certainly not normal. *you* are unlike and exactly like everyone, by which i mean, if anything can be taken from *you* it will one day be taken from *you*. if you have lost something, lost a note to yourself in a park, lost a

day to walking, lost track of a person you once were, it is almost guaranteed to remain lost. this is not the planet where everything remains very still. this is the planet where too much of what is “said” is done by thumbs. what could be normal about that? (emphasis added)

The “you” in her caption might as well refer to a reader of her novels, a potential reader, an Instagram user, and herself. It is an all-embracing “you” that flattens the communicative hierarchy between teller and receiver because it shows the teller’s attempt at sharing that “interhuman sameness” invoked by Wallace and echoed in *The Answers*.

Intersubjective communication resonates through Lacey’s Instagram profile also thanks to “throwback” pictures portraying episodes from Lacey’s past. On April 16, 2017, she shares an old photo portraying her and her siblings as children. They look dressed up for some occasion but are not particularly happy to have their photo taken. Her caption reads: “Another Happy Easter of our very normal childhoods in clothes we all felt glad wearing and absolutely no problems at all with anyone else in our family.” The irony of her caption is meant to create not only a *sincere* self-portrayal (“This is who I was / This is who I am”), but also to bond with her audience through the sharing of a common situation, such as children forced to do something against their will by their (possibly dysfunctional) parents. Her feed, like Chabon’s, is a communication channel with the purpose of depicting a *sincere* self-portrait and of bonding with her audience.

Lacey’s Instagram feed also includes posts that present an interest in gender issues that echo the thematic issues presented in *The Answers*. In a post, dated July 8, 2019, Lacey shares a picture of her first novel with the caption:

I got a text this morning: “Happy Birthday Nobody,” which seemed odd until I remembered it’s been five years since I published this, my first book.

And I was thinking just the other day about how surprisingly natural it was to play the fool when interviewed about this book five years ago—it was almost as if I had been trained all my life to believe that *if a young lady finds any success she should pretend it was all some silly accident, and not decades of working and reading, nor years of early mornings—nothing for which she can be held accountable.*

I mention this here because you may find yourself one day having to answer to something you did, something you made, and please do us all the favor of just talking about it honestly instead of putting on a costume of Some Harmless Gal. Sure, the route to publishing a book (or making almost anything) involves many accidents and timing and luck but that is not for

you to speak of. Don't waste your time playing dumb for someone else's benefit. (emphasis added)

Here, Lacey is taking a stance toward gender issues by sharing the difficulties that she, as a young artist, faced because of conventional views of womanhood and by inviting other women to disavow such views of themselves. In this case, therefore, an epistemic digital epitext contains echoes of Lacey's fictional discourse, echoes that, if met, may reinforce (through activation or evaluation) the discursive authority of the ethical and political issues appearing in *The Answers*.

More recently, she has shared mostly through "Stories." On Instagram, a "story" is a way to create content that allows users to share photos, videos, music, and texts that appear in a sequential feed and disappear after twenty-four hours. For example, on April 20, 2022, Lacey shared a screenshot from her own website portraying the sentence, "Someone told me recently that in love there's always one person with their eyes open and one person with their eyes closed," followed by the direct question, "Is this true or nope?" In the story, Lacey explains through a comment added to the picture that the sentence on the screenshot is "One of the many hidden objects within website." Another time (Mar. 17, 2022), she shared her playlist on Spotify (titled "Already ready to leave the parties I haven't been to yet") with the comment: "But what if I'm not ready for social distancing to be over?" Other stories include book recommendations. For instance, on June 3, 2021, she shared a picture of *The Most Fun Thing* by Kyle Beachy (2021) with the comment: "Wow I had no idea how much I needed to read a book about skateboarding" and the tag @themostrfunthing, which is the personal page of Kyle Beachy. On June 15, 2021, instead, she shared a screenshot of an article with the comment: "New essay by @forsythharmon in @believermag !!!"

On Twitter—her profile went through a renovation like the ones for her Instagram profile and her website and currently shows some thirty tweets from April 2021—Lacey also often shared spontaneous book recommendations: a picture of the book, portrayed as the copy she has just read, or she is currently reading, accompanied by captions inviting her audience to read it as well, such as:

If you, like me, cannot stop thinking about catastrophe but also have a high standard for sentences & ideas, this book is for *you*. Just finished the terrifying essay in which @egabbert basically predicts Covid-19. (@_catherinelacey Mar. 18, 2020; emphasis added)

Another stunning book in translation—LOOP by Brenda Lozano—that American readers are sleeping on. Please do *yourself* a favor and read this one. Fans of Jenny Offill (that's basically *all of you*) take note. (@_catherinelacey Mar. 15, 2020; emphasis added)

She wrote her recommendations using the pronouns “you” and “yourself,” so as to address her Twitter audience in a direct way. Again, this is in line with established Twitter practices, but if the tweets are encountered, they may still contribute to the creation of a paratextual knowledge readers can draw upon in their co-constructing endeavors.

The actual audience that encounters these epistemic digital epitexts after reading *The Answers* can evaluate their co-construction of Mary's storyworld with all of her existential questions, together with the additional knowledge Lacey's epistemic digital epitexts provide, that is, the consistency between Lacey's fictional and the extrafictional discourses with regard to some ethical and political questions, but mostly her interest in intersubjectivity. The members of the actual audience who, instead, have encountered Lacey's epistemic digital epitexts before reading *The Answers*, may activate the paratextual knowledge about the modes they contain—connection, intimacy, and earnestness—to interpret the projections of the authorial voice generated thanks to the various questions/existential statements as likewise intimate and earnest declarations. If *The Answers* attends to earnestness through a focus on characters that emphasizes their subjectivity and an authorial intersubjective discourse, her epistemic digital epitexts provide that discourse with a context that reinforces it.

In her novel, Lacey employs a character to emphasize the narrative's engagement with existential, but also ethical and political, issues posited as questions and direct addresses to the readers. Intersubjective communication is foregrounded: there is a self, the author, communicating earnestly through fiction, knowing that her telling will be able to affect readers' actual world. Post-postmodernist authors like Lacey exploit the paratextual affordances of digital media not as specific resources of narrative communication but in order to create an effect that reinforces their earnest gesture toward the audience and their earnest attempt at intersubjective communication. This means that there is a sort of reciprocity in the modes and strategies employed by Lacey in her fictional novel and in her online presence, and this reciprocity reinforces and further authorizes both discourses. In this sense, authorial epistemic digital epitexts are not resources of narrative communication, as I already pointed out, but they may contribute to the creation of a cultural and social context within the current changing of dominant function.

Authorial epistemic digital epitexts are relevant to this study not only because they are currently an extremely widespread practice but also because their use often resonates with the themes, modes, and strategies at play in post-postmodernist fiction. Contemporary authors exploit the affordances of digital media not only to employ them as rhetorical resources, but also to create an effect that reinforces the discursive authority grounded on an earnest attempt at intersubjective communication, currently emerging from post-postmodernist novels. Significantly, the internet, and social media in particular, is a place where contemporary authors can further engage with real-world preoccupations through paratextual performances in the form of social media profiles and interactions, which take center stage in the situated reading practices of many actual readers—actual readers who, as I will show in the following chapter, participate, too, in the creation of a novel’s social context.

The affordances of social media, moreover, may create a sense of connectedness that resonates with the sense of earnest communication authors aim for in their fiction. Page remarks that “social media genres are characterized by their distinctive collaborative potential (the opportunity for narrators to interact with a networked audience),” among other things (2015, 330). And often, on social media, the front-stage and back-stage presentation of the self blends into one another (Page 2011 qtd. in Thomas 2014, 177) so that a sense of intimacy between users—among which are actual authors and actual readers—is produced. Within this contextual background, authors’ epistemic digital epitexts are to be considered a fuzzy area with regard to rhetorical paratextuality: even if they are not proper resources of narrative communication, often they do participate in situated reading practices, which are more and more enmeshed with what happens online. The paratextual knowledge they provide is activated by actual readers who reconstruct a novel’s storyworld and possibly respond to the author’s post-postmodernist gesture toward them.

CHAPTER 5

Instances of Co-Construction

The interview is—to put it lightly—part of a social game that no one can evade, or, to put it more seriously, part of a collaborative intellectual venture between writers on the one hand and the media on the other hand. There are meshing gears that have to be accepted: from the moment one writes, one expects eventual publication, and from the moment one is published, one must accept what society asks of books and what it turns them into.

—Roland Barthes, *Le Grain de la voix*

Attending to paratexts, as seen in chapter 4, means anchoring narratives to their social context. Communicative digital epitexts in particular, as explored in chapter 2 and chapter 3, are becoming a self-reflexive mode of twenty-first-century fiction that both extends into the digital world where the narrative act is occurring at the textual level and reflects on such an act of communication. The digital world is the place where the reconstruction of the author's narrative act from the audience can be shared and confronted with other readers' reconstructions and the authors themselves. It is a space where the context of writing (e.g., the account of the manufacturing of writing) can be put to the fore, and so the context of reading. Thus, the whole variety of digital epitexts as performative instances of writing and reading, of reconstructions, of extensions, of evaluations, and of applications is to be understood not just as the product of the current digital ecology but also as exemplary of the social context in which twenty-first-century fiction comes into being.

While the role of communicative digital epitexts is most noticeable for the rhetorical co-construction of a narrative, the audience's digital epitexts may affect the narrative communication, too. Like with authorial epistemic epitexts, whenever readers share digital material related to the narrative, and other readers encounter it, readers' reconstructive efforts may be altered when the paratextual knowledge the audience's digital epitexts contain is activated and readers reevaluate their co-constructions of the narrative storyworld and

its application in the actual world. As I underlined throughout this study, author-audience interactions (including authors' interviews and individual correspondence) are not new phenomena (see, for instance, Andrews 2007, but also Barthes's quote in this chapter's epigraph). But the way new digital technologies have become omnipresent in many readers' lives makes the relevance of audiences' digital epistemic epitexts for the narrative communication a territory necessary to start mapping out. Today, as I explain in chapter 1, the accessibility to paratexts that was a prerogative of peritexts has now extended to the epitexts in the digital world.

This chapter presents an analysis of Meg Wolitzer's *The Female Persuasion* (2018) and a study on how readers' digital epitexts may reveal how audiences apply storyworld details to their understanding of the actual world, contributing to other readers' paratextual knowledge that is, in turn, activated in their reconstructive efforts or employed to evaluate them. Considering how readers are engaging with and reshaping narrative communication in the digital world is an enlightening window into the context of how the author-reader communication is developing nowadays. Indeed, investigating readers' digital epitexts means investigating what readers share about a narrative and what happens to the narrative communication when other readers encounter that material before, during, or after their reading experience.

The focus on some examples of readers' digital epitexts is also helpful to start outlining, in rhetorical terms, what the twofold exchange of digital epitexts may mean for twenty-first-century fiction. By twofold exchange I mean the gesture twenty-first-century fiction makes toward the digital and the gesture the digital makes toward twenty-first-century fiction (see also the introduction): readers co-build a storyworld and bring that co-construction into their situated context of reading, which is in their actual world, but then sometimes they also bring their application of storyworld details in the digital world by sharing them through reviews, tweets, photos. This new digital contextual environment does not contribute directly to a switch of dominant, but it makes contemporary authors aware of the way readers perform their readings, possibly guiding new readers from the digital world toward a fictional narrative. To these readers' epistemic digital epitexts, contemporary authors may respond in their fictional and/or paratextual creations.

Confirming Bronwen Thomas's remark that the "forms of literature encountered on or shared by social media display high performativity, relationality and 'nowness'" (2020, 121), this chapter shows the way readers' epistemic digital epitexts participate in such a digital sociocultural environment linked with post-postmodern relationality. On the one hand, there are contemporary authors like Chabon and Lacey, as seen in chapters 2 and 4, that

share performative digital epitexts through media governed by immediacy and connectiveness, digital epitexts that are connected to their own narratives likewise invested in “the dialogical and the relational” (Elias and Moraru 2015, xii). On the other hand, there are readers equally interested in sharing their ideas on their reading experiences to connect and further dialogue with other readers/users. In so doing, they influence the paratextual knowledge that readers bring into their co-constructing endeavor, which does not exhaust the actual experience of reading but continues in their minds and is renewed any time they encounter new digital material. The narrative communication happens between authors and audiences on the occasion of reading, but that occasion can be extended digitally. And these digital epitexts provide some instances of the various occasions in which the narrative communication occurs in a sociocultural context in which, as Zara Dinnen highlights drawing on posthuman studies, “the thinking, feeling, interpersonal subject is always mediational” (2018; see also Braidotti 2013; Grusin 2015).

RECONSTRUCTING MEG WOLITZER'S *THE FEMALE PERSUASION*

The Female Persuasion tells the story of Greer Kadetsky from her college years to the present, when she is in her thirties. Her trajectory is pretty straightforward: she grows up in a small town in Massachusetts, with self-absorbed parents and few friends; she spends most of her childhood and adolescence reading books, until she falls in love with the boy next door, Cory Pinto, the son of immigrant parents from Portugal, who will eventually go to Princeton with a full scholarship. In college, she meets her best friend, Zee Eisenstat, and an older second-wave feminist, Faith Frank, who first becomes her mentor and later her employer at a women's foundation in New York City. Both the heroine and the mentor, at some point, act unwisely: the former by betraying her best friend, and the latter by accepting compromises to keep fighting for equality (the foundation, called Loci, is financed with money coming from a corporate tycoon, Emmett Shrader, an old friend of Faith, whose interests are not aligned with hers). Greer will eventually reconcile with her friend Zee, after having asked for forgiveness, and she will also reconcile with her high school boyfriend, from whom she had separated following a family tragedy (the death of his little brother). Disappointed in Faith Frank's compromises, Greer loses her job but manages to write a feminist manifesto that becomes an international bestseller and gives meaning and financial security to her, now a new mom.

While this summarizes an uncomplicated plot, two of Greer's actions are problematic in terms of the reconstruction of the narrative. For Phelan, reconstruction is part of a two-step process in rhetorical ethics and aesthetics, in which the audience must attempt

to identify the relevant ethical principles [in the narrative], to apply them to the specific behavior of the characters and techniques of the telling, and, ultimately, to determine the ethics of the overall narrative purpose [and to identify] the nature of the work's narrative project and analy[ze] the skill with which it executes that project. (2007, 13)

In this sense, reconstruction serves as a parameter in the evaluation of the narrative project. In our article, Efron, McMurry, and I understand reconstruction as a synthesis of Phelan's idea and David Herman's hypothesis of reconstruction as the audience's mental exercise of world-building:

Independently of the type of narrative, an author creates a world that has to be reconstructed by the audience. This reconstruction results from the application of assumptions and judgments on the part of both authors and audience and is, simply put, the active part of the audience's role as co-creator of a world. However, the resulting world is not merely a reconstruction. The audience will imbue the storyworld with some of its own assumptions and mental representations and thus the result is a co-construction. Furthermore, by applying insight gained from co-constructing the storyworld, the audience also re-constructs the actual world. In this sense, reconstruction inevitably involves some transformation, reconfiguring rather than purely building again. (2019, 336)

In Wolitzer's novel, the first action that is problematic for audience members as they attempt to identify the ethical principles of the novels, and apply them to the specific behavior of Greer, involves her relationship with Faith and her friend Zee, and the second action involves her not being supportive of her boyfriend Cory's decision to give up his promising career to take care of his mother after the traumatic events of the death of his little brother and his father leaving for Portugal. The narrator reports on these actions but avoids any kind of direct judgment, so this produces an effect reminiscent of what Phelan calls "estranging unreliability," which occurs when the "discrepancies between the narrator's reports, interpretations, or evaluations and those of the authorial audience leave these two participants in the communicative exchange distant from one another—in a word, estranged" (2017, 101). Here

there is what we may call, building on Phelan's concept, an estranging *effect* provoked by the dissonance between Greer's judgments of her own actions—available to the audience thanks to the focalization through her and the use of free indirect discourse (FID)—and the judgment of the same actions that Wolitzer guides the actual and narrative audience to make through the other characters' voices, which emerge through dialogue narration. Even as Wolitzer uses focalization and other disclosures to estrange her audience from Greer, the author also introduces significant ethical ambiguity into the larger author-narrative-audience communication. In other words, the ambiguity in the ethical principles at play in the novel frustrates the audience's attempt at reconstruction.

About this first action: after Greer secured herself a job at Faith Frank's foundation, her best friend Zee asks her to give to Faith, her long-time role model, a letter in which she asks for a position at the foundation, a letter that Greer, however, will never deliver. So, Greer appears involved with a women's foundation to help women across the US and elsewhere, but at the same time, she is also acting against the value of "sisterhood" she embraces in her job and, supposedly, in her life. The question of the letter becomes particularly revealing for the readers' judgments of her actions: she realizes she does not want to give the letter to Faith after all, but she nevertheless mentions it to her during some after-work drinks. Perhaps to elicit some empathy in her employer, she strangely justifies her betrayal of her friend with her parents' lack of interest in her life: "My parents never knew how to be parents. [. . .] They were potheads. They still are" (156). Nevertheless, Faith is encouraging and tells her she likes the way she tries "to figure things out" (157) and that she is "genuine and thoughtful," and then she flatters Greer by asking her to start writing speeches for some of the women who would speak at Loci's events. Later, when Zee would inquire about the letter, Greer would simply lie, telling her that there were no openings.

Reflecting on her actions, "Greer wondered, afterward, if everyone had a certain degree of awfulness inside them" (159), but the matter does not come out again until four years later, when Greer decides to confront Faith on the morality of some choices she made to keep the foundation functioning. When Faith justifies her own choices by talking about compromises, which causes Greer's decision to resign, Faith exposes the contradiction in her moral standards by mentioning the episode of Zee's letter. Greer will eventually confess to her friend her lie, asking for her forgiveness, to which Zee replies:

Because I'd been this little activist before college, and you were basically home reading books and having sex with your boyfriend. Which is fine; it's

just different. But I wanted to help you. You'd had this bad experience at that frat party. And you were shy. But the meek shall inherit the earth, right? For someone who was always so shy, Greer, and who couldn't ask for what she needed, in fact you've asked for everything you needed. You basically went in and got what you wanted, and made yourself known. You raised your hand that night in the Ryland Chapel. You raised it faster than me, and you got your question answered. And then you called Faith on the phone, and finally got a job with her. And you even gave her a frying pan. That took chutzpah. And, of course, you kept my letter from her. These are not classic shy-person actions, Greer, I'm just saying. They're something else. Sneaky, maybe. [. . .] You really know how to act in the face of power. I've never put that together before, but it's true. [. . .] I think there are two kinds of feminists. The famous ones, and everyone else. Everyone else, all the people who just quietly go and do what they're supposed to do, and don't get a lot of credit for it, and don't have someone out there every day telling them they're doing an awesome job. (367)

The narrative guides readers to judge negatively the action of Greer through this character-character dialogue. It is not the protagonist through which the novel is focalized, but another character's perspective that reveals that you need not be "famous" to be a feminist. Rather, you might be a better activist by living your everyday life according to feminist principles than by spending time advocating for them regardless of your own contradictions and double standards. Moreover, the narrative seems to ask: shall we judge feminists' ideas by their actions, or do we need to separate the ideas and political actions from their personal choices, which can be as flawed and contradictory as those of everyone else?

The second action that becomes a bit unsettling for the audience's ethical judgments of the protagonist's actions within Wolitzer's overall act of storytelling occurs when, just a couple of months after Cory's family tragedy, Greer tells him that there is an opening for a consultant at Loci. From the couple's confrontation emerges the fact that Greer's biggest concern was that Cory was not with her in New York as they had planned and was instead dealing with the tragedy that suddenly befell him. Once again, it is thanks to someone else's perspective emerging through character-character dialogue, in this case, through Greer's mother, that Wolitzer guides her readers to judge Greer's actions. The mother tells her:

It seems to me [. . .] and this is really outside my sphere of knowledge, since I'm not the one who's been working at a feminist foundation. But here's this

person who gave up his plans when his family fell apart. He moves back in with his mother and takes care of her. Oh, and he cleans his own house, and the ones she used to clean. I don't know. But I feel like Cory is kind of a big feminist, right? (377)

The “real” feminist, readers are told, is Cory, someone whose actions, like Zee, are “invisible.” The other characters’ points of view serve the function of depicting Greer as an antiheroine and foregrounding the selfishness in her own judgments. As Rachel Vorona Cote notices, “Greer’s own self-perceptions are off-kilter: She describes herself as meek and unassuming, but her actions belie a selective audacity” (2018, n. pag.). Thus, after reading Greer’s mother’s observation, readers may reevaluate their judgment of Greer’s parents as “pot-heads” who were “never interested” in her.

To put this another way, the reconstruction of Wolitzer’s ethical storytelling is complicated by the fact that the novel’s main protagonist is a subtle antiheroine. To use Phelan’s terminology, the ethics of the told, that is, the ethical dimensions of characters and events, including character-character interactions and choices to act in one way rather than another by individual characters” (Phelan 2017, 8–9), is complicated by the ethics of the telling, that is, “the ethical dimensions of author-narrator-audience relationships as constructed through everything from plotting to direct addresses to the audience” (9). Or, to use co-constructive terminology, the reconstructive efforts on the ethical dimensions of the narrative are complicated by a narration that produces estranging *effects* because of the ambivalence in the co-construction of Greer. In other words, some readers’ efforts to co-construct the narrative with the author may be affected by their difficulty in participating in the narrative audience, because of the estranging effects provoked by the dissonance between the way the audience is led to judge the protagonist’s actions through the other characters’ voices and the trajectory the narrator depicts for her. Greer is the heroine whose perspective we are invited to adopt because of the narrator’s focalizing through her: her mimetic dimension is emphasized, yet she is the protagonist of a feminist coming of age, whose feminism the narrative often calls into question.

Such ambivalence is also hinted at the beginning of the novel through an intertextual clue. As a freshman at Ryland, Greer writes a paper on a book she had particularly loved, Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848), because its protagonist, Becky Sharp, “was awful in her naked ambition, and yet you also had to give her credit for being single-minded. So many people seemed muddled in their desires. They didn’t know what they wanted. Becky Sharp knew” (52). Commenting on her paper, her professor tells her she did a “fine job,” because the

concept of the anti-heroine “isn’t something that everyone intuitively understands” (53). To which Greer replies, “I think what’s interesting is that we like reading about her. Despite the fact that she’s unlikable. [. . .] Likability has become an issue for women lately” (53). And, hinting at the same issue, not too long after this passage, the narrator employs the same adjective—single-minded—to describe both Cory and Greer:

“Oh, come on. Your parents are these stoners, and you’re this ambitious good girl. I think that’s funny.”

“I’m honored by your description of me.”

“I wasn’t trying to insult you. I see you all the time with college brochures. You’re trying for the Ivies too, right?” She nodded. “I think we’re the only ones in the grade,” he said. “I think it’s just us.”

“Yeah,” she said, softening. “I think so too.” They shared a *single-mindedness* that you couldn’t teach someone; a person had to have it as part of their neurology. No one knew how this kind of focused ambition got into someone’s system; it was like a fly that’s slipped into a house, and there it is: your housefly (67–68; emphasis added).

Like for the dialogues above, in this passage the narrator exercises her authority, offering a statement that moves away from Greer’s focalization. The narrator does not negatively judge being single-minded in one’s own ambition, but the readers who will pick this clue up will probably employ it to understand Greer’s behavior with both Cory and Zee.

In these passages, Wolitzer’s omniscience is in line with Paul Dawson’s description of its use in post-postmodernist fiction. The authority of the narrator emerges from dialogue narration and statements that momentarily elude Greer’s focalization, disclosing Greer’s misevaluation of the consequences of her own actions. Greer’s actions are told in a mix of narratorial reporting and FID that Dawson would define as “a performative statement, a narratorial performance of the kinetic flow of a character’s thought, incorporating the rhythm of the thought process into the syntactic structure of narration” (2013, 181). Indeed, Wolitzer’s novel shows the presence of what Dawson calls a “performative inhabitation of a fictional mind” (194), which is in itself relevant for fiction after postmodernism because of its investment in “explor[ing] the problem of character as a knowable human self, distinct from a postmodern critique of subjectivity embedded in the realist concept of character” (166–67; see also chap. 4). On the other hand, the estranging effect provoked by Greer’s own “unlikability” results in the (possible) weakening of Wolitzer’s ethical concerns about feminist issues. After all, inhabiting a fictional mind perceived

as “off-kilter” is not easy, and some readers will be resisting it. Some readers may perceive the estranging effect toward Greer as a way for Wolitzer to bring to the fore the multiple ways one can be a feminist. That is, by unveiling the flaws in someone who will become a famous feminist, the narrative redeems the “everyone else” kind of feminists, giving them the “credit” they deserve. According to Vorona Cote, for instance, Greer’s unlikability is a way to combat gendered assumptions, and her “contemplating the tricky, anti-heroic Becky Sharp” foreshadows the novel’s central concern, “the tense, simultaneous promise and danger in feminist heroines” (2018, n. pag.). But other readers may not perceive this strategy and overlook that message. For these readers, in fact, the overall narrative communication’s purpose remains unclear.

Both readings emphasize the fact that Wolitzer’s novel is grounded on themes such as sexual abuse and women’s role in society, which project a dialogue with the cultural and historical context in which the novel emerges. *The Female Persuasion* has been called a #MeToo novel by more than one journalist (e.g., Scholes 2018), as it thematically explores some of the issues emerging from feminist public discourses currently engaging with subjects such as sexual assault (the support that arrives from other women rather than from institutions) and the principles according to which is possible to live a feminist life. Such a clear-cut thematic interest, however, does not correspond to a similarly clear “ethics of the rhetorical purpose,” namely, “the ethical dimension of the overall narrative act” (Copland 2021, 233). Moreover, as the ending will reveal, Greer is not only ambitious to the point of being single-minded, she is also naïve in her feminism. Her feminist manifesto, *Outside Voices*, is described as “a lively and positive-leaning manifesto encouraging women not to be afraid to speak up, but the title also played on ideas of women as outsiders” (438). The only critical comment on it, again, is the one offered by another character, Kay Chung, Greer’s sixteen-year-old babysitter, who tells her: “We should all definitely assert ourselves more in the world, that’s totally true. But I look at everything that women did and said in recent history, and somehow we still got to a caveman moment. And our responses to it just aren’t enough, because the structures are still in place, right?” (441–42). Kay, the narrator tells us, “could not be babied, could not be swaddled and comforted by *Outside Voices*” (443). But, after all, this should not be a surprise if the main purpose of Greer’s book is to espouse “the value of literally speaking up,” as if, says Megan Reynolds, “in the 2019 of *The Female Persuasion*, feminists have not yet gotten there” (2018, n. pag.).

The manifesto appears in the happy ending provided by Wolitzer, with Cory and Greer reunited, new parents to a girl named Emilia, and owners of a brownstone house in Carroll Gardens in Brooklyn, thanks to Greer’s book

sales. She didn't have the chance to reconcile with Faith Frank, but she was able to reconnect with Zee. Cory also preserved his feminist attitude, although such an attitude is never openly discussed. Wolitzer depicts a "new normality" with a woman and a mother working out of the house (she had been touring with her book for a year or so) and a man who "was working, and engaged by work; and he also did a lot around the house, cooking homemade fish fingers for Emilia and vegetarian dishes for Greer, and being in charge of the master schedule" (444). As Greer's situation is far from common in contemporary American households, the lack of discussion of such exceptionality provides another example of how her feminism is perceived as naïve and guided by wishful thinking more than real commitment: "At least they had done what they could," (444) says the narrator about Greer and Cory's successful situation in their early thirties in this passage of internal focalization.

This is problematic because the novel's beginning guides the readers' interests toward a discussion of feminist issues, themselves in turn grounded in current discussions of intersectional structural inequalities, which are under-explored by the protagonist's focalizing. Unable to actively engage with her privilege and the lack of it for "many women, most women" (438), Greer's feminism reflects the same kind of outdated idea of feminism that focused on issues that mostly affect privileged women Zee associated with second-wave feminist Faith Frank. *The Female Persuasion*, as Reynolds notes, "is a perfect microcosm of the concerns of a very specific set of women—white, middle-aged or older, middle-class—who are grappling with the ways the conversation they began is changing" (2018, n. pag.). As the narrator remarks in the end, closing the circle on the episode of the sexual assault:

A man who degraded and threatened women made you want to do everything possible. Howl and scream; march; give a speech; call Congress around the clock; fall in love with someone decent; show a young woman that all is not lost, despite the evidence; change the way it feels to be a woman walking down a street at night anywhere in the world, or a girl coming out of a KwikStop in Macopee, Massachusetts, in daylight, holding an ice cream. She wouldn't have to worry about her breasts, whether they would ever grow, or grow big enough. She wouldn't have to think anything physical or sexual about herself at all unless she wanted to. She could dress the way she liked. She could feel capable and safe and free, which was what Faith Frank had always wanted for women. (448)

Greer's feminism, Wolitzer seems to convey through the ending, may still be outdated and far from flawless, but it can still do some good: "The book had

encouraged women to stay strong and loud. And certainly staying strong and loud was urgent” (439).

Greer’s character in the end is redeemed, and Wolitzer’s storytelling seems focused on offering a portrayal of some current standpoints in public discourses on feminism, rather than on assuming a clear-cut position on matters such as privilege or intersectionality. More importantly, the last quote highlights how, regardless of the different kinds of feminism people can embody, enemies are men who degrade and threaten women, not “unlikeable” feminists. Still, as Claire Fallon highlights, feminism should look different now, “less beholden to existing institutions, more suspicious of corporate messaging and #GirlBoss swag, more inclusive, not just centered around and represented by cis white women (especially high-achieving, well-packaged white women) but women of color, LGBTQ women and nonbinary people, poor women, disabled women” (2018, n. pag.). Finally, the contrast between Greer’s off-kilter self-awareness and the other characters’ judgments may also lead some readers to co-construct her character as ironic. In this sense, Wolitzer’s choice to deploy an antiheroine and punctuate the narrative with moments of estrangement seems at odds with post-postmodernist fiction’s interest in sincerity and author-reader intersubjectivity. Still, the narrative projects a figure of authorship as someone with a political agenda in dialogue with the cultural, historical, and digital context in which the novel emerges (e.g., the Me Too movement, the Women’s March, and fourth-wave feminism).

I conclude this analysis with a short description of Meg Wolitzer’s online presence, including her website <https://megwolitzer.com>, which contains a section with a list of her books, the links where to buy them, and a list of reviews; another section with a very short biography; and another with a list of events she is going to participate in and the links to her Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook account. Except for Instagram, however, none of these media engage with a kind of communication created to establish a more intimate or personal connection with her readers. Her Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/meg.wolitzer>) and Twitter (<https://twitter.com/MegWolitzer>) profiles engage with merely formal communications on events in which she has participated or will participate. Instead, on Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/MegWolitzer/>) she engages (since July 2017) in a more personal conversation, sharing pictures of her dog, her manuscript, concerts she has been to, her childhood, her teenage years, her and her husband as a young couple, and books she is reading. To share the latter, she often employs the hashtag #bookstagram, thus actually participating—like a reader “down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us,” to borrow David Foster Wallace’s words, rather than in an “abstract Olympian HQ” (2001, 136)—in the same phenom-

enon of community formation of readers posting photographs of books (see Murray 2018, 27). And she mostly chooses books written by female authors, revealing (or confirming) an activist stance toward gender issues.

This stance is further confirmed by explicit references to feminist anthologies such as “Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement” (1970) edited by Robin Morgan (in a post dated Nov. 9, 2017), or by declarations such as, “Is it just my *nonstop feminism*, or does the traffic light out my window resemble the cover of Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments*?” in a post dated October 30, 2019, and her participation in the Women’s March on January 20, 2018, as implied by her picture on the same day. The author’s personal image emerging from her Instagram profile is aligned with the image of her as the author of *The Female Persuasion*: someone actively engaged with feminist issues. Significantly, when Wolitzer shares posts related to *The Female Persuasion*, she uses not only the hashtag #bookstagram but also #thefemalepersuasion, so that, on the one hand, her posting on her own novel merges with the other readers who share about it employing the same hashtag, and, on the other, she is also encouraging such sharing. She authorizes it, which reminds us of Lauren Oyler’s comment that *The Female Persuasion*, “with broad strokes that assert nuance with the opposite of nuance,” seems written for online readers (2018, n. pag.). Readers who, in turn, may perform their reading experience by sharing online the way they actually received the narrative communication.

AUDIENCES’ DIGITAL EPISTEMIC EPITEXTS AS INSTANCES OF CO-CONSTRUCTION

Like for communicative digital epitexts, readers’ digital epitexts show an illocutionary force that can be mainly informative, performative, and interpretative. Readers perform readership by sharing what they read in the form of a review or of a picture of the book they are reading: as “social media is intrinsically focused on individuals—the ‘profile’ being the key unit of Web 2.0,” as Alice Marwick remarks (2013, 5), this contributes to the creation of their online identity (as people who read, as educated persons, etc.). Moreover, this performed readership serves to stir a conversation engaging other users/readers by informing them of certain thematic interests or offering interpretative clues. Thus, readers’ digital epitexts can guide other readers toward such thematic interests—fostering further discussion and further sharing—or even prevent the narrative communication from happening, as when the sharing and the discussions convey disappointment.

Encountering readers' digital epitexts before or during the actual occasion of narrative co-construction means readers' starting points (see Rabinowitz 1987) may be affected by the knowledge these epitexts contain, because this knowledge—made of the assumptions gathered through the various pieces of information, interpretations, and performances—may be activated in the actual audience's attempt to enter the authorial audience and reconstruct the ethics of the rhetorical purpose. Encountering readers' digital epitexts after the actual occasion of reading can still, indirectly, influence the narrative co-construction, because actual audiences may re-evaluate their own judgments and understanding of a narrative's purposes. Moreover, attending to readers' digital epitexts means attending to instances of readers' reconstructive efforts, so that the gesture outward of much contemporary fiction finds a corresponding movement of audiences gesturing inward toward the narrative. This gesture outward has been described, for instance, by Dawson with regard to contemporary omniscience (2013; see the introduction) and by Ellen McCracken with regard to literary narratives read on e-readers such as Kindles and iPads and their "centrifugal paratexts," which "draw readers outside the text proper" for instance to "engage with blogs, other readers' comments, or an author's web page" (2013, 106–7; see also chap. 1). While authors employ various resources, including omniscience and peritextual links to authors' websites, or explore themes concerning the digital as a way to gesture outward, thus also to the digital world where digital epitexts occur, readers' digital epitexts inevitably gesture toward the literary narrative whose blueprints stimulated their creation.

The nature of actual readers' online answers to the narrative is varied and dependent on the medium where the answer is shared. In practice, analyzing readers' digital epitexts may be challenging, not just because of the variety of platforms where these can appear (e.g., Goodreads, Tumblr, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter) but also with regard to which method to use. As I am interested in sample comments, reviews, and posts as examples of the way readers share their reading experience online, qualitative methods seem most appropriate. I looked at instances of co-construction of Wolitzer's *The Female Persuasion* as readers' digital epitexts on the Amazon-owned website Goodreads, "the world's largest site for readers and book recommendations," whose "mission is to help people find and share books they love," which count on 90 million members and 90 million reviews ("About Us," Goodreads). In addition, I looked at posts with the hashtag #thefemalepersuasion on Instagram and Twitter. These examples form part of the audience's ongoing paratextual knowledge that can be activated during the narrative co-construction, or they become instances of applications of co-construction in the actual world—

instances that other readers can pick up to juxtapose, reframe, or compare with their own co-construction. Following Beth Driscoll and DeNel Rehberg Sedo (2018), I used content analysis and coded one hundred reviews and one hundred Instagram posts/tweets employing #thefemalepersuasion, looking for recurring features. In the following, I provide a descriptive analysis and exemplary reviews and posts/tweets in order to understand the kind of paratextual knowledge these informative, performative, interpretative digital epistemes contain and how it can later be activated in the narrative act or employed to evaluate one's own co-construction compared with that of other audience members.

The Goodreads page of *The Female Persuasion* contains, at the time of writing, almost 5,000 reviews (almost all of them are in English). The book rating details mention that the average of 46,209 ratings is 3.58 (on a scale of 1–5). As a sample, I took the first one hundred reviews listed by popularity, namely, according to how many people “liked” and commented on them, which were written almost exclusively by female subjects, between 2017 and 2020. Among them, five users rated the novel one star, fifteen users rated it two stars, thirty users rated it three stars, twenty-four rated it four stars, and twenty-one rated it five stars. Overall, the sample displays a variety of readers who “liked” or “disliked” the novel. Unsurprisingly, many aspects presented in the previous analysis emerge in the reviews on Goodreads, too. Many reviews show disappointment by mentioning the lack of intersectionality in the kind of feminism portrayed and complain about the privileged life of most characters. This disappointment, if encountered before reading, may provide a lens through which subsequent evolving judgments on Greer and her feminist awakening are shaped. Both positive and negative reviews remark on this issue and go from “this is the epitome of why ‘white feminism’ is a problem,” by a user who rated the novel one star, to “it’s classic white feminist—and there’s a crucial awareness of that throughout the book as Greer questions whether they’re actually making a difference for those who need it most or merely enabling rich white women to feel good about their narrowly defined feminism,” by another user who rated it four stars (reviews shared on May 6, 2018, and on Apr. 17, 2018, Goodreads). Significantly, the main disappointment emerging in this sample of reviews concerns the fact that the “text never really engages with” the critical themes it presents (review shared on Jan. 14, 2018, Goodreads). The reason these readers found it difficult to participate in the authorial audience is that they feel the narrative wants to educate them on issues about which they are already knowledgeable. Reading about other readers’ disappointment may influence some readers’ expectations on the themes with which the novel engages or make others feel less alone in their own disappointment when confronted with similar experiences.

While many reviews signal the “hype” or “buzz” upon the release of Wolitzer’s novel, often linking it with the Me Too movement or the timely issues it deals with, most of the positive reviews explain what the book is about and praise Wolitzer’s prose. Some of these positive reviews are aware that “the feminism explored here is from a one dimensional and mainly white viewpoint, without the intersectionality of race and economics that makes this issue increasingly complex today” (review shared on Apr. 3, 2018, Goodreads). But this set of readers enjoyed the novel precisely because it offered them “many moments of interesting reflection” (review shared on Apr. 8, 2018, Goodreads). Thus, both groups of readers remark that *The Female Persuasion* does not offer a clear message or position on the political issues it presents, a remark that could be useful in framing the narrative co-construction as a not-too-politically involved novel. While one group values positively such lack of commitment, the other feels betrayed: “The book never really pins down what it wants to say,” says one reader in her review (review shared on Apr. 10, 2018, Goodreads). “Feminism,” she complains,

is the large topic hanging over all proceedings of this novel, but it never wants to explore any aspect of feminism outside of cursory surface-level ideas. Female autonomy, abortion rights, the pay gap, pornography, and internalized misogyny are named, but only so you know that the characters are talking about feminism. They never delve into these very real problems, almost as if the book doesn’t want to scare off anyone who isn’t intensely feminist. (n. pag.)

This “betrayal” might prevent those members of the actual audience from entering the authorial audience, or it may further accentuate the estranging effect of the novel. Others, instead, while recognizing that the book is “simply fiction with a feminist bent” (review shared on May 28, 2018, Goodreads), still praise Wolitzer’s writing style and the importance of the issues represented in the novel.

For both groups of readers (those who wrote an overall positive review and those who wrote an overall negative review), the book offers “a platform to discuss all the hot feminist topics” (review shared on Jan. 10, 2018, Goodreads), and some value this fact positively (for instance, mentioning future book club conversations), and others do not. Likewise, both generally positive and generally negative reviews state that Cory, Greer’s boyfriend, is one of the most interesting characters. However, while for some readers this only adds value to the narrative, for others it is another flaw, Cory being one of the few male characters in a novel about the female experience; Greer’s unlikability is mentioned quite often, even by those reviews that are overall quite

positive. But it is the fact that two main sets of instances of co-construction emerge from the Goodreads page on *The Female Persuasion* that may guide future readers—generalizing a little—to align their own reading experience with one of the two groups.

Moving on to a different forum where one can find readers' digital epitexts, on Instagram, #thefemalepersuasion appears, at the time of writing, in 3,833 posts (as a way of comparison, #theoverstory, the hashtag about Richard Powers's novel, which was likewise published in 2018, has 7,529 posts, while #harrypotterandthephilosophersstone is used in 148,025 posts). The first nine posts are ordered according to their popularity, while the others are listed in chronological order, from the most recent to the oldest. As a sample, again, I analyzed the first one hundred posts. Visually, all of the posts (with a few exceptions) portray the book proper, either by itself or in a stack of other books. Alternatively, the Instagram user is portrayed in the act of reading *The Female Persuasion*. Significantly, the books photographed are always printed books: this highlights the relevance of their materiality and the physical presence of the book as object (see the discussion on materiality in chap. 3). Languages other than English are frequent, and so is the use of other hashtags, such as #bookstagram, #feministbookclub, #readersofinsta, #booklover, #book addict, #bookworm, #currentlyreading, and so on.

While some posts offer an opinion or even a review, many others seem to share the picture of the book right after the book was bought or during the act of reading it. While the Goodreads reviews are meant to help fellow readers to decide whether to read Wolitzer's novel or not, or to discuss its value with other readers, on Instagram, users seem more interested in sharing the fact they were reading it, so as to participate in a collaborative narrative on reading and feel part of the community of #readersofinsta. Some users combine the picture and the hashtags with favorite quotes from the novel, while many ask other users for their thoughts on the novel. For instance, on January 25, 2020, a user asks in the caption accompanying the photo of *The Female Persuasion* on her nightstand: "I am reading The Female Persuasion right now and I'm not sold yet . . . which is so disappointing because I had such high hopes for this one. Did anyone read and love this one??" This Instagram user's profile only displays photos of books, that is, she created, through the social media, a visual blog around the books she reads, buys, or wants to read. She has more than ten thousand followers, but only around twenty users replied to her question, with none offering any further insights on the novel. Comments sometimes may actually engage in a dialogue, especially if the user offers a review, as in the case of a user whose post has been commented on by another user with: "Spot on review! I actually really enjoyed the plot but I found Greer very

frustrating. [. . .] The only feminism that mattered to her was the version of it in her life. However, I found Cory's story to be really interesting."

On Twitter, tweets employing the hashtag #thefemalepersuasion are again listed according to their popularity ("Top") or in chronological order ("Latest"). Those appearing in the "Top" list include tweets by Meg Wolitzer herself, the publishing house, Barnes & Noble book clubs from around the US, magazines that reviewed the novel, and actress Nicole Kidman announcing she will adapt and star in a film version of *The Female Persuasion*. The tweets appearing in the "Latest" list are more similar to the Instagram posts, in that they include pictures of the book as "currently reading," favorite quotes from the novel, or links to long reviews on personal blogs. Moreover, they include photos from Wolitzer's book presentations and other hashtags such as #supportwomen, #MeToo, #femaleempowerment, #feminism, and so on. Some tweets mention issues appearing on the Goodreads reviews, too, such as the interpretation: "I'm coming to [the] view that #TheFemalePersuasion would be stronger if it had cut out all the non-Greer section[s]" (Jun. 14, 2018). But, overall, the tweets are celebratory along the lines of: "Heard lots of good things about #TheFemalePersuasion by @MegWolitzer so I read it & it lived up to the buzz. Loved it. #fiction #goodbooks #reading" (Apr. 12, 2018, Twitter).

Encountering these readers' epitexts before reading the novel shapes the actual audience's starting points with regard to the themes it explores (e.g., feminism, mentorship, ambition), as well as their expectations toward certain issues (e.g., the lack of intersectionality) and toward the various characters and the possible unlikability of the protagonist. They can offer clues on what to focus on or which aspects are worth paying special attention to. Readers' digital epitexts contain historical and contextual clues (e.g., fourth-wave feminism, the Me Too movement) that contribute to the ongoing paratextual knowledge of the author and the novel available online. When readers encounter other readers' digital epitexts after having read the novel, they can also verify if their co-construction of the narrative is widely shared, if other readers have valued the same aspects or not, and they may also change their mind about their overall reading experience. They might be cued to take part in the same wide community of readers who perform their act of reading online. They may, in other words, be induced to continue the ongoing online conversation on the novel by sharing their own digital epitexts or by commenting on those of others.

Of course, the creation of communities of readers can happen around novels published in the past, too, or around authors who are not at all active online. But contemporary authors are aware of the sharing that readers can do. As Michele Zappavigna argues, devices such as the hashtag presuppose

“a virtual community of interested listeners” (2011, 791). And, as Wolitzer employs the hashtag #thefemalepersuasion on her own profiles, this might influence the way she, like other writers, constructs her narrative to convey a certain message to an audience who may or may not perform an answer to what they read. Wolitzer’s voice emerges from her novel through her use of post-postmodernist omniscience, and it establishes a starting point for further discussions on contemporary feminism. Readers, in turn, respond to her feminist discourse, providing a platform for other readers to consult “reviews” in dialogue with one another and with Wolitzer’s voice itself.

Readers’ digital epitexts like the ones analyzed above are, to some extent, all performative, and they all participate in the collective creation of a digital archive of reading experiences. They encourage future readers to actually read a certain novel and to possibly evaluate it, too, so as to respond and continue the online sharing of their reading experience. And this means that their narrative co-construction is affected by the awareness that there will (or might) be such sharing. In other words, the possibility of performing our readership online opens the communicative act to the possibility of extension beyond such a narrative act. As Zadie Smith remarks, “We’ve gotten into the habit of not experiencing the private, risky act of reading so much as performing our response to what we read. [. . .] By now, the idea of depriving this digital maw of its daily diet of ‘you’ has become inconceivable. Meanwhile, the closed circle that fiction once required—reader, writer, book—feels so antiquated we hardly see the point of it” (2019, n. pag.). But it is not the one singular act of sharing a reading experience online that makes this opening to further extensions possible: it is the collective gesture, the common habit, the idea of participating in a collective act so as to be, borrowing Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo’s words, “of service to other readers” (2018, 7).

In some platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter, the reading experience is predominantly performative. For Instagram, Thomas talks about the phenomenon of #bookstagram and #bookporn (2020, 75), where users share photographs of themselves currently reading books and tag them with the two hashtags, as well as others, so that (1) their posts participate in the ever-growing community forming through the hashtags, (2) they can engage in discussions about their reading experience through the comments that follow the caption in the post, and (3) they can stand as part of their online identity creation (see also Birke 2019). In other platforms, like Goodreads, more than the performance is “the description of a reading experience, especially an emotional experience” that is relevant (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2018, 10).

Here we find actual responses to the narrative with the function to inform or guide other readers in their future readings or as further reflections to confirm, challenge, or reframe their own co-constructions.

Thus, a narrative's digital epitexts, made by the audience, create the paratextual background of ongoing extensions, reframings, and performances that readers provide for other readers. As seen above, the audience's epistemic digital epitexts display an illocutionary functionality. The paratextual knowledge that accompanies it can be activated during the communicative act through its intersection with the reconstruction of the narrative's storyworld; the same paratextual knowledge can also be employed to compare and evaluate one's own reconstruction. The audience's digital epitexts contribute to both the creation of an (ephemeral) archive and a conversation, like communicative digital epitexts. And, like communicative digital epitexts, they take part in the contextual landscape of twenty-first-century fiction, especially when a narrative gestures outside the book proper toward the digital where the authorial discourse on sociopolitical issues continues as a conversation online—a conversation readers respond to through hashtags, tags, tweets, and reviews. In this sense, the "circle" made of author-text-readers is the opposite of closed, as Smith points out. The activity of co-building storyworlds and the actual world that reading narratives allow does extend beyond textual boundaries and can be modified by the digital background that comes with a novel published today. That the occasion of reading is always situated in the context of the audience members' social, political, and cultural values is not a novelty, but the advent of the digital world puts this context to the fore.

To conclude, two main sets of questions emerge: questions concerning activating the paratextual knowledge when audiences' digital epitexts are encountered before reading, and questions concerning evaluating one's own co-construction when audiences' digital epitexts are encountered after reading. Taking *The Female Persuasion* as example, the set of activating questions includes: Does learning about the lack of in-depth discussion of fourth-wave feminist issues prevent disappointment? Does learning about Greer being not easily likable influence readers' judgments of her negatively from the beginning, rather than, say, when she actually acts unwisely toward Zee and Cory? Does having access to these audience's epistemic digital epitexts weaken the completion of the narrative co-construction toward its overall purpose? Does learning that the ethical dimension of the overall narrative act is possibly problematic prevent the co-construction of the narrative? Then, the set of evaluating questions includes: Does seeing many readers pointing out Greer's naïve approach to feminism make actual readers reevaluate their own judgments of her? What effects, if any, does the confirmation that one's own recon-

struction is widely shared among other readers have on the completion of the narrative act beyond its textual boundaries? Attending to these questions means attending to some possible ways readers can assume different starting positions and apply the way they co-construct the narrative—the “something” that somebody tells—in the actual—albeit digital—world.

The reconstruction of *The Female Persuasion* certainly depends on the readers’ personal experience and knowledge of feminism and its realities in the present moment—but part of this knowledge may come from the sharing of epistemic digital epitexts from other audience members, who apply the values encountered in the novel to their own understanding of reality and share that application online. So, the audience’s epistemic digital epitexts may affect the assumptions readers may bring to their reconstructive efforts with regard to the feminist issues presented: when Greer’s problematic actions occur, the estranging effect they provoke would be even more intense if readers assume *The Female Persuasion* to be a fictional manifesto for fourth-wave feminism, while it might be less powerful if readers assume it to deal with that discourse only superficially. In this latter case, readers may focus on the portrayal of the antiheroine and co-build their narrative starting from this different premise. Instead, having overlooked the ambiguity in the ethical issues presented because, for instance, of a marginal knowledge of feminism, the novel may be reevaluated once that knowledge is expanded. This clearly does not happen only thanks to the audience’s epistemic digital epitexts; rather, as I tried to show throughout this book, the ease with which actual and potential readers can access digital paratexts makes their role central for contemporary acts of narrative co-construction.

While in this chapter I attended only to a selected group of the audience’s epistemic digital epitexts, it is far from me to argue that these are the only kinds. For instance, fan fiction could be another arena to tackle within this framework, as well as other types of epistemic digital epitexts, coming neither from the author nor the audience. But reading *The Female Persuasion* through the lens of the post-postmodern dominant and the framework of rhetorical paratextuality outlined here is exemplary of the cultural context in which post-postmodern fiction happens: a cultural context that promotes both the sharing of one’s reading experience and its dialogue with other readers’ sharing of their own reading experiences.

C O D A

It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries,
though we have learnt much about making machines,
we have learnt anything about making literature.

—Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction”

The aim of this study was to provide new vocabulary and a new theoretical framework to investigate the relation between author-audience interactions in the digital world and the poetics of contemporary literary narratives. To put the vocabulary and framework of rhetorical paratextuality to work, I analyzed four novels that display a post-postmodern sensitivity that is in dialogue with some of the ways digital epitexts are currently employed. These novels and the author-audience interactions in the digital world they promote are representative of some possible intersections between texts and paratexts in the digital age. Certainly, they are not meant to exhaust the variety of creative possibilities and narrative dynamics the rise of digital epitexts entails. This overview, however, would be even less complete if I didn't, in this concluding chapter, address the case of authors who purportedly avoid communicative, and also epistemic, digital epitexts. After all, in our digital media age, attending to narrative communication means necessarily addressing the media that participate in the creation, realization, and delivery of such narratives.

This book has explored some new synergies and communicative dynamics created by the intersection of digital media and contemporary fiction, arguing that these synergies and dynamics are part of the cultural context in which the post-postmodern novel emerges. The rise and ubiquity of digital media in today's literary ecology, therefore, make contemporary authors more aware of their media choices, so much so that a metamedial discourse about the mode

of existence of the novel in the digital age is always present. Communicative digital epitexts, in line with Genette's remark that the paratext is a functional instrument that helps the immutable text to adapt to the sociohistorical reality of the text's public ([1987] 1997, 408), call attention to this need to adapt to today's sociohistorical reality by projecting a self-reflexive discourse on the narrative media/medium in the communicative act.

Some authors, as I showed, engage with a metamedial discourse by employing unconventional peritexts that foreground the book's materiality, or by attending to the changes digital media elicit thematically, guiding the readers' thematic interests toward the use of new media and the changes they bring to the arts, including literature. A recurrent theme in twenty-first-century fiction is indeed the role of new digital technology in people's life: Kristian Shaw, for instance, sees novels such as *JPod* (2006) by Douglas Coupland, *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) by Gary Shteyngart, *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers, *Bleeding Edge* (2013) by Thomas Pynchon, and *Book of Numbers* (2015) by Joshua Cohen as responding to the "rapid acceleration of digital communicative technologies" within contemporary globalization (2017, 14; see also Schaefer and Starre's edited volume *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture: Medium, Object, Metaphor* [2019]). A novel may engage with these themes politically and, in fact, an investment in political issues is a characterizing feature of contemporary fiction, as I argued in the previous chapters (see also Caren Irr's 2014 study on the geopolitical novel).

Other contemporary authors reflect on the mode of existence of the novel in the digital age exploiting communicative digital epitexts more or less willfully. Indeed, the author's choice to employ digital epitexts emphasizes metamedially the way a narrative's storyworld can materially exceed its preferred medium of delivery (e.g., print/electronic book). The use of these digital epitexts implies, in other words, for the narrative communication, a possible openness to further change (e.g., the disappearance or the addition of narrative content delivered through paratexts). By opening the narrative to other media, communicative digital epitexts multiply the occasions of the actual audience's participation in the authorial audience, as seen for *Moonglow* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. While some readers will enter the authorial audience when reading the printed/electronic book, others will do it when reading communicative epitextual material online. Communicative digital epitexts make the narrative communication occurring through the print/electronic book open to further change, because its medial boundaries are open to possible extensions in the digital world, where digital epitexts are delivered through a different medium.

Communicative digital epitexts extend the narrative communication outside the medial boundaries of the book proper, but they are also not fixed, subject to the author's future choices on their status and dependent on the inherent ephemerality of online digital media, which can become obsolete, be deleted, or be revised, extended, and reorganized. The fluid quality of digital epitexts makes their presence in the narrative communication a factor favoring an author-reader exchange always possibly ongoing or incomplete. Because communicative digital epitexts change over time, the narrative communication itself may change over time. Yet, digital epitexts, and epistemic ones especially, are so widespread that their presence is almost taken for granted, so much so that one could ask which writer today can actually still opt to opt out. Social media added to cultural capital and social capital—as Kate Eichhorn observes while analyzing the phenomenon of Insta-Artists and Insta-Poets like Rupi Kaur—*content* capital: the ability to create content about oneself online (2022).

Within the current changing literary media context, the absence of digital epitexts is the exception rather than the rule. The absence of communicative or authorial epistemic digital epitexts, in fact, implies a metamedial discourse, too, for example, a refusal of digital epitexts' underlying openness to further change, possibly associated with political overtones, such as a stance against the impact digital media have on people's lives, or the corporations that own them. In rhetorical terms, I believe this absence to be revelatory of a privative choice. And by privative choice, I mean—drawing on Wayne Booth, in turn building on William James—the practice of assuming that authors purposely exclude the rhetorical resources that they do not choose to use.¹ Hence, while some authors draw on digital epitexts and engage further with their narrative's storyworld and the author-reader communication online, others may choose not to use digital epitexts as a way to refuse a further ephemeral and ongoing conversation. Especially if their novels, like the examples above, engage thematically with how digital media are affecting cultural and interpersonal relations.

For example, if a novel's purposive design is a critique of social media, the author's choice to deploy digital epitexts through social media could add a layer of ambiguity to the text, because that choice may seem in contradiction with the narrative's ideological agenda. Conversely, the choice not to employ

1. James, says Booth, “writes of the ‘privative use’ of concepts, the practice of assuming that they exclude what they do not affirm” (1986, 476). This argument does not regard paratextual resources exclusively. Rather, potentially, any kind of rhetorical resource could be used in a privative way.

digital epitexts becomes a way to provide readers with a confirmation of the ethical values presented in the text and through which they have built their expectations. Thus, the connection that is established through a combined use of textual and digital resources when communicative digital epitexts are employed, can also be drawn when these are absent, if that absence bears relevance for the narrative communication. Using digital epitexts privatively is not common but may be indicative of the creative potentiality that lies at the intersection of literary narratives and digital media. In the following section, I address the absence of communicative digital epitexts as a privative, rhetorical choice in Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2010).

“SOCIAL ENOUGH:” DAVE EGGERS’S *THE CIRCLE* AND THE PRIVATIVE USE OF DIGITAL EPITEXTS

While a novel like *A Visit from the Goon Squad* reveals a not-so-obvious ethical stance toward new technologies (see chap. 3), Dave Egger’s use of a satirical mode makes it very clear, from the beginning of *The Circle*, where the narrative stands as far as contemporary network culture and its corporations are concerned. The novel tells the story of Mae Holland, a woman in her early twenties who moves to Silicon Valley to take up her dream job in the world’s most important high-tech corporation, the Circle. The Circle is a relatively young company that in less than six years has managed to buy out Facebook, Twitter, and Google and create a platform called “TruYou,” which combines in just one account all of our social media profiles, payment systems, passwords, email accounts (Eggers 2013, 21). “My God, Mae thought. It’s heaven,” is the opening sentence, from which the description of such “heaven” ensues:

The campus was vast and rambling, wild with Pacific color, and yet the smallest detail had been carefully considered, shaped by the most eloquent hands. On land that had once been a shipyard, then a drive-in movie theater, then a flea market, then blight, there were now soft green hills and a Calatrava fountain. And a picnic area, with tables arranged in concentric circles. And tennis courts, clay and grass. And a volleyball court, where tiny children from the company’s daycare center were running, squealing, weaving like water. *Amid all this was a workplace*, too, four hundred acres of brushed steel and glass on the headquarters of the most influential company in the world. The sky above was spotless and blue. (1; emphasis added)

The hyperbolic—and parodic—description of the workplace (everything is so perfect that the sky cannot but be spotless too) immediately sets the tone of

the narrative as satire. This is further confirmed by the image of “tiles with imploring messages of inspiration” such as “Dream,” “Participate,” “Find Community,” “Innovate,” “Imagine,” “Breathe” (1–2), whose banality clashes with the importance these words seem to have for the company. Equally satirical are the names given to the roles of the Circle’s employers, for example, Annie, Mae’s friend from college, a member of the “Gang of 40” (14) who managed to grant Mae a job position in the company where she is a “Director of Ensuring the Future” in the “Old West” (3). *The Circle*, as Zara Dinnen puts it, is a novel “about the culture of software, which does not explicitly say anything about the culture of software. In this way it mimics precisely the contemporary condition of living with digital media” to satirize “Silicon Valley’s obsession with simplicity” (2018, 114).

Because of Eggers’s satirical mode, it is pretty obvious from the beginning that the Circle and its CEOs are the villains of the storyworld. Moreover, hinting at the genre of science fiction where ciphers or types are quite common (see Stockwell 2005, 518–20), *The Circle* employs archetypical characters such as the Three Wise Men in charge of the company. These are Bailey, the “happy and earnest” (24) public face of the Circle; Ty, the young, nerdy, creative mind who will eventually try to avoid the “completion” of the Circle, that is, when “everyone will be tracked [. . .] with no possibility of escape” (481); and Stenton, the ruthless CEO who monetized Ty’s utopia, having spotted right away the connection between “work and politics, and between politics and control” (484). Just like they are the villains of the narrative, Mae’s parents and her ex-boyfriend Mercer—as the only “human” characters who can and do prefer to live detached from the Circle’s controlling media—are easily identifiable as the “good guys,” who are not antisocial, but “social enough” (133). Between these two kinds of archetypical characters are Mae’s fellow coworkers, the zombie-like Circlers that follow the villains’ preachments without a shadow of a doubt that interests like money, power, and control are what actually motivate them. Most of the Circle’s employees, like Mae, understand “the product of the company” they work for only insofar as they understand the way “it engenders social relations and individual being”; they do not “need or want knowledge of the material systems” that they serve and that serve them (Dinnen 2018, 110).

The audience thus co-constructs Mae’s journey into the Circle, hoping she will, sooner or later, understand that the Circle is no utopia and that she will eventually, given the occasion, try to unveil the hypocrisy behind the “cult taking over the world,” as Mercer calls the tech-corporation (258). *The Circle* guides the readers’ mimetic interests toward the effects of social media and the way companies like the Circle frame their products in terms of “technological determinism and digital-utopianism” (Dinnen 2018, 105), so much so that people do not actually realize what is at stake any time they do use circle-like

technologies. For instance, when the Circle starts selling “SeeChange” cameras (they are cheap and very small, and the images they record are instantly shared and broadcasted in the Circle’s network), the Circlers wholeheartedly believe that they are invented to reduce the crime rate and advance democracy against totalitarian regimes. As Bailey declares: “There needs to be accountability. Tyrants can no longer hide. There needs to be, and will be documentation and accountability [. . .] all that happens must be known” (67). The Circlers’ unawareness of the consequences of the widespread use of such cameras reflects David Lyon’s remark that “surveillance occurs in the most high-tech ways and at the pinnacles of power but depends on the humdrum, mundane communications and exchanges that we all make using online media and communication devices” (2015, vii; see also Lyon 2007). Indeed, Eggers’s narrative is realistic in a way because, as Dinnen notes, in our “black-box culture, private corporations run complex proprietary algorithms, which a very small number of people understand” (2018, 108).

In order to show the naiveté of the consumers in this regard, Eggers presents readers with this young, not particularly tech-savvy character, whose naiveté, as Dinnen highlights, is performative (2018, 110). Mae is described as an everywoman who is simply happy to work in a young and exciting environment. She is not even particularly interested in social media before arriving at the Circle. However, the technology she has to use every day—about six screens on her desk, a phone, and a tablet—will soon turn her into a human deprived of her ability to empathize and connect with other people. As Francisco Collado-Rodríguez puts it, Mae’s “personality is taken over by the technological extensions she has to use in her job” (2021, 89). But while I agree with Roy Sommer’s remark that “the novel’s narrative design is characterized by the sort of dynamic transitions from heterodiegetic narration to psychonarration and internal focalization, which are typical of social realism” (2017, 59), I believe that Eggers’s intended audience is not comprised of readers “like Mae,” who are “likely to be appalled by the cynical world of contemporary corporate culture” and are “surprised to see how the company’s ideology is put into practice,” as Sommer contends (59). Rather, the narrative audience is guided in the uncomfortable position of reading mimetically about someone whose choices cannot but be judged naïve: the narrative audience hopes Mae has a choice, but what Eggers wants to show is that she does not. In fact, she is doomed.

The actual and narrative audiences are supposed to feel uncomfortable while co-constructing a version of our reality in which people—like Mae—are not able to see things clearly and, as a consequence, they are—like Mae—doomed to fail as humans. Mae’s journey is a quick descent into a totalitarian

system she helps create, encouraged by a utopian desire to make the world a better place. One of the turning points in the plot indeed occurs after one of the few episodes in which the narrative space trespasses the limits of the Circle's campus, that is, when Mae ventures kayaking in the Pacific at night, trespassing the gate of the kayak rental shop where she had been a client for a long time. Caught through SeeChange cameras, Mae, ashamed and worried about losing her job, decides to "go transparent," that is, to record and broadcast every moment of her life.

The kind of general unawareness that today allows private commercial companies to "hold potentially more information on their customers than any state institution" (Booker 2005, 127) is the same that in Eggers's novel will lead to a state of ubiquitous surveillance. Politicians will be constantly spied on, chips will be implanted into children to prevent sexual abuse, while everyone is just dazed by the consumer appeal of the various products: by employing new media and communication devices, individuals obliviously participate in the creation of a dystopian society. Reminiscent of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the Circle supposedly works to make the world a better place and adopts slogans, such as "secrets are lies," "sharing is caring," and "privacy is theft" (303; see Orwell 1961, 4). Similar to the "epic environmental dystopianism" of much twenty-first-century fiction (Boxall 2013, 217), then, the dichotomy utopia/dystopia couldn't be less unequivocal: the technological progress aimed at creating a utopian "imaginary ideal society that dreams of a world in which the social, political and economic problems of the real present have been solved" (Booker 2005, 127) creates instead a dystopia: "an imagined world in which the dream has become a nightmare" (127). Such a nightmare is caused by the various digital innovations sold by the Circle and branded as essential for people's well-being and for the progress of the human race.

Eggers suggests that together with people's growing engagement with online media and communication devices comes surveillance systems and loss of privacy, and he critiques the utopian ideology that accompanied the beginning of the digital revolution and that hasn't been supplanted yet. Not so much within the internet pioneers themselves—Jaron Lanier, for example, has published widely against the ideology that "promotes radical freedom on the surface of the web" (2010, 3)—but within the main internet companies whose mantra is often to provide technological progress to make the world a better place. For instance, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's founder and CEO, on more than one occasion stated that Facebook's mission is to "make the world more open and *transparent*," presumably serving society's interests, not to become more profitable and powerful (van Dijck 2013, 15; emphasis added). And Sergey Brin, the cofounder of Google, as Marina Ludwigs observes, "according

to Wikipedia, said that ‘knowledge is always good, and certainly always better than ignorance,’ a philosophy that is summed up by Google’s mission statement ‘Organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful’ (2015, n. pag.). Eggers satirizes these kinds of declarations and has the Circle transforming America into a totalitarian surveillance state with everyone’s blessing. The Circle, Ludwigs remarks, “tries to convince humanity that *transparency* is a force for progress because it brings knowledge, and knowledge is an unqualified good” (2015, n. pag.; emphasis added). Indeed, echoing Zuckerberg’s words, the Circle’s mantra invites its users to be more *transparent*, but transparency is just the sugarcoated synonym for surveillance: by providing the technology that allows people to record and broadcast every moment of their life, the Circle encourages the creation of a surveillance state, where politicians will commence, one after the other, to record and broadcast their lives in the name of democracy.

The Circle aims to show that it is this technology that, by keeping everyone happy like *Brave New World*’s soma (Huxley 1932), will lead to a world with no personal freedom. The narrative audience observes Mae giving up her life (she moves to a living space in the dorms of her workplace), her family (her parents ask her not to contact them unless privately, after she accidentally broadcasts them having sexual intercourse), her friends (she grows estranged from both Mercer and Annie), and personal hobbies (e.g., her kayaking in solitude) without ever reflecting on her choices or questioning the supposedly good intentions of the Circle; not even when Mercer dies and Annie goes into a coma as a consequence of two of the company’s “utopian” technologies. (When Mercer tells Mae that he will go North hoping not to be found, she uses a software called “SoulSearching” to find him. In a desperate attempt not to be stopped by the Circle’s users, who indeed find him, Mercer loses control of his car and dies. Her friend Annie falls into a stress-induced coma after another software called “PastPerfect” finds and disseminates information about her ancestors being, among other things, slave owners.) The ending sees Mae, now left without her friends and her family, and constantly accompanied by the communication filtered by the technology she wears, still believing the Circle’s technologies to be good and able to make the world a better place.

Eggers’s fictional discourse couldn’t be more explicit: together with people’s growing engagement with online media and communication devices comes surveillance systems and loss of privacy. And he conveys his communicative purpose by relying on the reader’s ability to negatively judge the lack of critical understanding in Mae and the other Circlers so as to show how such technology is changing their interpersonal relationships and their sense of humanity—in other words, to show how such technology is making

them oblivious. Mae and the other Circlers don't need Orwell's Newspeak to be deprived of any form of critical thinking: they have wearable computing which, as Steve Mann and Joseph Ferenbok point out, "can turn every wearer into an information production factory—a surveillance-capable post-cyborgian human" (2013, 29). Indeed, as the narrative progresses, Mae is more and more connected, and she will have more and more followers, online. But in her real life, she is lonelier and lonelier, unable to create new bonds and bound to destroy the ones she has. The narration of oblivious characters elicits the readers' mimetic responses to question these characters as versions of themselves: are we/these characters human, posthuman, or cyborgs? Does online communication make individuals actually more alone? If the ability to communicate and connect in person is lost in favor of online exchanges that offer easy validation, are people bound to lose their sense of humanity? These questions undoubtedly reinforce the narrative's overall ethical purpose and Eggers's cautionary tale on the future of human relationships.

The narrative, therefore, successfully makes the audience uncomfortable when mimetically confronted with the characters being too comfortable with the way they use digital media, that is, with no concern regarding the consequences of such an acritical use. However, being that the characters are so clearly functional to the author's cautionary tale—the explicit warning against the power acquired by the private companies that invent, develop, and sell new technologies thanks to the huge amount of information users give away in order to use their services—the balance in the double consciousness of the reading experience (Phelan 2017, 70) is off-kilter. The audience is uncomfortable co-constructing Mae's journey because readers understand that her naiveté is more functional to Eggers's underlying cautionary tale than "the illusion that the characters are acting autonomously" (Phelan 2017, 70). Indeed, Dinnen considers *The Circle* as "the statement on a topic" (2018, 115), and Sommer includes it in a subgenre of the social novel called the "techlash novel" (2017, 53).

Eggers's interest in educating "readers about contemporary social concerns while articulating means of response to the stresses of globalized life" (Mousseau 2016, 256) is renowned. Through its didacticism, *The Circle* confirms Liesbeth Korthals Altes's argument for Eggers's posture as a "sincerely committed writer" (2014, 54), as the narrative explicitly warns that the only antidote to a future where obliviousness rules is being, unlike Mae and the Circlers, critically aware of the utopian ideology that allows technology companies to acquire more and more information about individuals, monetize such information, and change the way people interact with one another. Korthals Altes's idea also resonates with what Bran Nicol highlights:

Eggers himself seems to typify the kind of professional writer this figure has evolved into in the twenty-first century: one who is aware of himself as rooted in the social world, performing a social function he reflects on continually, and producing a socially committed kind of fiction. The awareness of the message of his fiction Eggers reveals in interviews[;] its capacity to respond to broader social issues[] underlines the impression that his political awareness and activism are not supplements to his career as a writer of fiction and biography but part of the same socially-engaged mission. (2019, 314)

Nicol's impression, in other words, is supported by the ethos clues of Eggers's public persona as a socially engaged, committed writer that find correspondence in his social novels.

Because of his social and political commitment both in his fictional and extra-fictional discourses, I believe that Eggers's rejection of communicative digital epitexts signals authenticity and sincerity, a further proof of the consistency of his authorial discourses. For example, he favors a "three-dimensional" correspondence with his readers, rather than one through social media. On his website (<https://daveeggers.net>), a repository of his novels, short stories, essays, and nonprofit engagements, he says: "To write a letter to Dave, mail it to P.O. Box 410987, San Francisco, CA 94141. To receive a reply, please include your own *three-dimensional* mailing address" (emphasis added). Through the absence of an online engagement with those social media (and their companies) he warns his readers against in *The Circle*, he shows a consistency in his fictional and extrafictional discourses that intensifies his social and political commitment.

Significantly, the use of communicative digital epitexts shows the willingness for authors to connect further with their audience, but in Eggers's case, the privative use of such resource may show a similar intention. The absence of communicative digital epitexts becomes a way for the actual and narrative audience to actively engage with the reconstruction/revision of the novel's overall ethical message. If, prior to the occasion of reading the novel, actual readers encounter no communicative digital epitexts, they may still build on such absence in their reconstructive efforts, establishing a continuity between Eggers's fictional and extrafictional authorial discourses. The starting assumptions readers employ to co-construct *The Circle* are conditioned by this piece of paratextual knowledge created through absence, and so is the ensuing evaluation that may happen afterword, when readers bring forth their co-constructive efforts in their actual world. The actual audience may judge Eggers's choice not to extend his narrative through digital material as revealing of a "refusing" (see also the discussion on Egan's "embracing" attitude in chap. 3) posture toward an extended, online author-reader communication.

Such an assumption may affect the co-construction of *The Circle*'s purpose as a cautionary tale because of the comparison between Eggers's message about digital media in *The Circle*, with the refusing posture his choice to avoid digital epitexts seems to entail: if not to opt out like his character Mercer—Eggers has, after all, a website—at least to avoid any sort of interactions between the fictional narratives he creates and the digital world.

Eggers's privative choice, however, still possibly extends the narrative communication precisely because it offers a confirmation of the sincerity of the author's commitment to the didacticism about people's and society's growing involvement with digital media presented in his novel. So, the privative use of digital epitexts still entails communicative value in dialogue with the shift of sensibility apparent in twenty-first-century fiction that promotes earnestness. Yet, one may wonder if this is just another example of what Kate Eichhorn considers the counterpoint to Barthes's death of the author, that is, "a cultural sphere where nothing remains but a cult of celebrity being played out on digital platforms" (2022, n. pag.), in this case through a conscious and revelatory *absence* from digital platforms. Certainly, Eggers's choice seems a continuation of his "statement on a topic" emerging from *The Circle*, but it is also a choice his social and cultural capital allows him to make, while emerging writers may not have the same privilege. Indeed, this is just a further example of the extensiveness of the current interchanges between digital media and literary narratives—an example that shows the creative potentiality of this nexus in reverse. Indeed, *The Circle* underlies a metamedial discourse even if digital epitexts are not employed, because their absence entails a specific choice about the mode of existence of the novel in the digital age.

To conclude, co-constructing *The Circle* means accepting that Eggers is willing to forgo the illusion of a coherent storyworld for the purpose of his cautionary tale. This means, in other words, accepting Eggers's cautionary tale as the precondition to the reconstruction of the storyworld and its characters, who are clearly functional to the author's purpose. But the narrative needs to be perceived as an earnest attempt at communicating such a cautionary tale for the successful transmission of the novel's message. And this earnestness is evident from the urgency of Eggers's satire, an urgency that makes him sacrifice "the illusion that the characters are acting autonomously" (see Phelan 2017, 70). The absence of communicative digital epitexts establishes a continuity in Eggers's fictional and extrafictional discourses while underpinning the novel's earnestness.

This book argues that understanding the functioning of digital paratextual elements is necessary to attend to narrative fiction in the digital age. Vari-

ous online practices involving authors and readers sharing and interacting through the internet and social media intersect with a post-postmodernist dominant interested in sincerity, relationality, and intersubjectivity. To explore the way these digital practices are employed in the communicative act between authors and readers, I argued for a reconsideration of the concept of paratext within the framework of rhetorical theory. This reconsideration allows us to distinguish between communicative and epistemic paratexts. Communicative paratexts are rhetorical resources that the author may employ for communicative purposes and, as such, they concern the communicative act between author and audience *for/around a particular narrative*. Their functions depend also on the interaction these paratexts have with the other resources employed in the narrative, including recurrent modes of the current shift of poetics succeeding postmodernism, like the blurring of the fiction/nonfiction distinction, the use of omniscient narrators, metamediality, the return to characters, and so forth. Epistemic paratexts, instead, describe those paratextual elements that are not resources of narrative communication. The distinction between communicative and epistemic paratexts allows us to further distinguish digital epitexts—that is, paratexts appearing not in proximity to the printed text but rather in the digital world—and to explore their functionality.

A further distinction, which interests both communicative and epistemic paratexts, shows a functionality linked with the temporality of the paratextual message delivery and the communicative dynamics that the paratextual element elicits. There are at least four situations resulting from whether the readers encounter the paratextual element before or after the narrative communication takes place. As I have illustrated in this book, (1) if readers encounter a communicative paratextual element before or when the narrative communication takes place, they may incorporate it into their efforts to reconstruct the narrative storyworld according to the author's blueprints; (2) if they encounter a communicative paratextual element after the narrative communication took place, they may assume that paratextual material is an extension of the communicative act and/or employ it to revise their reconstructive efforts; (3) if readers encounter an epistemic paratextual element before or during their reading experience, they may activate the paratextual knowledge it contains during their reconstructive efforts; and, finally, (4) if they encounter an epistemic paratextual element after their reading experience, they may employ the paratextual knowledge it contains to evaluate the result of their reconstructive efforts.

Building on these distinctions and communicative dynamics, I have shown how authors may use digital epitexts in connection with the other rhetorical resources employed in their novels, often to support their overall purposes.

Communicative digital epitexts may extend the communicative act beyond its medial boundaries and multiply the occasions of narration before and after the actual occasion of reading, allowing authors to connect with actual or potential readers to create further narrative threads that may confirm information to be found in their narrative fiction, or to offer additional material belonging to their narrative's storyworld, and allow readers to actively engage with the reconstruction/revision of a novel's message, ethical or otherwise. Because the use of digital epitexts entails these possible extensions, some authors employing them may reveal an embracing posture toward an online author-reader communication. This embracing posture is in contrast with the refusing posture of authors whose novels *are not* open to further change, as seen in this concluding chapter through Eggers's example. Digital epitexts are indeed always possibly open to further change because of their ephemerality, inherent to single digital epitexts as well as the platforms that contain them. This ephemerality may appear as an inconvenience when investigating digital epitexts, but such a quality can (and should) be recognized and accepted as such, rather than be a reason to dismiss digital material in the first place. This is true for all the novels analyzed in this book—and I can only assume it will become even truer in the future when further changes will have happened to both the communicative and the epistemic digital epitexts presented here.

Ephemerality applies to both communicative and epistemic digital epitexts, but while communicative digital epitexts are becoming a self-reflexive mode of twenty-first-century fiction that both extends into the digital world the narrative act occurring at the textual level and reflects on such an act of communication, epistemic digital epitexts may seem less related to contemporary narratives. Both audiences' and authors' digital epistemic epitexts, however, are able to influence the paratextual knowledge that frames past, present, and future narrative communications that occur when audiences read a given literary narrative. Thus, the analysis of audiences' and authors' digital epistemic epitexts complements my rhetorical theory of digital paratextuality as a way to start mapping out how the reading experiences—digitally and collectively performed and archived, sometimes responding to the digital material (related or not to their novels) authors share online—are still able to affect the narrative communication. Epistemic digital epitexts do not contribute *directly* to a switching of dominant or a new poetics after postmodernism, but they still take part in the contextual landscape of twenty-first-century fiction, especially when a narrative gestures outside the book proper toward the digital where authorial discourses may continue as a conversation online—a conversation readers may respond to through photographs, hashtags, tweets, and reviews. Narrative fiction in the digital age exists together with a digital

paratextual background of ongoing extensions, reframings, and performances that readers provide for other readers and the personal material authors share, together with a dialogic conversation conducted online that can contribute to the audience's co-constructive efforts by creating connections between an author figure readers have come to know through the author's online activities and the author figure they take as the one communicating through the textual resources and the dominant interests governing a given narrative communication.

All this digital mesh may seem to complicate the functioning of the narrative communication between authors and readers. And perhaps it does, creating new fragments both agents may want to put together in their communicative exchanges. Certainly, new dynamics are emerging, especially within this initial stage of post-postmodernist fiction. With no pretense of completeness, this book has started exploring them, providing a theory and some tools to better navigate what it means to experience fiction in the digital age.

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