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Losers, Lovers, and Loners: Internet Identities and Parasocial Relationships in Esther Yi's *Y/N* and Tony Tulathimutte's *Rejection*

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This thesis is dedicated to the chronically online, unmedicated,
and otherwise objectionable rats who were inexplicably
granted access to the ivory tower. Here's to the rest of our lives.

Introduction: Parasocial Relationships, Screen Culture, and Alternative Conceptions of the Internet Novel

Allow me to take you, briefly, down the path of a TikTok feed. Your first video: an unboxing of an alternative wearable tech device advertised to provide similar if not better quality than the original. The second, an edit of a Japanese anime character; the third, a woman advising her audience on how to handle mold outbreaks in the home. A clip of a comedian interviewing a politician; a fifteen-second loop of a river flowing through a sun-bathed forest with a caption encouraging the viewer to stop and breathe, which may or may not be AI-generated; five Korean American influencers lip-syncing to a popularly misheard verse of PSY's "Gangnam Style." At the conclusion of this final video, a multiple choice survey appears, issued by TikTok itself: *How do you feel about the video you just watched?*

Perhaps a better question: How do you feel about the people you just met?

Scrolling through a social media feed collapses distance while multiplying encounters, producing the sensation of proximity without the conditions of relationship. What appears as connection is heavily mediated, where we witness others in their vulnerability — often a constructed version of themselves, a fantasy built to appeal to the masses — while remaining unexposed ourselves. This asymmetry, constituted of simultaneous intimacy and distance, forms the basis of what has been theorized by psychologists Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl as the parasocial relationship, now intensified and transformed by the Internet. The Internet thus offers a form of relational safety and refuge, minimizing the risk of one's own vulnerability and therefore the risk of rejection, remaining safe from the imperfections of a true relationship or connection. To state it explicitly, safety within the comfort of fantasy comes at the cost of true connection.

The conditions of digital mediation have reshaped what it means to know and to love someone. While mass media began to reshape structures of intimacy, recognition, and relationality, the Internet has transformed it. David Foster Wallace argues in his essay on American television culture, "E Unibus Pluram," that television constructs a form of intimacy grounded in asymmetry, where performers simulate naturalness while remaining fundamentally inaccessible to their audience. The viewer is thus positioned as a voyeur, invited into scenes of apparent authenticity while remaining physically and relationally separate from the performers.[1] This dynamic forms the basis of what Horton and Wohl term the parasocial relationship, a one-sided bond in which viewers experience a sense of connection with the person that they view without reciprocal recognition or understanding.[2] This thesis extends their frameworks into the digital age, questioning what happens to the audience when the static, one-way logic of the TV is replaced by the interactive, networked structures of the Internet, when the screen no longer simply displays but invites response, when the boundaries between viewer and viewed-upon blur, even as asymmetry persists.

Interactivity is demanded online, drawing a marked difference from the screen culture that Wallace writes of the TV, and yet there remains a blockage that renders it effectively one-way. There is a difference between flipping through channels with a remote, several feet away from the TV, and directly touching the screen of your phone to scroll through a selection of videos that an algorithm has selected specifically for you while "liking" a post every so often to indicate your engagement. The personality host that speaks at the camera is different from the

[1] Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 13, no. 2, Summer 1993, pp. 151–194

[2] Horton, Donald, and R. Richard Wohl. "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance." *Psychiatry*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1956, pp. 215–229.

celebrity livestreaming to their fans and responding as casually to their comments in the chatroom as if they were on a FaceTime call with a friend; TikTok, in this world, directly asks you, the user, for feedback on the content that it feeds you. While the TV places the viewer in the role of passivity, the Internet grants its audience a degree of agency. One can now befriend people from across the world through online communication channels; a celebrity becomes as accessible as a friend with the ability to write them a message to their social media account. But even as the celebrity speaks to their audience, as the audience attempts to speak to the celebrity, the screen prevents true connection from forming. The celebrity remains untouchable, physically and emotionally distant from their audience, while the audience can exist only as a mass, a disparate swarm, and never as distinguishable individuals. Interaction thus produces the illusion of connection but does not realize it.

Literature, particularly fiction, proves the most optimal avenue for these specific interrogations of screen culture and the Internet. Because this topic is involved deeply with sensations of the body and a character's internal state, to examine similar stories that operate by means of the screen would be to obscure portions of the truth I am attempting to excavate. To use narratives located in the form of the screen would be to participate in the masking of truth; written literature can bear witness to the screen and expose what it obscures. My method reflects that of the novels I have chosen to examine, which center characters that employ the act of fiction or fantasy writing, or outright lying through the written form, in their attempts to articulate their realities. The line between fiction and deception is key to this thesis and my method of examining these novels. The Internet and screen may provide the means by which these characters realize or encounter their desires, but it is through literature, the act of writing non-realities, that they dissect the particulars of their truths.

When discussing novels about the Internet, Patricia Lockwood's 2021 debut novel, *No One Is Talking About This,* is impossible to avoid. The book depicts the experience of a woman going viral online during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent upending of her life. Lockwood's assertions are clear: the Internet has a deeply negative effect on the protagonist's life, one that would disappear if she stopped using it. But Lockwood's version of the Internet is a predominantly white liberal one and thus not applicable to the majority of online experiences. Writer Brandon Taylor, in an essay discussing the genre of the Internet novel, claims that this genre has become defined by the particular cultural forces within Lockwood's novel and largely ignores spaces of safety, community, and refuge that can be found away from or within the chaos. His essay argues that the Internet is being treated by its genre as a force of moral corruption, one that people should ultimately turn away from. But the Internet is not exclusively white and liberal, nor is it necessarily, inherently corrupting.

I thus turn to two Asian American novelists that have, together, written three Asian American characters engaging with forms of Asian mass media, with the intent of complicating the existing definitions of Internet novels, or novels that write about the Internet. Esther Yi and Tony Tulathimutte draw less of a binary distinction between online and offline spaces and relationships, treating both the offline and online as capable of hosting forms of reality and fantasy to varying degrees. Yi writes a Korean American woman living in Berlin who is obsessed with a K-pop idol whom she knows only through a screen; Tulathimutte writes two Thai-American siblings living in the United States that escape the limitations of their realities by means of the Internet's promise of infinity. These are characters whose very existences are tied to the Internet; their online world is just as real as their offline world, if not more so, a physical space where the body cannot exist.

Lockwood's narrator can theoretically leave at any time; she *should,* Lockwood poses, leave as soon as possible. Unlike Lockwood, Yi and Tulathimutte do not want you to get offline because the online world is evil; going offline is hardly even considered as an option because of how intertwined the online is with the offline. The Internet never corrupted their characters but simply amplified what already existed. The Internet did not create another reality; it extended the existing one. Whether Yi and Tulathimutte's characters *should* leave does not register as a question within these novels. There is no reason to leave what cannot be left behind. There is no reason to reject what never rejected you.

In the first chapter, I employ Korean American author Esther Yi's debut novel to interrogate this world, where there is no meaningful difference between the offline and online. This novel examines a Korean American female narrator living in Berlin as she grapples with a parasocial attachment to a K-pop idol, blending the prose of fiction with actual fan-fiction written by the unnamed narrator herself. This narrator is determined to remain as unidentifiable as possible, rejecting labels and definitions that others attempt to impose upon her. Faced with this desire to annihilate her selfhood, she turns to two mediums in her attempt to escape the limitations of reality and physical form — and at every turn, she fails.

Tony Tulathimutte's *Rejection* attempts to answer the question of offline/online distinction that Yi has presented, presenting not failure but loserdom as his method of inquiry. In the second chapter, I thus pair his narratives about two siblings, Kant and Bee, examining their relationships to their bodies, experiences with social ostracization, and their usage of the Internet as a basement into which they might escape. Their stories are directly intertwined, with Kant's public humiliations in school from childhood bullying being the reason for his younger sibling Bee's decision to pre-emptively self-isolate from others, and their roles on the Internet as

consumer and creator operating in close reflection to each other. If there is corruption, Tulathimutte poses that the Internet is not the source. The Internet is where people turn to reprieve after the outside world fails to do anything for them — or actively rejects them.

Where better to start than with the perfectly constructed image of the idol?

Chapter 1: Worship through Self-Annihilation in Esther Yi's Y/N

Esther Yi's *Y/N* begins with the narrator's first encounter of the celebrity idol Moon at a K-pop concert, where she witnesses his image multiplied by thousands of phone screens, magnified by the surrounding screens of the arena. The term "Y/N" — the title of Yi's book — stands for Your Name, acting as a placeholder for the reader's actual name: rather than being read, the term should be mentally "written over" with the reader's own selfhood; the Y/N character is not a character but a stand-in for you, the reader. Upon seeing Moon and the other idols belonging to his group, the narrator experiences, as her roommate puts it, her "First Time" (Yi 8), a transcendental experience bordering on a religious awakening, and one that explicitly invokes language of the loss of virginity — one that, in short, implies an intense connection both physical and emotional, one that will leave her fundamentally changed upon its completion. Overcome with this sensation as Moon begins to walk down the stage, and believing that he is walking in her direction, the narrator pushes through the crowd:

> Angry strangers tried to block my way. I couldn't blame them, I was being a very bad fan. But I felt no solidarity. I excised them from my perception of space. All went quiet in my mind. Moon and I were alone in the arena, headed for each other. I would jump onto the stage and force him to look into my eyes. For a single moment in time, I would be all that he saw. I knew I'd be condemned for imposing on him my individual humanity, divorced from the crowd, but I didn't care, I was a person, I knew this if nothing else, that I was a person, however hapless, however void. (Yi 10)

With Moon as the sole focus of attention, the narrator at once disidentifies herself from other fans and places emphasis on her identity as a human being in order to encounter her idol.

Here, she attempts to approach Moon as a person, meeting him as one might meet a friend, physically drawing closer to one another as she views him away from the screen. Her goal, as she pushes forward, is to literally come to his level, onstage, and encounter him as one would another person. If she is a person, the narrator suggests, then Moon is merely a person, too. But this personhood is distinct from that of the fans in the audience; she, in short, views herself to be closer to Moon than she is his fans, with whom she states she does not belong. As the two get closer, she continues:

> Moon grew from tiny to small, from small to less small. I begged him to become as large as I was to myself, but the closer he came to reaching the size of a normal person, the more I sensed he'd never get there. We stopped moving at the same time: he reached the end of the runway, while I couldn't penetrate the crowd any longer. He threw back his head in dreamy surrender, exposing a limestone column of neck almost as long as his face. The cartilage supporting his larynx protruded like a spine. Blue veins ran up the neck and branched off across his mandible. Life swarmed just under his skin. The neck's language was of suppression, unlike that of his face, where the jungle inside his body oozed free through the eyes, nose, and mouth. Vavra's mistake had been to draw rational strokes of narrative, compelling me to understand everything about Moon at once. But all I'd needed was to begin with the singularity of his neck. (Yi 11)

Yi's usage of physical size reveals the impossibility, however, of real-life, person-to-person connection: the narrator can never know Moon as an equal. He remains literally above her on the stage, physically far from her; witnessing him away from the screens, which multiply and magnify him, renders him so physically far from her that his body is small and thus lesser. A

literal gap remains between them as both Moon and the narrator are forced to stop moving, the narrator because the crowd will no longer part for her and Moon because he has reached the literal limits of his dimension. It is here that the narrator realizes that it would be impossible to have Moon, recognizing simultaneously that "I wanted something, and I wanted all of it, but I didn't dare want Moon, because if it was that simple, it was also that impossible" (Yi 11). While the screens make connection seem possible, it is when the narrator attempts to reach him that the impossibility is revealed. With the aspect of reciprocation, the relationship is not necessarily one-way — but there is a massive, unbridgeable gap. She wants Moon, but to state this is to acknowledge the fact that she cannot have him — that she will never, no matter how hard she tries, encounter him in the plane of reality, as a human being.

These excerpts anticipate the narrative of a novel that Yi has intentionally rendered nearly incomprehensible. Following the concert, the narrator experiences a growing parasocial attachment to Moon, strengthened by her watching his livestreams through her phone, to the extent that she feels that she knows him on a spiritual level. Shortly after the concert, however, Moon mysteriously disappears, prompting the narrator to travel to South Korea in an attempt to find him and meet him in a way that she physically could not at the concert — removing herself, then, from the fantasy of the screens in order to encounter him as a person. Yi writes this journey in winding paragraphs with strange turns of phrases that defamiliarize the physical body, with dialogue that a real person, let alone a character representing a human being, would never say. There is not even a single strand of narrative: the novel is interwoven with pieces of fanfiction that the narrator herself writes, with Yi rarely stating explicitly that the narrator has moved into or exited out of this meta-fictitious act and leaving the comprehension to the reader, making

confusion between Yi's fiction and her narrator's possible. Discussion of the narrator's fiction with Yi's fiction is inseparable but nearly impossible to clearly discuss together.

If Yi does not want this novel to be comprehended, it is because the narrator herself does not want to be comprehended. The narrator feels that she has known Moon her whole life, across time and dimension, and that this is the singular most important relationship that she has. She simultaneously, however, recognizes that she cannot want Moon as a person, because to want Moon as a person would mean that he is a regular person — which, in her constructions of him, he inherently cannot be. If Moon must remain separate from others in order for him to be a superior object of worship *and* the narrator wants to encounter him on-stage, as close to an equal as she can get without challenging his superiority, then she must exist in a different form entirely. To know Moon, to encounter him, to worship him most effectively, is to shed her identity entirely.

I understand self-erasure, or self-annihilation, through scholar Amy Hollywood's examination of worship as an alternative method of study in a collection of essays exploring "uncritical" methods of academic engagement, specifically her interrogation of worship as methodology in the context of literature and dialogic encounter. It is from here that I draw the word "annihilation," in reference to Hollywood's concept of a female mystic's "annihilated soul," annihilated so that the woman might exist as a more perfect medium for worship.[3] While Hollywood's expertise is in medieval female mystics, her work is tied to the contemporary by writer Elvia Wilk, who examines the nature of a mystical text, a text of and for worship, and how that text might be encountered by writer and reader alike. The writer of the mystical text

[3] Hollywood, Amy. "Reading as Self-Annihilation." *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical.* Taylor & Francis Group, 2004. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/detail.action?docID=214872.

worships their God, operating within the existing mythology of their religion rather than creating a new one and laying claim to the textual landscape as God themself.

Understanding the trajectory of the narrator's annihilation requires an initial rethinking of the narrator's apparent isolation. Why would someone reject available forms of human connection in favor of mediated, unreal ones? For what reason, if not loneliness, would David Foster Wallace's socially isolated voyeur turn to the TV screen for his social outlet? Yi resists a reading of her narrator's isolation as one inherently indicative of loneliness. Loneliness typically describes the pain and sadness produced by a lack of connection, and a desire to alleviate that lack. [4] The narrator, however, does not seek conventional connection: she does not express a desire to be integrated into a social world, instead refusing these forms of relation. She appears, at least superficially, to possess the conditions for social fulfillment: she has a roommate, a boyfriend, and access to a broader fan community. But these relationships are marked by distance and evasion. She rejects labels, articulating, "I'm not a fan" (Yi 29), and refuses relational definition and therefore external recognition. The narrator is not deprived of connection but actively refuses it in favor of another. To be known, within the logic of the novel, is to be fixed into place as a coherent subject, defined and limited by others' perception. The narrator seeks a form of connection, and thus relation, that bypasses these limitations entirely — a form of connection that does not require her to exist as a stable, recognizable, definable person. Her attachment to Moon thus cannot be understood merely in terms of fandom or desire. It is a part of a broader project of self-erasure.

[4] "Lonely, *Adj.*, Sense 4.a." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, September 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4064594090.

In this chapter, I argue that Yi does not simply depict loneliness or parasocial desire but stages a progressive logic of self-erasure, within the contexts of screen culture and online interaction, to the end of truly knowing a person. Across the narrator's engagement with fan-fiction, her attachment to Moon, and her investment in the transmission of the image, Yi traces a movement from identity towards its dissolution. The narrator initially attempts to escape personhood through the reader-insert figure "Y/N," a placeholder that promises to empty the self of defining characteristics and selfhood. However, this form is insufficient: because the Y/N figure still functions as a character within a narrative, inhabiting the form cannot fully eliminate subjectivity. Instead, the narrator moves beyond character altogether toward identification with the technical apparatus — specifically, the camera — which enables her to witness without being recognize, to mediate without existing as subject. In tracing this shift from subject to placeholder to apparatus, this chapter demonstrates how Yi reconfigures fandom, worship, and authorship into a logic of self-annihilation, where the desire for a perfect intimacy is expressed through the elimination of self. This is how the narrator can most truly know her idol.

To account for this, I frame the narrator's relationship to Moon not merely as parasocial attachment but as a form of worship. Yi's novel collapses distinctions between celebrity and divinity, positioning the idol as a modern figure of transcendence, a visible image through which its audience attempts to access something beyond themselves. The narrator's goal is not to be close to Moon as another person, nor to join a community of fans, but to reconfigure her own mode of being in relation to him. What she ultimately seeks is not intimacy between two subjects, nor intimacy between gods, but simply a position from which she witnesses without existing — a form of self-annihilation that transforms her from participant into the transmitting medium. To know someone is to worship them.

I. Fan-Fiction and Y/N as the Placeholder Identity

At first glance, fan-fiction complicates traditional models of authorship by positioning the writer not as a creator but as a participant within a pre-existing world. With any g/God comes the question of creation and, thus, the question of authorship. Gustave Flaubert articulates authorship in explicitly religious terms, arguing that "the author in his work must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere."[5] In this model, the author is like God because they have conceived the world of the text in their own image. The author is therefore inherent in every aspect of the created work, even if never explicitly visible within it: to write is to undergo a process of deification. Authorship thus constitutes the creator's complete control over the work, being the origin source of it, and the possession of an identity in itself.

By this definition, Yi occupies the position of creator, while her fan-fiction-writing narrator would operate within a fundamentally different authorial logic, one that does not originate worlds but instead inhabits and reworks them. The fan writes not necessarily to create or to lay claim to originality but to relish in an existing, fictional world, spending more time with the characters that they love by placing them in different contexts. The fan-fiction writer's desires, then, as they operate within a fundamentally derivative medium, are not necessarily the same as those of an author — at least by Flaubert's definition. Authorship implies originality, invokes intellectual property, but fans are proudly derivative and explicitly lay no claim to ownership of the story or its characters: they are writing in an author's world, but they are not the author, nor do they attempt to pretend to be the author.

But while fan-fiction appears to offer a model of authorship that abandons authority and, with it, subjectivity, I argue that it ultimately preserves the very subjectivity that it seems to

[5] Flaubert, Gustave. Letter to Louise Colet. 9 Dec. 1852.

dissolve, ultimately rendering it counter to the narrator's true conceptions of self. Fan-fiction may reject the origin, but it does not reject the possession of identity and therefore subjectivity. Although the fan-fiction writer relinquishes claims to originality, the narrative remains organized around their desires and perspectives.

Reader-insert fan-fiction, particularly in the form of "Y/N," appears to offer a solution to the problem of subjectivity by formalizing the erasure of identity. Reader-insert fan-fiction is an Internet-born genre of writing that places the reader into the fabric of the story with the narrative's characters. The reader is passive, given the nature of the medium, and can make no choices that impact the narrative flow or other characters, but derives pleasure from the idea that they can and are. The Y/N figure must therefore account for the identities of all readers and cannot have an actual identity independent of others'. While reader-insert fan-fiction is also present in wholly fictional stories, where the writer will place Y/N in the fictional setting of the original story and/or with the fictional characters, Yi's work focuses on reader-insert fan-fiction within the genre of real-person fiction (RPF). Rather than other works of fan-fiction, which uses existing fictional characters, RPF imagines real people doing fictional activities.

In practice in Yi's novel, the term Y/N does not function as a universal placeholder for any reader, instead operating as a projection of the narrator's own desires to evacuate identity. Yi makes use of actual reader-insert fan-fiction in her novel, literally inserting the text itself between "real" scenes that the narrator experiences to most clearly articulate the strength of the narrator's parasocial relationship with Moon. This draws an immediate parallel between the fictitious, parasocial, and utterly fantastical relationship that the narrator has with Moon versus her real-life connection that she has with her boyfriend, where the narrator locates herself in the figure of Y/N. The narrative thus initially distances the reader from implication into the story-

within-a-story, introducing a third-person Y/N narrator as a character separate from the reader's being: the female character of this fan-fiction is a stand-in for the narrator of the novel: Y/N, as she is introduced, is not Y/N and thus the reader, but an expression of the narrator herself.

In writing herself through Y/N, the narrator seems to believe that the closest way that she can get to Moon, the best way for her to articulate the perceived depth of her connection to him, despite never having met him, is to make herself Y/N. A character in the novel, responding to another's experience of reading reader-insert fanfiction as a method of self-discovery, critiques the genre's form, arguing that the reader-insert character must be without selfhood or personality to allow for all readers to be included in the constructed fantasy. He says, "You are not Y/N. All of us are, all at once" (Yi 49) and adds, "You say you're Y/N, but you're really no one at all. You're the placeholder itself. A vacancy waiting to be filled" (Yi 50).

I posit that the narrator strives to achieve Hollywood's annihilated soul and believes that she can find annihilation in the anti-identity of Y/N: a placeholder for the reader, an empty space into which one can insert themself into. She does not want to be a character but, rather, a suggestion, a repository for others' existence, her existence defined by its absence. The narrator exists in this textual space of faith and worship as grounds for self-annihilation. In rejecting identity/definition/presence in their entirety and insisting that her love for Moon transcends the carnal, she strives to be neither Moon's equal as an idol, nor his follower as the audience, and thus pursues a total annihilation of self for the purpose of better witnessing and understanding Moon — for better reading Moon. She is the empty space into which one can insert themself into, the placeholder for all to exist within, and therefore is everything and nothing at once — the gaze through which others might witness the truth of Moon. In the chronically-online world, worship through self-annihilation is her chosen method of self-expression. This is the only way

that she can claim true individuality and selfhood. This striving towards self-annihilation, however, is never realized. Both the narrator's fan-fiction and her real-world pursuit of Moon demonstrate that placeholder identity cannot fully achieve the self-annihilation she seeks.

The fan-fiction begins with the character Y/N and a fictional Moon in a relationship, intertwined culturally/linguistically, physically/spatially, and chronologically/dimensionally in a way that the narrator and the real Moon can never be. Its story progresses in a way that distances the two of them to make true spiritual contact, to attempt to reach that intangible, impossible fact of truly knowing someone, until Y/N and the fictional Moon have completely forgotten each other and the fact that they once had a relationship. In the narrator's most explicit attempt to understand herself, in writing her fan-fiction, the narrator's constructed "character" of Y/N does not stay with the fictional Moon. He alone is not enough. The narrator's solution to truly know Moon, then, is for her character Y/N to end her real-life relationship with Moon so that she is "extinguished from his consciousness" (Yi 60).

In an attempt to articulate her desires, she writes:

> But the real thing is not enough. Moon himself is not real enough. She wants him too much. Her appetite is unnatural. He can't possibly give more than he already does. Still, she wants everything he isn't and everything he will never be. How he exists in the negative — she wants this, too. (Yi 60)

And thus, she ends the relationship and becomes Moon's fan — achieving, in short, a reverse trajectory to the narrator, where she strives to move past the label of fan and find a real-life encounter with Moon.

Y/N's decision to reject a reciprocal relationship with the fictional Moon and instead become his fan marks a crucial shift from intimacy to distance, suggesting that true

"understanding" requires not closeness but separation. Throughout the fan-fiction, as opportunities to be closer to her fictional Moon again come to her, Y/N instead chooses to make a doll of Moon or otherwise widen the distance between them, further attempting to reach the made-unreachable. Every available opportunity for connection with Moon, Y/N rejects, thus actively opting for a parasocial relationship. By replacing lived experience with objects of fandom, Yi converts relational intimacy into mediated distance, reinforcing that presence must be replaced by representation. This logic anticipates Yi's later shift from annihilation as character towards annihilation as identification with the apparatus that produces these representations.

While Y/N functions as the narrator's projected form within fiction, the novel stages a divergence between the two: as Y/N moves toward distance and abstraction, the narrator paradoxically moves toward physical proximity. When narrator finally finds the real Moon at a memory care facility, she decides to share the fan-fiction that she has written about him and thus realize the fantasy that she has been literally writing to bring both hers and Y/N's stories to completion. The fan-fiction is unfinished by the time she shares it but describes Y/N "taking apart old clocks" (178) as a hobby, literally destroying time with her own hands. The fan-fiction then trails off and does not return as Y/N leaves her apartment, entirely alone, in a dreamlike, abstract writing style, in search of a "repairman" for the clocks that had taken her favorite clock with him. As Y/N embarks upon a journey to find the repairman, the narrator realizes that she must act through the ending of her fan-fiction herself in reality for it to reach its proper conclusion, thus marking the collision between fantasy and reality. This is the final battle of the parasocial.

The narrator's attempt to give the real Moon her fan-fiction reveals the impossibility of her chosen method of annihilation by directly contrasting the fan-fiction narrative with the real narrative, the generally fantastical with the real, and the spiritual with the physical: these things are in fundamental opposition to each other and cannot coexist upon their collision. The narrator has found that to touch Moon is to encounter a "dead end" (Yi 189): her search, this contact, was futile because she encountered reality. Her attempt to share her writing directly parallels Y/N's reading of the book that the fictional Moon writes. The narrator wants, in other words, to be read by the real Moon in the same way that she believes she read him, assuming that, in reading her Wilkian flesh-words, inscribed for her own purposes to feel that she is most fully worshipping her God, the real Moon will feel what she feels for him. The final fan-fiction that the narrator shows us is unfinished for this reason: it cannot be finished in the world of fantasy. The fiction picks up in reality, when the narrator gives the real Moon her fan-fiction, and it is there that these two threads of dimensional reality collide and therefore end. The narrator wants her god to be real and to recognize her, but for him to be real means that she, too must be real, and both come at the cost of her belief in that fantasy.

Y/N is not an adequate form of annihilation because it remains a character, even if an empty one. What these parallel trajectories ultimately reveal is that even the most radical form of reader-insert fiction cannot fully eliminate the self: Y/N remains a character and therefore remains insufficient. A character can still be related to. To be Y/N and therefore the placeholder is still to risk implicating oneself, if writer becomes reader, and to exist within the genre of fan-fiction is to exist in a separate but parallel plane to the actual Moon — to still be rendered distant from his existence, never quite realizing contact. The narrator wants contact. She does not want to be an equal as an idol — Y/N is a genre of self-insertion, and by writing Y/N fan-fiction, the

narrator is still, technically, writing herself into the story with Moon — nor does she want to usurp him as a god or creator. She does she want to be beneath him as his fan or worshipper, either, which she would be, if she were to continue to write. She does not want to be anything at all. The narrator's project thus requires a more complete form of erasure, one that will move beyond narrative altogether and into the domain of the technical apparatus – that, in this case, being the camera.

II. Intimacies of the Camera and Becoming the Gaze

Because Y/N remains bound to narrative and thus to subjectivity, the narrator's project of self-annihilation requires a form that exists outside of character altogether: the technical apparatus. The camera represents a more complete form of self-annihilation because it eliminates both identity and the conditions of subjectivity, functioning as pure mediation, as a mere gaze, rather than as an embodied being within the world. It sees without being seen, records without being recognized, and structures perception without possessing identity. The narrator does not want to be the passive subject-viewer, nor does she want to be the visible, objectified idol. To be a fan is to be relational. What the narrator wants is to be the condition of visibility itself.

The medium of the livestream is perhaps the best example of its powers as it structures the idol's visibility while remaining unseen, thus modeling the existence that the narrator seeks. The camera is a recording device and a facilitating machine, the means by which the real is captured for livestreaming on a screen. Livestreaming closes distances in a way that film and TV do not by allowing interactivity in real time.[6] The camera produces the image, the livestream

[6] Kowert, Rachel and Daniel, Emory. "The one-and-a-half sided parasocial relationship: The curious case of live streaming." *Computers in Human Behavior Reports,* Volume 4, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2021.100150.

distributes it, and the screen transmits it. When Moon is in South Korea, the narrator can access him in her own Berlin bedroom through the livestream of her phone. Even when they are physically in the same place at his concert, when Moon is on stage, the massive screens around the stadium magnify him, and the phones of fans filming him multiply him, resulting in an almost intimate, individualized experience of his otherwise distant, stage-relegated performance: he is omnipresent. Still, despite this breaching of distance, there remains a wall that is impossible to cross: the screen.

The screen mediates the distance and also creates it. I return to Horton and Wohl for the one-way mechanisms that construct the parasocial relationship in the first place, and to Wallace for his discussion of the lonely person's TV-viewing as a method of voyeurism to solve the problem of their isolation, despite remaining physically alone. These illusions of accessibility creates the parasocial relationship. Although the narrator and other audience members can see Moon through the screen, he cannot see them: in bringing them together, it renders the celebrity idol and the audience separate beings, viewed-upon and viewer. The screen only provides the image of reality, denying audience the agency of actual, physical access to it. In other words, the camera produces forms of fiction, reflecting visual portrayals and representations of certain truths while denying access to portions of reality.

Although the livestream appears to offer reciprocal interaction, it ultimately reinforces the asymmetry of perception, positioning camera as utterly detached from the dynamics of both viewer and idol, rendered, therefore, more powerful. During a later livestream, one of Moon's fellow idols, Mercury, stands in for the audience and acts their requests onto Moon. When the barrier of the screen is thus partially lifted, the audience — acting through Mercury — does not seek mutual recognition but domination, testing Moon's physical limits. Yi writes:

> Mercury bent his head over Moon's hands and pushed back one cuticle after another. He tore out excess bits of skin and made a little pile. Then he sprinkled the bits into his mouth and chewed, the working of his jaws suggesting a consistency like that of jerky. (Yi 34)

This moment of literal consumption exposes the instability of parasocial intimacy: when distance collapses, the desire to witness becomes a desire to penetrate and control. Crucially, this interaction is still mediated through the camera, which is detached from the interaction between Mercury and Moon, even as it depicts it. Moon's transmission of image through the screen closes the distances between himself and the audience, thus emphasizing the circumstances of the parasocial relationship by challenging the boundaries of the screen. This involves a de-subjectification of the audience by allowing them to witness the scene through the camera while identifying with Mercury. The audience's identification, in short, is not with the camera, and the camera is thus not a placeholder. For the narrator to identify with Mercury, in this case, is to acknowledge her relationality to Moon, that being one that is inherently beneath him as a fan. For her to identify with the camera, conversely, is to simply depict the truth of the interaction and of Moon. The narrator, in attempting to breach that final distance and exist in the same dimension as Moon, but not on the same hierarchical plane, strives to achieve a form that can facilitate this transmission. She does not want to be Mercury or Y/N. She aims, instead, to be the machine that allows for the gaze to exist at all.

Media theorists posit that the authority of the camera lies in its capacity to define the conditions of perceptions. Marshall McLuhan, a scholar of media studies and the Internet claims that "Whatever the camera turns to, the audience accepts" (McLuhan 316). His observations on how camerawork produces visual illusions is foundational to understanding the visual effects of

the Internet.[7] We perceive what the camera presents to be inherently true: perhaps part of this is because the "precision and tyranny of the camera eye" places greater pressure on capturing the accuracy of what is being transmitted through the lens (McLuhan 319). The camera's forced objectivity, its seemingly pure rendition of reality, makes it a storyteller aligned with the visions of the narrator: that being a precise, clinical accuracy. The camera's construction of reality therefore supports its authority as a mediator.

The narrator's vehement refusal to be identified as anything, her rejection of being "related to," suggests that her ideal form is to be an object of objective registration for Moon. With her boyfriend, she was most content when she "became nothing, just a scale for his weight" (Yi 20) as they laid in bed together, her expression blank and her body still. If this is the narrator's ideal intimacy, her ideal model of knowing and loving another, then this is what she strives to become for Moon, too: a recording device that exists solely for Moon's purpose, defined by his existence. The scale is a true, objective portion of Moon's being —the literal ground upon which he might stand — and the narrator, inhabiting that form, can thus approach a most accurate capturing of Moon. Similarly, identification with the camera means that the audience is able to ignore the presence of the camera entirely to implicate their own consciousness and physical body: the camera is only a gaze through which we witness the story, not an entity of its own.

Likewise, we are meant not to perceive Y/N as a character of its own but rather an extension of ourselves, an empty space into which we may place our existences. We cannot relate to Y/N, because Y/N is defined by its own absence, but we are able to identify with and therefore inhabit it. But we cannot relate to the camera because the subject of its gaze remains

[7] McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill, 1964

ignorant to its existence — or must deliver the performance as such and "act natural" (Wallace 154). The camera therefore is not given space to exist in the film's diegesis. But because we view the entire narrative through the camera's lens, we inhabit that gaze and exist as ourselves through the space that the camera has granted us.

Early in the novel, the narrator fantasizes about her boyfriend's physical worship of Moon's body and de-implicates herself from the scene, imagining herself as the disembodied gaze through which the audience witnesses the coupling. She is not Y/N, there, because to be Y/N is still to be a character. Y/N must be everyone because the audience inserts itself into its place, and it therefore has no identity of its own. The camera, conversely, is defined by its absence, annihilated from existence in the story by means of the actor's intentional, performed ignorance to it. Her status should also be distinguished from Wallace's voyeur, as to be a gaze is to be absent of form; the key aspect here is that she is facilitating the recording and transmission of the image onto the proverbial "screen," otherwise removed entirely from the equation. In that idealized moment, she is the gaze itself.

While the camera is not the creator, it is its tool. Philosopher Vilem Flusser, in his discussions on the technical apparatus and its mechanisms, has observed the production of the technical image, specifically the gestures that render it into existence. In his analysis, the photographer performs the gesture of taking a photo, thus activating the machine and producing the image that the photographer desired. But, as he states, "the photographer can only desire what the apparatus can do" (Flusser 20). In other words, although the camera can do everything that the creator wants it to, the creator's desires are limited to the capabilities of the camera.[8] If the apparatus limits desire, then it supports annihilation through these constraints. The camera

[8] Flusser, Vilém and Nancy Ann Roth. *Into the Universe of Technical Images.* University of Minnesota Press, 2011. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24685.

limits what the creator produces in a way that Y/N, which exists far beyond the original created material, is inherently incapable of doing. While the narrator of Y/N rejects self-definition and identity, I do not believe that she wishes to exist separately from the world that Moon exists within. She seems to strive instead to be located in the same apparatus that houses Moon, rendering herself thus near Moon and beyond "mortal" perception.

The narrator's desire to become the condition under which anything can be seen manifests in a desire to become the camera. Becoming the camera implicates the narrator into the apparatus and thereby grants the narrator a degree of agency that she has previously been denied — an agency that does not usurp but rather complements that of her god. She cannot be God because Moon is God; she cannot be God-creator because she did not create Moon. She is not Wallace's voyeur, restrained to the living room couch and given no choice in the story she witnesses, nor is she the worshipper reading or writing fan-fiction to literally place herself in the story in an attempt to circumvent the denial of agency. To do any of these things would be to either resist the circumstances of Moon's existence, to have no effect on his experience of the world, or to define herself as an identity-haver. Becoming the camera allows her to exist in his circumstances, to be a direct mediator for others' experience of Moon, and to maintain her lack of identity. It is to exist not as the Fluabertian god or the creator of the story but to take the authorial desire to be everywhere and unseen and apply it instead to the narrator's desire for self-annihilation.

III. The Failure of Annihilation

Yi concludes with a broken screen, a broken fantasy, and the absence of Moon in her narrator's life. The narrator is, in other words, alone, and the novel ends on an uneasy, eerie note. But while the narrator is alone, is she lonely? Was she ever? Addressing her self-imposed

isolation, I bring attention to a passage near the middle of the book, where the narrator encounters the woman who "created" Moon. The woman in question, called the Music Professor, provides insights and advice to the narrator from a place of power and agency that the narrator cannot comprehend. The authority of her words stems from the fact that she is, essentially, the creator of the god — the person who rendered the fantasy of Moon into existence.

> The spiritual vacuity of our consumption and conversation, the daily torture of justifying our ethical fraudulence, the ever intensifying yearning for love in a world that systematically handicapped our very capacity for it—amidst this desolation, how could one not think that the solution was to retreat behind the walls of the self and become utterly singular? This was why people clung to markers of identity as if they were differentiating, when the mere fact that there already existed a name for this difference meant it wasn't differentiating enough. No, the perverse cunning of the human spirit manifested itself in submission to the erosion of all categories, a descent into namelessness, homelessness, nothingness. Only then did one have a chance at achieving universality. (Yi 130).

While the narrator is not the god or creator, nor does she want to be, this selected quote, I argue, was precisely the narrator's key point?. To label oneself, to label one's relationship, is to render yourself indistinct, similar and therefore relatable. Self-isolation, the narrator appears to argue through her repeated rejections of definition and community, is the singular answer. The narrative, however, poses that it is because she is human that she, like others, must engage in "expression of their individuality" (Yi 129), therefore rendering her alike despite her best efforts — and, therefore, the only option is to turn entirely away from community, to renounce connection as she recognizes it.

But to exist in a body, as a person, is necessarily to exist in relation to others. I thus return to the initial discussion of loneliness and parasociality. Self-isolation might be the narrator's only recourse, but still, she turns to a god of her own: Moon. This is a connection of its own; the narrator herself claims that it transcends any mortal connection. She cannot be alone in the presence of her god; she cannot be lost if she has a destination — the destination being Moon. But this god is a human one: while it might provide fans with salvation, rendered powerful because of those who believe in it, it is, first and foremost, a capital product for entertainment. It serves the public, plays a character role that it cannot depart from — and it, through the company, directly capitalizes upon the parasocial relationship, to the point that consumption and expressions of adoration are nearly the same thing: when a fan buys into an advertisement, they are buying both person and product — and to buy a person is to buy the emotional connection with the idol (Hwang 197).

The narrator's failure to achieve self-annihilation, in her attempts to breach the boundaries of the parasocial relationship, ultimately reveals the limits of mediated transcendence. While she attempts to move from subject to placeholder to apparatus, the collapse of the fantasy, in the form of the screen between herself and Moon, forces her back into embodiment. The book concludes with an image of a world flooding with a black chemical substance and the narrator fights to remain conscious despite her physical exhaustion. The last words that the narrator speaks are an articulation of how she wishes that she could be made of glass so that she could be known at a glance — that she "wouldn't have to say a word to make you understand what I'm feeling" (Yi 204) — and a request to see "the real thing" (Yi 205). The real thing that she refers to is a painting that her friend in Seoul has been working on, depicting the back of her knees. It is unfinished. Her friend warns her, upon the request, "You don't know

what you're asking for" (Yi 205), as she gazes up at the narrator's face following her assertion that, if the narrator was made of glass, she wouldn't know that she existed at all. That her embodiment, and embodiment in general, is not for the sake of existence but so that a person can bear witness to you — to encounter the demarcations of flesh and know, tangibly, where to stop to avoid breakage and penetration. The novel thus demonstrates that the desire to become pure mediation, to exist as the gaze itself, is structurally compelling and yet fundamentally impossible. The narrator will never achieve the form she strives for, will never be able to achieve true annihilation, and therefore can never be known how she wants to be known.

Chapter 2: Pornography Addictions, A.I. Bot Farms, and Brutal Empathy: Release and Relief in the Nihilistic World of Tony Tulathimutte's *Rejection*

It is not quite accurate to say that the reading experience of Tony Tulathimutte's second novel, *Rejection* — following his 2016 debut novel, *Private Citizens* — is like watching a car crash in slow motion. For one thing, the phrase is obviously a cliche, and the book — a series of interconnected short stories with characters recurring often enough that it could nearly qualify as a novel — is anything but. For another, nothing about these stories is quite the novel, time-limited spectacle as watching a car ram itself into the back of another is, that machinic contact resulting in metal shrapnel flying through the air, airbags bursting, fire roaring, et cetera. There is nothing slow-motion about this book, nor is there anything brief about it. These stories are horrific in their infinity, mesmerizing in their pace, brutally unforgiving in their empathy.

Tulathimutte's method operates through a form of brutal empathy that exposes his characters fully without offering resolution. What I refer to as empathy functions as a mode of representation that insists on understanding without offering redemption; I characterize it as brutal empathy for this reason. While Tulathimutte's world is nihilistic, his method is not a condemning one: he neither diagnoses nor heals his characters, instead rendering their desires and failures with such intensity that readers are forced to confront them directly. The characters' traumas emerge gradually, and their inner lives, in all of their manic obsessions and most perverse addictions, are presented in full, without narrative judgment. The aim is not to correct or redeem them, but to force recognition: to inhabit, however briefly, their shame, desperation, and fear. In this sense, Tulathimutte's project aligns with a Kafkaesque nihilism that does not deny meaning outright but instead reveals it as inaccessible, blocked by the structures of modern life. [9]

[9] Emrich, Wilhelm, et al. "Franz Kafka and Literary Nihilism." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1977, pp. 366–79. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831181.

His characters continue to seek purpose within this impasse; Kant clings to the possibility of meaning while Bee rejects it explicitly, yet both persist in asserting their existence through the Internet. Meaning may be unattainable, but the impulse to seek it, and to be recognized in that seeking, remains existentially necessary.

This chapter focuses on two of the novel's short stories: "Ahegao; or, the Ballad of Sexual Repression," and "Main Character." The former highlights a gay, high-achieving, porn-addicted, and deeply repressed older brother named Kant who contacts a male adult-content creator with a video request for a highly irregular, highly specific sexual fantasy that he has; the latter finds his younger sibling, Bee, who self-isolates and rejects all labels of identity — from ethnicity to gender to the very fact of their existence in relation to others — before eventually becoming the mastermind of a bot farm that allows them to inhabit and act within hundreds of thousands of identities at once. A brother who seeks out the Moon-like figure to fulfill his desires and writes himself into a form of online fiction; a sibling who pursues a *Y/N*-esque annihilation of selfhood to the extent of becoming a kind of god-like figure. Worship, however, does not factor quite so closely into this particular equation — Bee, for instance, seems to be far more willing to become the, or a, Creator than the narrator of *Y/N* did.

I therefore ask, once again: What does it mean to know, love, and understand someone through these online mediums of the Internet and why is the literary text the place to stage these questions? I argue that *Rejection* stages characters who, denied connection, turn to the Internet as escape and as a structure that promises control, safety, and the illusion of self-realization. While Kant seeks relief from shame through mediated sexual fantasy and Bee pursues total self-expansion through digital multiplicity, both ultimately achieve only temporary release rather than lasting transformation. I examine Tulathimutte's method as one grounded in brutal empathy,

parallel to David Foster Wallace's image of the teenager staring at himself in the bathroom mirror, one that shines an unforgiving white fluorescent on each character's exposed insides.[10] This method exposes these characters' inner lives without resolving them, producing a world that is at once deeply human and fundamentally nihilistic.

By placing this dynamic in conversation with *Y/N*, I attempt to distinguish between forms of annihilation that promise transcendence and those that culminate instead in repetition, exposure, and the impossibility of relief. I thus draw a contrast between the concepts of *release* and *relief,* framing Tulathimutte's characters as ones that retreat into the comforts of promised release by seeking a temporary, often literally, masturbatory satiation, rather than achieving true, lasting acceptance.

I. Kant, Sadism, and Shame

Sequentially, "Ahegao; or, the Ballad of Sexual Repression" comes first, and the logical place to begin with the story is to define the word *ahegao*. The term: Japanese in origin, referring to a specific facial expression made by animated characters experiencing intense sexual pleasure. The genre: rooted in *hentai,* or Japanese animated pornography. The legacy: flushed, flesh-colored sweatshirts plastered with anime girls contorting their faces into the expression; aesthetic Tumblr blogs and seedy Reddit pages dedicated as shrines to the expression; profile pictures that suggest the person behind the screen is actively experiencing sexual pleasure as they reply to a post with the user's current home address and personal phone number. Whether any of these usages are ironic is a coin toss. The story begins as it ends: with a vulnerable, confessional email, sent en masse via mailing list, to everyone in Kant's life that matters. The first email is an

[10] Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 13, no. 2, Summer 1993, pp. 151–194

elegant, highly intentional coming-out, and this as the story's introduction allows Kant to elaborate upon the particular perversions of his sexuality. Namely, his lifelong interest in sadism and humiliation, explored through the infinite realms of the Internet and its specific strains of online-based genres and tropes of pornographic literature, accessible almost exclusively via electronic mediums.

"Ahegao" reveals how shame attached to the physical body drives a turn toward mediated sexual fantasy, where control replaces relationality and release substitutes for relief, especially once real, embodied relationships fail. Kant's reliance on online fantasy stems from earlier experiences of bodily shame and social rejection that he experienced in childhood bullying, making his desire for disembodiment both a refuge and necessity. There is safety in the online fantasy, a safety that does not exist in reality, where pain is real and experienced, manifested by Kant's hands. Kant's desires are incompatible with his shame and therefore his body, even as the shame is what produced them in the first place. But to be aware of this is not enough to grant Kant relief. Past experiences of social isolation and abuse are the origin story for his extreme sexual proclivities, particularly his desire to see men rendered "pathetic and ridiculous so he can feel powerful and attractive by comparison" (Tulathimutte 94). A convoluted form of self-punishment, self-admitted. Part of this shame, too, stems from his belief that he is socially undesirable as a larger Asian man. Thus ensues a series of lackluster, vaguely humiliating sexual encounters where Kant feels either that he underperforms or actively destroys any possibility of further arousal beyond repair. Nothing sexual in reality, for Kant, can compare to the experience that he has alone, when consuming online materials of his hyper-specific and extreme sexual fantasies, often animated and rooted in the genre of *hentai.* He craves the utterly fantastical, the

physically impossible; his turn to the online as method to assuage his loneliness has resulted in his inability to react to anything sexual but the most extreme and unrealistic.

Tulathimutte foregrounds the physical body as the site of Kant's shame, establishing embodiment itself as the primary obstacle to intimacy. Recurrent images of sweat, discomfort, and post-sexual cleanup emphasize the inescapability of the body and its failures. These descriptions contrast with the frictionless perfection of Kant's fantasies: while the body produces desire, it simultaneously renders that desire unbearable. The result is a cycle in which Kant seeks escape from embodiment through the very fantasies that his embodied experience generates. Sweat is an inescapable constant throughout Kant's story, these regular descriptions of his uncontrollable bodily reactions serving to highlight Kant's deep-rooted shame for the sexual desires he experiences while acting as a sharp contrast to the sweatless, painless perfection of his fantasies. The first of three sections in the short story, appropriately, is titled "The Year of Damp Feet," where Kant is perpetually showering to "rinse off his dick and stomach" (Tulathimutte 93), apparently stuck in a cycle of temporary release by means of masturbation and sitting in the uncomfortable, imperfect, and embarrassing aftermath. Kant must face and clean up the mess of his own desires, and it happens that, to do so, he must strip naked to confront his shame with a frequency that further exacerbates the emotion. These highly physical images contrast against the impossibility of Kant's desire, marking the return to reality and the crashing fall that comes after the high of fantasy: a literal come-down where return to the embodied form constitutes a return to shame, reinforcing a cycle of fantasy without relief.

A failed sexual encounter with his real-life boyfriend Julian, whom Kant should theoretically be able to feel emotionally vulnerable with, demonstrates the incompatibility between his embodied relationships and his mediated desires. Even when Julian attempts to

understand him, literally bringing the Internet into their shared space when he attempts to make the *ahegao* expression, Kant's fantasies cannot be realized within the limits of the human body. Kant's conclusion thus seems to reach a final stage, one reminiscent of the belief that drove him to sign up for dating apps in the beginning of the story. If he cannot be loved and understood, then he might as well deal with his sexual repression however he can. Having tested the real, physical, and human as well as the fake, physical, and plastic, the result is withdrawal. Kant returns to his home base, the source of his sexual awakening and the only place he has ever felt able to realize his desires: the Internet.

That final, failed attempt at having sex with Julian is ultimately what pushes him away from society once more, and Kant marks a shift in his feelings towards the practice of masturbation, from ritual practice to addiction-like dependency, ultimately rendering what was once a comfort not a source of transcendence but as sedation. He observes that his masturbatory habits shift from feeling "oddly sacramental" to being not "outlet for thwarted lust" but rather "a pacifier, a syringe of oblivion" (Tulathimutte 124).

Sacramental: a term of religious origin; pacifier, one that indicates a retreat towards the infantile; syringe, one of either drugs or medicine. Religion is not a central focus of Kant's story, for the presence of religion, or some religious element, would imply the existence of some kind of redemption or relief; this is not the end that Kant will find. Salvation is not for Kant — nor, as we will find, is it for their sibling. But the terms remain useful, and it is what Tulathimutte chooses to employ in relation to Kant's habits of release, a form of worship, a physical honoring of his own body and desires that he has never experienced at the hands of others. Newly absent of others, however, and absent of even the possibility or hope of such further encounters after he breaks up with Julian, the habit morphs from something nearly holy into a pathetic substitute: the

pacifier that a child sucks on in place of a thumb or its mother's breast, the syringe that inserts chemical euphoria into pulsing veins. This is a satiating mechanism, not a permanent fix.

Scholar Julia Kristeva's "An Essay on Abjection" interrogates these concepts through the figure of the abject, drawing upon discussions of uncanniness, annihilation, non-existence, and repression to dissect the relationships surrounding the abjected — or, as Tulathimutte poses it, *rejected* — figure.[11] In the case of Kant, Tulathimutte's focus on the physical body seems to speak to Kristeva's elaborations upon the unclean, particularly the corpse, where invocation of the highly physical literally embodies the disembodying process. While Kant is disturbed by the "lack of cleanliness" (Kristeva 4) and potential for imperfections that come with physical contact with others, thus mitigating his ability to find true relief, Tulathimutte uses this to illustrate what, precisely, creates the *particular* disturbances of Kant's abjection.

For one to be abjected, Kristeva articulates *want* and desire to be defining factors: abjection, in short, is one's experience of wanting. Kant, in his repression, is defined by loss and therefore his want; his desires are formed around his lack of connections with others, his inability to truly embrace what he has repressed — a rejection of self. Abjection, too, is inseparable from religion — or, religion is inseparable from the matter of abjection. Kristeva briefly discusses religious exclusion, defilement, and taboo, and mentions the process of the abject's purification by the other. Tulathimutte's referring to Kant's masturbatory habits as *sacramental* can thus be read as Kant's attempt to purify himself from his desires, to literally release the want from his body and therefore relieve him of his abjection.

Kristeva poses that narcissism is part of the nature of abjection, suggesting its sources are both *strictness* — that being related to laws and rules, where a stabilizing force is, perhaps, too

[11] Kristeva, Julia. "Approaching Abjection." *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 1–31

stabilizing — and *desire* — where the objects of desire themselves are thrown into destabilizing question. Kant is plagued by both of these causes, held by the strict walls of his own self-governing rules that repress and thus destabilize his desires; his narcissism is thus inseparable from the matter of sex. I would be remiss, here, not to briefly point out the name Kant as Kristeva, incidentally discusses Kant, the philosopher, later in her essay; she states, in a comparison with Hegel, "If he thereby differs from Kant, he nevertheless shares his condemnation of (sexual) impurity. He agrees with his aim to keep consciousness apart from defilement, which, nevertheless, dialectically constitutes it" (Kristeva 30). To move away from the pure encounter is thus to move away from (the philosopher) Kant. Kant and his rules; Kant and his insistence upon the clean, flawless physical encounter, intercourse that dirties the other but does not infect his own non-object form. I interpret consciousness, in Tulathimutte's case, to be the conception of desire, and defilement to be the physical manifestation of it, where Kant believes that he can either continue to exist as a non-entity, a non-object, nearly non-existent, in a world that has rejected him, or somehow repress his desires, the object, into non-existence, and therefore evolve from them entirely.

Kant thus is not experiencing true relief, as he once thought, from engaging in sexual habits absent of another person, because the point was never the actual sex, rather that Kant wanted to be understood by someone else. The masturbation, the physical sensation, was only ever going to be a temporary release, a coping mechanism for the fact that he had never experienced what he really wanted: love and mutual recognition. Desire is not quite the point, and Kant almost explicitly states this when he discusses the start of his relationship with Julian as he observes his reservations that cause him to avoid sex with him. Part of the reason, he suggests, is because Kant, ultimately, wants a normal life. He craves "monogamy, stability, even kids

someday," and he believes that this future is "entirely incompatible with his hideous desires" (Tulathimutte 112), thus marking the effort of addressing his sexual repression pointless: if what he truly wants in the future is so counter to what he desires in this moment, then it would be more productive, wouldn't it, to simply stop having the sexual desires that he does? *Hideous,* here, is load-bearing, the word associated with physical appearance and further incompatible with objective attraction or desire. His issue is partially that he experiences shame for having extreme desires, yes, but that issue itself is rooted in a larger, gentler, quieter hope that Kant has for his future and relationships. He wants to be loved, known, and understood, but because he views his sexual desires as incompatible with that future, he seems to experience sex as something that tests his morality as a person, his right to be loved at all.

Eve Sedgwick, in her book *Touching Feeling,* articulates that the "double movement" (Sedgwick 37) of shame causes a dual reaction in a human person experiencing the emotion: simultaneously an increased sense of relationality to the other person and a hyper-sensitized experience of one's own individual body.[12] The very act, she argues, of experiencing shame indicates that you exist: "one is *something* in experiencing shame" because a self must exist to both identify relationally with another while also encountering the facets of its own existence (Sedgwick 37). With shame, one is forced to recognize their relationship to others around them and acknowledge the fact that that relationship inherently exists, by virtue of being in the same space as those others; one must simultaneously acknowledge the truth of their own body and physical form. Building on Sedgwick, I argue that, in experiencing this double movement, Kant becomes hyper-aware of his own body and thus the source of his own shame, and also aware of the *absence* of his relationship with others, that the relationship that he has with people is not

[12] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press, 2003.

what he wants it to be. That the relationship itself constitutes not only the possibility of rejection but, in his experience, the practical guarantee of it. It is fitting, then, that Kant encountered Julian in the physical, embodied way that he did, while stuck in his own head, ashamed of his entire being. Shame is precisely why Kant cannot ever truly experience relief from his repression; the emotion is "characterized by its failure to ever renounce its object cathexis, its relation to the desire for pleasure as well as the need to avoid pain" (Sedgwick 115) and thus impossible to resolve without voluntarily relinquishing the source of its obsessive focus. Kant's entire existence revolves around this question, desperate to experience pleasure while equally as desperate to avoid further rejection from those he must inherently expose himself to in order to pursue this pleasure.

This question is pushed to its limits at the literal and figurative climax of the story, where Kant's shame has grown so exponentially that it seems to have, in effect, left the premises. The third section, "Add Cum," is almost entirely composed of a massive, highly detailed email-based description of a sexual fantasy that a tentatively hopeful Kant sends to amateur adult content creator Cody Heat — with the hopes, as has been the case, of dealing with his sexual repression. Kant commissions a custom video, solely for his own purposes, by instructing this creator to do whatever Kant wants, just as long as he pays the (literal) price. With great enthusiasm, zero shame, and a jarringly amicable tone, Kant proceeds to describe a sexual encounter involving tentacles, macrophiliac dynamics, objectively insane and physically impossible manipulations of the human body, and the ascent of Kant's genitalia into outer space. In short, his video request would only be possible with animation and certainly could not be achieved with the human body alone, even if that human body existed only within a screen.

In the face of this creative freedom, this complete agency absent of the threat of judgment, Kant undergoes a series of highly physical reactions that suggest an unraveling of his repressed desires. Without a person to define his relationality to — or, at least, one that he cannot exist in a physical space with, which would, according to Sedgwick, remind him of his own body and therefore that he can experience shame at all — Kant unleashes all. When he discovers the "menu" of options that Cody Heat provides, his "face goes slack with lust" as he types at a "terrifying speed" with "twitching knuckles" (Tulathimutte 126). Later on, while Kant's "eyes are dry and unblinking" (Tulathimutte 129) — indicating that his focus on writing to Cody is so singular and undivided that there is absolutely nothing else in his brain at the moment — he is in the process of experiencing a kind of mental explosion where "His mind feels like a limb that's been freed from a plaster cast, greenish and sickly but with, at last, a full range of motion" (Tulathimutte 129). These reactions are physical, rooted in a grounded experience that give Kant a sense of freedom that he could never have with Julian or any other real person. Kant is no longer stock-still beside another human body, sweating and sleeping badly, while he breathes in cold air and feels his nasal cavities harden and close over. He is hideous, undesirable in his desires, but online he is mobile, and he is free.

Effectively, Cody is neither another human with which Kant can engage in flawed, sweaty, gross sex with, nor is he the cold, immobile, unresponsive sex doll that Kant expressed frustration over. He possesses the reactions that the sex doll cannot without the risk of shame and humiliation that the human poses. Sedgwick's double movement, too, is thwarted, as Kant does not need to be perceived or exist in a space as anything more than the manifestation of power and control. Kant, in other words, by means of Cody, can have all of the control that he desires over his sexual partner by literally *creating* the scene that is to be enacted, without any fear of being

rejected, because his existence to Cody is purely abstract. When money is involved, Kant does not have to worry about whether Cody is attracted to him. Rejection is rendered impossible, and salvation seems that much closer.

The process of writing out his fictitious fantasy by means of creative confession brings Kant to what he feels could be true *relief,* something that he failed to find with Julian. This relief is achieved not by directly talking with another person whom he personally trusts but rather writing, in a format almost reminiscent of self-insertion RPF with its usage of the first and second person pronouns, what could be considered a letter of request to a person that he trusts because of the security of a financial agreement. To Kant, this commission is the solution to his sexual burdens, a creative act and means by which Kant can claim agency and full control without rendering himself vulnerable. He is the one who sets the story and the terms of the relationship. In this case, this act of narrative, creative fiction-writing may be the solution that Kant was searching for. Kant may write this letter, then, with the belief that he is relieving himself of these desires entirely, literally getting them out of his system so that he might most fully realize the person that he wants to be — a person utterly incompatible, in his mind, with those very desires.

Both emails that Kant sends over the course of his story function as confession and attempted self-erasure, revealing the limits of expression as an avenue to relief. Both emails are a kind of "coming-out" with his sexuality. The first is hyper-intentional, professional, and cautious in its language, so much so that it takes Kant an entire year to write the single paragraph explaining that he is gay. This paragraph that he writes to his family and friends might be taken as a trial run, a way for Kant to begin to acknowledge the reality of his sexuality so that he might try and actually act upon all of the desires he experiences. By rendering his sexuality a "public

fact" (Tulathimutte 92), he forces it to be real, thus forcing himself to encounter it, and it is the act of sending it to the people in his life that allows that rendering to happen as the information exits the non-reality of the Internet and enters the very real minds of others.

The second email intensifies rather than resolves Kant's condition, functioning as both confession and attempted self-erasure. Like the narrator of *Y/N,* Kant is ultimately writing primarily for himself here, even if both characters technically possess an audience that will read their creation. The parasocial remains in discussion here; Kant, like the narrator of *Y/N,* appears to desire that kind of separation, one only achievable, in these particular cases, by means of online, mediating technologies. Unlike the first email, which enters social reality, this one remains within mediated space, allowing Kant to articulate his desires without consequence. Yet this very protection ensures its failure: because it cannot produce recognition, it cannot produce relief. Kant believes that sending the second email to Cody might provide him with a semblance of salvation because it, unlike the first, is not intended to enter the fabric of his experienced reality. Kant's shame cannot be realized with the veil of online anonymity, the secure promise of financial exchange, and the protection provided by a screen that portrays what Kant otherwise finds sensorily overwhelming in reality.

If the first email opened the door to his journey towards sexual liberation over the course of this story, then this second and final email seems to be the culmination of that journey, the final act that Kant hopes will free him from his sexual repression — or, at least, allow him the beginnings of a kind of freedom by providing him with a space to be honest with himself, his desires, and utterly embrace the physical impossibility of what he wants — provided that the online does not breach into the realm of reality. The act of creation allows Kant to encounter, through the medium of fiction, something approaching relief. He allows himself, for the first

time, to hope that things might improve, that this might actually be the solution to his repression, to his sexuality, to the question of his embodiment, that he has been craving for his whole life. His desires could not be achieved in reality because of the nature of his desires; true realization of them, it seems, could only be possible under these hyper-specific circumstances, created and allowed by the Internet. This — the commissioning of a fictional video, sent to a camboy — is how Kant can be known.

Perhaps, then, his act of writing "Kant" as a character alongside "Cody" as a character in this three-act almost-script can be considered a form of sex in itself, even if it remains absent of physical contact and real-life encounter. If this is the case, Kant's relationship is less with Cody and perhaps more with the actual computer and therefore the Internet. In an essay examining the topic of online pornography, Zabet Patterson discusses a pornography-viewing man's failure to "find a suitable 'other,'" resulting then in a sexuality that is shaped and "mediated" by means of the online.[13] The other, which Sedgwick locates, in the schema of shame, as one that inherently defines the existence of the person being perceived. The crowd that rejects Kant cannot lay eyes upon the pornography that Kant consumes; not even we, as readers, are granted access. Effectively, Tulathimutte has created what Patterson describes as a "blind spot," where what Kant sees is not what the audience sees: we encounter the computer, the Internet, only through the pleasure that Kant experiences — or, at least, in the aftermath of release.

While "cyberporn," as Patterson calls it, offers the illusion of infinite choice "in excess" (Patterson 109), this choice is ultimately constrained by a hyper-management and categorization of pornographic categories, where every choice is actually dictated by "a logic requiring instantly recognizable cues" (Patterson 107). This "hallucinatory promise of fluidity" (Patterson 107) is

[13] Patterson, Zabet. "Going On-line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era." *Porn Studies,* Duke University Press, 2004, pg. 105. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822385844-005

precisely what appeals to Kant, especially in the act of directing a video commission that would supposedly realize all of his deepest fantasies. The menu offers Kant a limited range of choices and corresponding monetary increases; this organization is appealing to Kant *because* of the lack of choice, because of the *illusion* of choice that ultimately establishes hard, impassable rules that make it nearly impossible for him to humiliate himself — so long as he operates within the rules of the code and does not compose his fantasy in a textbox outside of the intentional constructions of the platform. That Kant finds more satisfaction in commissioning a camboy, rather than continuing to sink into the endless choices of the Internet search function, reflects Patterson's discussion of the relationship between the amateur pornstar and the viewer, the illusion of relationship and reality created by viewer interaction, the comparative "realness" of the pornstar. These pornstars are not untouchable. Conceivably, Cody Heat could be someone that Kant met at the gym, too — but going about a relationship this way means that there is the guarantee of pleasure without the risk of rejection. This commission, then, is the closest that Kant can come to sex, while having a tangible impact on an actual person, without actually having it.

When Kant engages in the act of writing readers are granted to his constructed fantasy while he himself remains protected from the people in his social circle. Here, Kant acts but is not seen. He cannot be Wallace's voyeur, lacking agency and control and relegated to the television room seat; to do so would be to reveal himself as "lacking" (Patterson 114) and thus open himself up for rejection. Kant strives to actively create the fantasy, direct the story, to script every single detail of what he experiences or witnesses so that he bears the utmost control over the relevant events. Human connection may be what he wants — complete with the family, the children, the house in the suburbs — but if we operate by his own conceptions of identity, that desire for connection is apparently incompatible with his sexual desires. "Real" sex, and

therefore the capacity to be seen, understood, and known; versus "online" sex, and therefore the capacity to realize his most base desires, are two separate things for Kant. "Real" sex involves relationality, acknowledging his own existence, and contains none of the predictable safety that the Internet promises. By this mode of operation, if he is the creator, Kant cannot be known or understood by another person. But that is the choice that Kant makes at the conclusion of this story. Of course, as he states, it isn't "ideal," but it may be "sustainable" (Tulathimutte 142), and that — given the fact that he's already tried the more traditional route of sexual encounters — is all that matters to him. What Kant wanted, more than anything, was to be loved and understood — this was the root of his sexual desires.

Faced with the impossibility of relief, Kant settles for release. The cycle of fantasy and consumption becomes an allegedly sustainable condition that replaces recognition with repetition. As long as he has the money, he will have the videos, and the cycle of commissioning and watching the creation whose direction he facilitated, he believes, could sustain him forever. Perhaps he will never be saved, but isn't this better than the prospect of shame? Isn't this better than to risk humiliation at the hands of another? To use Kant's own words: "No one's ever proved that desires are better off fulfilled. No one literally needs love; you don't die without it. And a substitute isn't nothing" (Tulathimutte 142).

But Kant's fall is inevitable as the accidental exposure of his fantasy collapses the boundary between private mediation and public reality that he sought to maintain. The structures meant to protect him from shame now reproduce and magnify it: his avoidance of the true root of his shame, the true avenue to relief, has only postponed the issue. His life will be exposed; mass-scale humiliation is only pending. His love and care for real people will be his downfall; if he did

not care about what others thought of him, like Bee claims not to, then he would be safe from rejection. He has only deferred his shame, ensuring its return at a larger scale.

Still, Kant doesn't know what he has done yet. What happens next is not something readers are granted access to. For now, this tentative hope is what Kant is left with. Because who needs love when you have a computer and a camboy?

II. Bee Swarms, Deject Trolls, and Empty Honeypots

If Kant retreats from the world to avoid rejection, his sibling Bee responds by attempting to eliminate the conditions under which rejection is possible altogether. Bee's narrative radicalizes the logic of identity by transforming selfhood into a scalable, manipulatable system to escape embodiment, literally pluralizing their identity. Where Kant seeks controlled intimacy and withdraws, Bee seeks total abstraction, replacing identity with multiplicity and recognition with omnipresence. This abstraction, for Bee, can be framed within the concept of the Dead Internet Theory, which refers to the idea that the Internet is not composed of natural human interactions across the world but is instead made up primarily of millions of AI bots created by companies, or others, to drive engagement and consumerism.[14] A swarm of bots, one could say. In other words, according to this theory, humans do not make up the Internet: bots do.

Bee, the main character of "Main Character," as an entity, embodies a swarm of bees, a swarm of bots — that disconnected, disparate, destination-less cacophony of human souls clamoring to be heard despite and through others of equal volume. There is no *striving* here, in the way that the narrator of *Y/N* strives to be the camera; Bee realizes their pluralization of selfhood by means of the Internet, all while occupying a singular, physical form.[15] They write a

[14] IlluminatiPirate. "Dead Internet Theory: Most of the Internet is Fake." *AgoraRoad.* 5 Jan. 2021. https://forum.agoraroad.com/index.php?threads/dead-internet-theory-most-of-the-internet-is-fake.3011/

[15] Because of the relationship that Bee describes with gender, the absence of pronouns used in self-reflexive reference, and Bee's literal pluralization of identity by means the Internet, I have elected to use

mirror to the above post, similarly asserting in their introduction that they are *nobody:* that they feel no connection to their name, no connection to or love for their physical form, and that they are "the most ubiquitous person on the internet, but you have absolutely never heard of me" (Tulathimutte 172). Simultaneously, they insist that they are fundamentally *unlike* the reader in every way that matters while relishing in the security of their own anonymity that makes them impossible to tell apart from everyone else. And they write, like this theory post, to the same audience: to *no one,* to *everyone,* for the conceivable end of spreading their words to the farthest corners of the Internet possible.

Bee's story takes the form of an Internet forum post composed primarily of autobiographical backstory and framed by an introduction and conclusion written by a user named MH-Sleuth. Tulathimutte writes Bee's unapologetic confession, whose words are then tracked down, contextualized, and verified by an online user named MH-Sleuth, who then composes what is sub-titled as the "Introductory Guide to Botgate v. 1.7.3" to recount, with as much accuracy as they can, the events of the scandal and the theories that branched off from it. The details of Bee's deceptions are initially unknown, but we learn, through Bee's recounting, that they created a massive bot farm of false accounts, managed by an LLM, to set into motion hundreds of thousands of online controversies and thus most completely achieve what they realize to be their true goal: to not reject identity and thus avoid its traps, but rather, instead, to embrace it so wholeheartedly that they inhabit all identities, at once.

Through early examinations of identity as a commodifiable object, Bee's narrative reframes identity as something constructed, distributed, and ultimately detached from the body. To Bee, the Internet is a place to shed identity at will and materially benefit from it; to isolate

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they/them when referencing the character. When Kant refers to Bee in his own story, he uses these pronouns as well (Tulathimutte 93).

from others and thrive on their own, dependent on nothing and no one, impossible to pin down. This shedding of identity for material gain manifests in Bee's construction of half-truths and outright lies, a source for their later turn towards mass-scale, global trolling operations. From selling their gender in the third grade; witnessing Kant humiliate himself on the literal stage as they made the conscious choice to never be like him; attending high school and engaging in self-isolation as self-protection, identifying with difference as a "goth kid" to avoid identification entirely; an argument about identity politics with fellow college students — and so on — Bee is aware from the very beginning that there are better, more material things than social inclusion to obtain, identity to maintain. At one point, Bee descends into the online gaming world and proceeds to befriend players and immediately cheat them of their items to later sell online for profit that they exchange for "weed, anime VCDs, and a used '96 Toyota Camry" (Tulathimutte 183) — in short, drugs that allowed them to push the boundaries of their mind, animated media that allowed them to escape the constraints of reality by means of the medium and the story itself, and a vehicle that allowed them physical movement and autonomy. Material item, particularly money, is more tangible, useful, and reliable than social inclusion could ever be — a kind of power equalizer where, especially online, one's identity and physical appearance do not matter. Abstraction is useless if it cannot be exchanged for concrete object. Verification is impossible, and so the truth becomes obsolete.

While Bee may be more focused on shedding their identity than their brother is, both Kant and Bee have a fixation on the physical form of their bodies. Just as Kant ruminates upon sweaty feet and shower-rinses, Bee opens their post with a dissociation of self from face — "a sheath of skin, muscles, nerves, and fat overlaying a skull, with five dark openings, two of them Asian" (Tulathimutte 172) — forcing the reader to encounter them not as a physical being but as

a concept without body, as the Internet user that they are. But despite their obvious dislike having a physical form, Bee, like Kant, continuously returns to the topic of body for dissection. Early on, they describe their mother's vaguely horrific, highly physical attempts to rid their face of acne, involving shredding, "jets of pus," and a "vacuum contraption that looked like a guitar amp" (Tulathimutte 183); later, they compare their acne-riddled face to a Southeast Asian girl with perfect skin, implying that the girl is more liked because she and Bee are comparable in every surface-level measure of identity except for their attractiveness; later still, Bee articulates their attempts to embrace their gender identity by means of their body, tattooing various symbols of gender as if laying physical claim to their flesh would allow them to be more comfortable in it. This occurs simultaneously to their realization that "if I had to have an identity, I'd construct a gender in twelve dimensions, a race as big as the Ritz, a standpoint of one's own" (Tulathimutte 202), a conception that defies the limitations of a singular physical form so completely that it renders their efforts at body-reclamation almost lacking in result. Tulathimutte's language, through Bee, is large, biological, and literally in-your-face; despite not wanting to exist in a body, Bee seems to be hyper-aware of the fact that they exist — and they despise that they do, because to exist is to be defined by others.

If Bee is defined by people's perceptions of them on the basis of physical markers of identity, specifically as a person born female (with the additional burden of expectation of attractiveness) and as a person with Asian features, then their goal is to transcend the limitations of the physical form entirely, to escape mortal flesh, and become something utterly indefinable. Their aim, then, is to shed and slip into as many identities as possible, at will. Bee does not want to be defined by others, thus rendering their existence in a physical body incompatible with their desires; their identity can be assumed with a mere glance, their selfhood crammed into boxes that

suffocate. To exist in relation to others is to be reminded of their body, and to be reminded of their body is to recognize that their relationship to others is one made up of rejection — this is not unlike the narrator of *Y/N,* who similarly insisted that she did not want to be related to by other people.

But Bee's experience is not entirely explained by this, given that their experience of rejection was first to reject others, having seen what others did to Kant. By Sedgwick's conceptions, shame is the source of identity, "uniquely contagious" (Sedgwick 64) in the sense that one's shame can spread to others. Tulathimutte's characters are not ashamed in isolation; their shame exists because readers are there to witness and feel it, too, the emotion of shame and the empathy that mediates its experience constituting a kind of communication between reader and character. Tulathimutte thus forces a direct confrontation of these characters' rejections and therefore forces understanding, comprehension of these characters' circumstances and their thoughts — all while knowing that we cannot be their salvation. Applied specifically to *Rejection,* Bee's identity is tied directly to Kant's experiences of shame, where their empathy for him has mirrored his shame into them. Rather than being rejected, Bee insists upon rejecting others. Rather than seeking to be loved by a single other, Bee wants to be admired en masse but never understood.

Another mirroring occurs with the topic of cyberporn. Much as with Kant, where before the camboy came the sex doll, before the bot farm comes the "tireless honeypot fembot" (Tulathimutte 214) — as it happens, a (fake) camgirl of Bee's own, and a way for them to further shed parts of their identity for money. Here, Bee exists on the other side of the computer as Kant, where while Kant was purchaser, Bee is the person selling — and unlike the Thai swear words incident, perhaps more comparable to the gender-selling incident, this involves no actual loss or

hurt on Bee's part. Bee commissions a "nice local girl from Smith College" (Tulathimutte 213) to film a series of provocative, erotic videos before then streaming the footage online, on various pornography sites, with a script that would play certain clips when a user would make an action, such as tipping. The fake camgirl can stream endlessly, generating Bee tens of thousands of dollars without having to expose their own body or face online and thus render themself vulnerable to rejection.

I would be remiss not to point out the vocabulary that Tulathimutte/Bee employs here, particularly the term *honeypot,* which seems to most succinctly capture Bee's logic of identity. The Oxford English Dictionary identifies several definitions of the word, but there are three in particular that draw my attention: one relating to bees, a second relating to gender, and a third relating to computers.[16] The first is obvious, and the most primary definition: a container within which honey, a product of bees, is held; the literal pot of material goods — a pun, perhaps, on Bee's name and a reference to the future swarm that they create after the camgirl. The term can also refer to a young woman, especially a highly attractive one, which falls directly in line with the purpose of Bee's construction: to literally attract people to their fake camgirl and financially benefit from their desires and thus their attention. The third definition, however, returns to the online, and I argue that the combination of all three of these definitions forms the multi-layered, plausibly-deniable irony that Tulathimutte, through Bee, so deftly employs. *Honeypot* can also refer to a website, made up with false data, that draws people to it in order to draw attention *away* from places containing actual, true data, thus preventing the intrusions of hackers and other digital attacks. The digital honeypot, in short, is a distraction meant to throw people off of the scent of true information.

[16] "Honeypot, N." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, December 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5123308086.

Identity is both lure and decoy, a constructed surface designed to attract and misdirect. Bee seizes the opportunity to commodify aspects of their *own* identity by means of the camgirl — this is where the gendered definition of the term *honeypot* enters. They do not choose someone with a male body or identity; they do not choose someone with a different racial background or geographic origin. Instead, they choose a local Asian girl — someone who, on paper, shares key markers of identity with Bee, especially physically — and uses her as proxy by which they can shed these aspects of identity themself and materially benefit from that shedding. Bee draws an explicit comparison to a childhood experience where they sold their gender to a boy: "The $22 of feminine mystique I'd sold in third grade had now grown to almost $60K; I was flush with gender" (Tulathimutte 214). By spending money on the girl to commission the videos, Bee has effectively purchased the girl's femininity — which, despite their body, they do not have or want — to use for themself, selling it online for profit. The shedding is possible because Bee has the vessel to hold pieces of the identity but does not actually take on those pieces, holding onto them only until and because they materially befit: the femininity is not theirs, but they are capable of holding onto it. Every time someone tuned into the stream, that femininity would only grow, and Bee materially benefits from their female body while continuing to discard the associated gender identity. Flush with gender; flush with money — filling and emptying the pot, all without implicating their own body at all.

The bot farm represents the culmination of Bee's project: the annihilation of identity through total proliferation. Unable to escape identity, Bee multiplies it to the point of abstraction, rendering themself omnipresent, "everywhere heard but not seen" and a "misrepresentation maximalist" (Tulathimutte 223). Propelled by the realization that to be recognized by the masses is to be defined by them, Bee responds not by withdrawing, as Kant did, but by becoming the

swarm itself, a distributed, impersonal force that eliminates the possibility of being known. Bee thus seems to approach a form of divinity akin to Flaubert's author, present everywhere and visible nowhere. Yet unlike the transcendent promise of Moon in *Y/N*, this omnipresence as a god/creator offers no salvation, producing only the illusion of relief. Bee's narration is notably drained of its earlier manic energy when recounting the specifics of the bot farm's operations, where what should represent total fulfillment instead reads as empty, mechanical, and detached. Like Kant's turn to mediated sexual fantasy, Bee's pursuit of total abstraction yields only temporary release, not transformation, perpetuating the same cycle they recognize themselves to be stuck in: a "carousel of *I-hate-people-because-they-hate-me-because-I-hate-people* ad nihilum" (Tulathimute 196). Ad nihilum: truly, to nothing, to no ending, to nothingness, to that gaping absence-of. In multiplying their selfhood to infinity, Bee exhausts identity entirely and thus finds no relief, only an endless repetition.

Crucially, Tulathimutte's empathy does not negate the clear nihilism of this novel's constructed world but intensifies it. By rendering his characters fully legible, he demonstrates that understanding does not produce resolution. If Kant, freshly convinced of the futility of being known for everything that he is, retreated to the proverbial basement out of shame, then when Bee comes to the same, if not more jaded, conclusion, their retreat to the basement has little to do with shame and more to do with a conviction that nothing will ever change. To state it explicitly, Bee's world "reject[s] the real world… and physical existence along with it" with a "preference for the certainty of nothingness over the realm of uncertainty" (Whisker and Coe 17).[17] For Bee, there is no such thing as salvation: this is the rest of their life, and that is how things will always

[17] Whisker, James Biser and Coe, John R. "Nietzsche: Godfather of Nihilism." *Nihilism: The Philosophy of Nothingness.* Nova Science Publishers, 2021. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/reader.action?docID=6639257&query=&c=UERG&ppg=36

be. Their divinity is not truly divine; it is claimed, falsified, never verifiable, and formed not on love or worship, not on the promise of a savior, but rather the guarantee of chaos and resentment, confusion and fiction. Uncertainty is reality. Certainty lies in the guarantee that nothing is real — and that they can ensure that this remains the case.

I thus return to Kristeva to examine the nature of Bee's identity expression through the bot-farm, particularly the distinguishing between the questions of "*Where* am I?" and "*Who* am I?" (Kristeva 8) in discussion of an *abject* and a *deject.* A deject, Kristeva argues, is in self-imposed exile, a constructor of worlds who "never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines… constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh" (Kristeva 8). Bee, I pose, by this framework, is less the abject that simply exists in their absence and more the deject that has, effectively, *chosen* this path. Kristeva's usage of the active voice suggests that, unlike the abject, who is *separated from*, the implication being a separation instituted by others, the deject separates specifically "himself" (Kristeva 8), making the choice to navigate through their circumstances beyond the control of others. The abject is concerned with the matter of being, a question of *who* the abject is, what makes up their identity.

The deject, conversely, is not interested in this question, choosing instead to question *where* they are, thus perpetually constructing a place for themself that is "never *one,* nor *homogenous,* nor *totalizable,* but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic" (Kristeva 8). The deject is a *Creator,* literally building their own universe. The deject, like Bee, seems to thrive in the desire to separate themself from others; the essay argues that the deject's straying necessary led to their being *saved* — finding salvation, then, of some form, in their choice to self-differentiate. Like the abject, the deject is an exile, but the distinction seems to be in choice; if the abject attempts to exist in a pre-existing world, the deject seems to attempt to create new,

inherently unstable ones where they can most truly exist as the "non-object" (Kristeva 8) of the abject. The deject is an abject who attempts to choose otherwise; Bee is Kant attempting to avoid his fate. Read through this lens, the bot farm, then, is perhaps Tulathimutte's attempt to manifest non-identifiable identity through unlocatable location, for an abject/deject to create a universe of themself, a universe of endless, self-replicating, destabilized non-objects.

And, in line with Kristeva's articulations of the cycle of world-creating and therefore endless release, there is an *after-botfarm:* escaping into other universes did not work before, and it has not worked again. Bee's story ends with the reveal that they are no longer controlling their mass-trolling operations, no longer inhabiting these millions of accounts to extend their mortal form — even though this, supposedly, was to have been their answer, their truth. Bee even expresses doubt over being an Internet-reliant recluse for the rest of their life: "I often wonder if this is what I want to do, sit inside year-round, devising notional people" (Tulathimutte 229) — to exist in fantasy, as Kant does, shying away from the real world under the guise of rejecting it, encountering it only through people's posts on social media. The online is their escape, and it is also their window into reality. Lying, and the creation of fiction, was their most accurate self-representation.

But if the online is the answer, shouldn't they feel happier? Even as they approach this thought, their mind immediately shuts it down and reiterates, like an oath, that "The internet is obviously better" (Tulathimutte 230) before concluding with their typical, plausibly deniable irony that never quite leaves a concrete answer or statement in its wake. Reality might be "static and vestigial," but of course the "presiding democratic humiliation" (Tulathimutte 230) is better. *Democratic* implies the existence of the masses and their movement, a majority agreement to

engage in these rituals of mass, collective shame — to be together in their misery, united by meaningless movement without destination. It's better, or isn't it?

After the botfarm, Bee the deject has nothing, no other choices before them. There is no salvation — nor the illusion of it. Despite the infinity of the online, they do not actually have the option to choose. This is the clarity that comes in the aftermath of euphoric release, Kant's damp feet and weird showers, and thus returns the Kant-Bee special, a hyper-focus on the endless limitations and discomforts of the physical body, made ever the more obvious in contrast with the Internet's infinite fantasies. Bee's physical form has begun to deteriorate from their extreme Internet usage, limiting their ability to actually interact with a computer, and their mental health has taken such a decline that they are "too depressed to scroll the internet, which is like being too hungry to eat" (Tulathimutte 230).

The bot farm was not relief and thus salvation; it was release, just as everything else was, and now, absent of answer, convinced, over the years, that what would give them true relief — social inclusion and acceptance by others — is a lie that they fell for. Bee's confessions of their disinterest begin with the prolonged, collective isolation period that COVID-19 wrought, seeming to profess annoyance or discomfort at the fact that they cannot even say that their isolation and Internet addiction is a *choice;* it is, actually, *government-mandated* and thus entirely finite, stagnant within the realms of conceivable possibility, and the opposite of contrary. Choice is further taken from them when they articulate the reminders of the limitations of their physical form — that they have a physical, mortal, fallible form at all — and how it literally prevents them from going online. But, as they say — again, using that irony to blunt vulnerability, as if that would take back the sting of the feeling itself — "what finally killed my vibe was the exodus to video" (Tulathimutte 230).

Video requires form; video requires identity. Video requires finite existence, a body with definable edges that puts itself, as an individual, onstage for public consumption and judgment, with no way to know if someone has stuck a chocolate bar on your chair. Video requires humiliation; video requires singularity. Video requires identity and to vie for social inclusion, the very things that Bee used the Internet to escape in the first place — and so Bee is left with nothing.

Their final gambit, a last-ditch attempt to achieve relief, takes the form of the ultimate reveal that "what you've read isn't canon" (Tulathimutte 232) but one of over a billion variations of the post, generated by AI and spread to every conceivable platform that supports text-based posting — a reveal that only further underscores the pointlessness of everything that this story has articulated, of the story's existence at all. Absent of concrete consistency, the truth becomes obsolete, and Bee has come closer to achieving their ultimate goal: a nihilistic rather than divine attempt tobecome no one by becoming everyone. This goal was never going to save them, and it is clear that they no longer have any delusions that it will.

Both Kant and Bee ultimately demonstrate that Internet-based, disembodied expressions of selfhood cannot resolve the desire for recognition that produces them. Kant remains trapped in cycles of release without relief while Bee escalates toward total abstraction only to find that multiplicity offers no more satisfaction than isolation. In both cases, the Internet provides not escape but repetition. This is repeated release, without satiation, until the characters are physically no longer able to continue. If Kant's ending is tentatively hopeful, with no idea of the nightmare that he is literally going to wake to, then Bee — obfuscating only slightly — states that they have no reason for posting this other than for the sake of it. Bee thus maintains control over the narrative and ensures that their identity remains impossible to place or define. Their post

is a honeypot that embraces its identity, a decoy that proudly announces itself as one. Bee has no hope that anything will come out of this, unlike Kant, because they do not believe that anything will change. This is Bee's final act of trolling, a memoriam to the acts of their past. If nothing matters, then their "only motive was fun" (Tulathimutte 222).

At least a troll doesn't delude themself into thinking that there's a point to it all.

Conclusion

I now abandon the academic tone for the purpose of self-reflection under the guise of summary. The method, here, is the potential solution that David Foster Wallace posed to address the growing pervasiveness of irony, a generational inability to take anything seriously: earnestness bordering on cringe. Consider this a Bee confession-post of my own.

In my senior year of high school, I wrote my Duke application essay about identity, social perception, and externally imposed definitions of selfhood. I despised labels; I despised identification. I, like the narrator of *Y/N,* did not want to be related to. I did not want to be anything, and I loathed the fact that concrete portions of my selfhood — including my age, ethnicity, and gender — could be gleaned from aspects of my physical body. I did not want to be seen, and yet I wanted to be known. And I, like these three narrators, turned to the Internet as my refuge. This thesis has brought me full-circle to the very piece of writing that opened the door to my attendance at this university. In the spirit of Bee's unwavering commitment to deception, I thought about lying here and saying that I meant to do that all along. That it was an accident, one I did not identify until I began writing this very paragraph, almost makes it better.

Writing this thesis was like pulling teeth. To write a thesis is, apparently, to step into the role of a graduate student and cosplay as an academic for a few months, even if you have no idea what that means. A very important thing that they do not tell you about writing a thesis is that you have to sound like you know what you're doing when you have absolutely no clue what you're doing at any given moment, in general, but especially when moving from the standard eight page essay to analysis so large that it must be divided into chapters, perhaps into sub-sections. The horror. I moved from guessing games on social media, attempting to discern whether the video I was watching was an event that had actually happened or if someone had generated it artificially, to guessing games on my computer, in my own head, as I attempted to

discern whether what I was writing was relevant or if it was actually the most fake sentence ever constructed in the English language.

In short, I wrote with a fractured, isolated, anarchic reality in mind — and, thus, a fractured, isolated, anarchic mind. In this reality, we can no longer trust the facts of our eyes. The online world is full of Bees that generate, Kants and *Y/N*-narrators that consume. We are increasingly alone, therefore increasingly seeking connection, therefore increasingly vulnerable to falsehood posturing as truth — and with a lack of third spaces, one of the few places we can retreat is to an Internet that might be dead. One of the few places that we can learn the truth, news of world events, is the place where you can't tell if anything is real. One of the few places we can connect with people is the place where no one might be real. What joy.

Unironically. There is unironic joy to be found on the Internet, and I do not want to undermine that. I have a lawyer friend from Australia, whom I met in a Twitter comment section, with whom I chat with every year or so about an objectively terrible animated TV show featuring robots in space. It's nice to look up a hyper-specific experience, add "Reddit" at the end of the search query, and find approximately four dozen forum posts written by people who experienced the exact same thing as you. I don't know anyone in my real life who shares a particular hobby as me, but I've encountered hundreds online that do. In my loneliest, most isolated times, I found community online. When I sought to flee from the constraints of observable identity, I multiplied and divided myself into dozens of anonymous, faceless accounts across social media platforms. The Internet was an escape, yes, and often a frightening one — this isn't to say that I haven't had negative experiences online, because what online person hasn't scrolled upon the occasional gore video — but it was also a refuge.

I wanted to do something true, something concrete, when I wrote this. I wanted to write something located in our present moment, immediately relevant to our current reality. This is a world where the actual, official White House Twitter (now X) account posts edits of immigrants being violently detained while a cheery, trending song by popstar Sabrina Carpenter plays in the background.[18] (The post has since been deleted following Sabrina Carpenter's reply demanding that it be taken down.) This is a world where my generation, Gen-Z, has a screen-time of over seven hours.[19] This is a world where social media platforms have become territories of their own, entire groups of people across the globe governed by the whims of a single CEO.

This is reality, and it is inescapable. But it is not unchangeable. If the inability to connect is the plague driving our Kants, Bees, and *Y/N*-narrators away, then perhaps empathy is our cure. Online echo chambers create the circumstances for polarization, further separating us from each other; to resist the impulse to divide is not necessarily to agree but certainly to attempt understanding of the other, to accept the rejected and welcome the self-isolated. Human error is more compelling than machinic perfection. Vile perversion is more compelling than barren sterility. Conflict is more compelling than a frictionless plot. The Internet is a tool for community, and as long as we are willing to welcome our neighbors, we can still use it as such.

Through this thesis, I believe, I hope, that I have revealed some truths about what it means to exist online as a human being in a human body and connect with real and fantasy people through the Internet — in this space where bodies do not exist and therefore identities can

[18] Carpenter, Sabrina (@SabrinaAnnLynn). "this video is evil and disgusting." *X,* 2 Dec. 2025, https://x.com/SabrinaAnnLynn/status/1995876972405420114

[19] Faughnder, Ryan. "Gen Z Spends Half Its Waking Hours on Screen Time. Here's the Good and Bad News for Hollywood." *Los Angeles Times*, 12 Apr. 2022, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/newsletter/2022-04-12/gen-z-spends-half-its-waking-hours-on-screen-time-heres-the-good-and-bad-news-for-hollywood-the-wide-shot

be shed, perhaps sold. I hope, too, that this thesis has said something about the necessity of written literature, of the humanities in general — of the truth that can be found in fiction, even in an age of lies. As generative A.I. becomes more interwoven with the fabric of our society, we must question the nature of truth itself, where navigating the Internet has become a guessing game, a puzzle of parsing through lies and reality. In this reality, we can no longer trust the facts of our eyes. If A.I. can generate a grammatically flawless, informative article about a complete lie, if there is no longer any discernible distinction between what is reality and fantasy, then perhaps what is factual matters less than what is true.

I also hope you do not understand my entire selfhood after reading this thesis. I am no *Y/N*-narrator, and you are no fantasy-image of a K-pop idol. Also, that is not the point of an undergraduate thesis. I am drifting from earnestness; allow me the return: in the interest of human made honesty, I will confess that I am okay with the fact that I have not fully captured every nuance of online communication and existence. All of the mistakes, the holes in the argument, every questionably placed em-dash, are proof that a flawed, hungry, and overly excited human, in a human body, wrote this with two very human hands.

And now, I will email this thesis to what is hopefully a better outcome than Kant is teetering on the edge of receiving. Send!

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