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AUTOFICTION'S INTERROGATION OF NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTIVITY

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has highlighted the affinity between autofiction—a development in the contemporary novel that incorporates a fictionalized version of the author in the work—and the neoliberal economy. Through readings of contemporary autofictional novels by Nicole Krauss and Sheila Heti, this essay argues that autofiction—in addition to being a method by which the author can respond to the injunction to develop his or her own portfolio of human capital—is a form that interrogates the animating logics behind the contemporary subject of capital. Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2010) dramatizes the formation of the artist as neoliberal subject as the adoption of enterprise unification of purpose in order to function within the competitive field. *Motherhood* (2018) describes a writer in her late thirties who stages a confrontation between the cultural directive to have children and the demands of a subjectivity marked by the injunction to achieve continuous progress, even when none is available. Krauss's *Forest Dark.* (2017) turns the critical lens back onto autofiction itself, pairing alternating narratives that coalesce to form a critique of autofiction's ambiguous capacity to alter the author's public image. All three novels conclude with an ambivalence toward the continual making of self that lies at the heart of both the subject of late capitalism and the autofictional gesture, and in so doing, reject the ubiquity of growth narratives in favor of a depiction of self-investment as a recursive, self-perpetuating circuit.

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Autofiction's Interrogation of Neoliberal Subjectivity

Introduction: the subject of neoliberal capital writes

Literary studies' continuing interest in neoliberalism arises from its status as a hegemonic, yet largely invisible, ideological framework of subjectivity.[1] "Neoliberalism" refers to the economic theories associated with Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics that first entered the discourse of state economic planning in the 1970's. The governmental policy recommendations neoliberal economic theory generates—privatization of public concerns, the reduction of the welfare state to a bare minimum, the lowering of taxes on corporate profits—have gone transnational, becoming the favored model of economic planning forwarded by bodies such as the World Bank and the IMF[2]. Political theorist Wendy Brown, in *Undoing the Demos* (2015), defines neoliberalism not only as a program of installing hands-off economic planning, but also as "a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms" (17). Developing Michel Foucault's formulation of *homo economicus* from *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), Brown argues that "neoliberalism has taken deeper root in subjects and in language, in ordinary practices and in consciousness" than what is immediately apparent (47). "Foucault would remind us," Brown writes, "that any ascendant political rationality is not only destructive, but brings new subjects, conduct, relations, and worlds into being" (36). In this view, the individual subject, caught in a cultural imaginary that sees competition as the essential model of relationality among agents, is figured as its own enterprise.

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[1] For recent in-depth treatments neoliberalism's relationship with literature, see the special issue of *Novel* on "The Novel and Neoliberalism" (2018), the special issue of *Social Text* on "Genres of Neoliberalism" (2013), and *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* by Rachel Greenwald Smith.

[2] See David Harvey's *Brief History of Neoliberalism* for the classic account of neoliberalism's global rise. Harvey has it that this suite of policies backed by an intensification of classical liberalism was seized upon in a loosely coordinated "project to achieve the restoration of class power" (16).

As a result, the neoliberal subject, "being for himself his own capital, [...] his own producer, the source of earnings," is alienated from its status as labor or agent of exchange, making room for the entrepreneurial mode to occupy a greater and greater share of its activity (Foucault 226). The subject of neoliberal capital, besieged on all sides by rivals, must become finely attuned to changes in the marketplace and consumer sentiment, turning the search for a profitable niche into the work of a lifetime. Successful human capital fully adheres to a program of self-management in which subjects measure their performance, focus on their most profitable activities, then reinvest their profits in either expanding productive capacity or undertaking a regimen of "continuous improvement" to produce regular "breakthroughs" in competitiveness (Juran).[3]

As Brown notes, though the above "neoliberal rationality disseminates market values and metrics to new spheres, this does not always take a monetary form; rather, fields, persons, and practices are economized in ways that vastly exceed literal wealth generation" (37). In the societies where it has been most internalized, neoliberal logic is virtually impossible to escape, and "the normative reign of *homo oeconomicus* in every sphere means that there are no motivations, drives, or aspirations apart from economic ones" (44). Consider that

> Human capital's constant and ubiquitous aim, whether studying, interning, working, planning retirement, or reinventing itself in a new life, is to entrepreneurialize its endeavors, appreciate its value, and increase its rating or ranking. In this, it mirrors the mandate for contemporary firms, countries, academic departments or journals, universities, media or websites:

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[3] Juran, the company founded by Romanian-American engineer and consultant Joseph M. Juran (1926-2008), lucidly explicates and systemizes one widely-utilized "enterprise logic." Juran works with clients to install a system of "Total Quality Management," in which every employee in a company takes responsibility for quality, defined in this case as those attributes of a company's products or services which increases customer satisfaction without decreasing customer satisfaction.

> entrepreneurialize, enhance competitive positioning and value, maximize ratings or rankings (Brown 36).

Just as the goal for the capital venture is continuous growth, progression becomes the rationale for all activity, regardless of the nature of the agent. However, just because the logic is economic logic, and the figuration of the subject is homologized with a model of capital enterprise, doesn't mean that the content is strictly financial. As Jason Read argues, "Neoliberalism can be considered a particular version of 'capitalism without capitalism,'" capable of "doing away with the antagonism and social insecurity of capitalism […] paradoxically by extending capitalism, at least its symbols, terms, and logic, to all of society" (32). Any prior "opposition between capitalist and worker has been effaced not by a transformation of *the mode of production* […] but *by the mode of subjection*, a new production of subjectivity" in which all are united in their fanatical pursuit of particular interests (Read 32).

Art, then, would be by necessity implicated in this neoliberal governmentality, and as I'll demonstrate, autofiction, a practice of novel writing that includes the insertion of a character based-on and named-for the work's author in the narrative, is the development in contemporary fiction that most incorporates the neoliberal model of subjectivity in the content of the work. In Nicole Krauss's *Forest Dark* (2017), a writer named "Nicole" travels to Israel to gain inspiration for her next novel but is soon asked by a retired Mossad agent to finish a play by Franz Kafka so that it may be shot as a film—all for the glorification of the Jewish diaspora and the Israeli state. Sheila Heti's first novel, *How Should a Person Be?* (2012), centers on a young writer in her twenties named "Sheila" who struggles with her inability to fulfill an agreement to write a play for a local theater company, finding that she needs to first master the art of being a "whole" person before she is able to write. In Heti's 2018 follow-up, *Motherhood,* a similarly

autobiographical author-character weighs, in her late thirties, the decision of whether or not to become a mother. In all three of the above instances of autofiction, the authors fulfill the neoliberal edict to develop their personal brands by centering a fictionalized version of themselves in the work. Additionally, the logic of the neoliberal subject-as-enterprise plays out in all its excruciating consequentiality within the novels themselves. “Nicole” in *Forest Dark* concludes that the story of the Jewish people, concerned as it is with reaching a Zionist end, can never be realized through writing, “as literature resides in the sphere of the endless, and those who write have no hope of an end” (269). Instead, she must write only for herself. “Sheila” in *How Should a Person Be?* learns to discard “unprofitable” activities (striving to become the ideal sex object, writing plays about others), and instead pursues a “platonic wholeness” of life fully geared towards the production of novels of artistic merit. The unnamed writer in *Motherhood* ultimately decides against becoming a mother, spiraling into an ever-heightening crisis of questioning her chosen role as a “writer” before anticlimactically finding peace through psychiatric treatment for depression.

The increase in “life-writing, memoir fiction,” or as it's now commonly identified, autofiction, has been described as “[t]he most visible tendency in the contemporary novel right now” (Huber 185). As a moment in the history of the novel, autofiction is a development that reflects and addresses the economized subject of neoliberalism described by Brown as it directly concerns the transplantation of the economic subject’s role in the competitive marketplace into the individual subject’s role in private life. Neoliberalism blurs the line between these two spheres, always pursuing a full alignment of activity towards one purpose. Autofiction is able to accommodate this full alignment by allowing for the direct conversion of “life lived” into “fiction sold.” By centering the author-character as an object of direct, authorial manipulation,

autofiction becomes a means by which authors can adhere to the injunction to take control of their own brand, develop themselves as a venture, and maximize returns. Lee Konstantinou, in a roundtable discussion on "Contemporary Autofiction" at the 2021 MLA Convention, argues that autofiction is "a way of grappling formally" with the "becoming institutional of the individual." As works of autofiction commonly depict fictionalized author-characters in conflict with the process of writing, marketing, or selling their works, authors are able to "foregroun[d] [the] struggle to capitalize on [their] own names." For Konstantinou, this means that "the distinctive feature of this aesthetic gesture [autofiction] is the internalization of marketing into literary form," making it something more akin to "Reality Television than metafiction."

The close affinity of autofiction and the increasingly urgent demands placed on the neoliberal subject to develop *itself* as a matter of absolute priority is clear. But an understanding of autofiction as *mostly* marketing is in danger of understating the significant need for a mode of art that concerns itself with the interrogation of neoliberal subjectivity in all its complexity. Comparisons of autofiction with reality television—while apt in highlighting both forms' collapsing of the fact/fiction divide and their shared utility in advancing one's position and exposure in one's respective competitive field—discount the political ramifications of autofiction's unique generic/modal properties, properties that are not at all present in reality television. Autofiction combines the role of critic with the role of author of fiction, and the author/characters that populate these works continuously question their own activities and experience the careerist obligations of their professions as sources of anxiety and ennui. Reality television shows rarely, if ever, allow their stars to express discontent with the show.

In what follows, I'll argue that autofiction's capacity to make available neoliberal subjectivity as a legible object of critique allows it to serve as a diagnostic for the contemporary

reader. Further, I'll show how the works of autofiction read—Krauss's *Forest Dark* and Heti's *HSAPB?* and *Motherhood*— make important, critical revelations of neoliberal subjectivity that other forms would struggle to illuminate. Namely, the three works reveal the lived, material ramifications of a neoliberal subject that has mutated in response to an economic moment in which the animating principle of enterprise—the reinvestment of profit into growth—becomes unavailable as anything but an empty structure, resulting in a dynamic in which the subject, unable to make progress towards any attainable goal, gets caught in a recursive loop of receding from, and then reproducing, its own identity.

The competing genealogies of contemporary autofiction

While "autofiction" has gained purchase as a term of art in the world of book reviews for over the past decade or more, the publication of some of the first extended academic studies on autofiction's contemporary manifestation has occurred in just the past few years. The Hywel Dix-edited collection, *Autofiction in English*, and Marjory Worthington's monograph, *The Story of "Me": Contemporary American Autofiction*, both published in 2018, are in part concerned with the establishment of an origin story that explains the increase in the publication—or identification—of novels categorized as autofiction. Dix's introduction to *Autofiction in English* makes the now-familiar genealogical move of tracing the genre's origins to 1970's France when Serge Doubrovsky coined the term "autofiction" in a blurb that appeared on the back of his own heavily autobiographical novel, *Fils* (1977) ("Introduction" 1). In Dix's retelling, "it was [...] on a stylistic basis that [Doubrovsky] first attempted to define" autofiction, describing "the practice" as one "committed to narrating events that he considered strictly real" outside of any adherence to the "linear, sequential, chronological time" in which they may have initially been experienced ("Introduction" 2). As Doubrovsky's practice gained critical attention in France, his definition of

autofiction shifted to a “sociological” account of the position of the author (3). In this view, a would-be writer of autobiography must be “sufficiently well known to the general public” or “of a sufficiently high standing even within the more limited sphere of the reading public to warrant” such a designation (3). Doubrovsky’s revised definition understood autofiction as “a form of autobiographical writing that offers to fill the gap created when more traditional forms of autobiography are rendered sociologically unavailable by the status of the writer (which may of course be ‘real’ or perceived)” (3). In this sense, autofiction is what happens when autobiography is written by “nobodies” (3). If the key differentiator of autofiction from autobiography is that it often “incorporates the techniques and characteristics more commonly associated with fiction, especially modernist experimental fiction,” its ability to make a “truth-claim” in keeping with Phillippe Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact” struck between reader and writer of an ostensibly nonfiction text is removed (*Late Career Novelist* 160). Thus, the works, though based on one’s lived experiences, are more honestly described by the word “novel” than autobiography or memoir, producing the genre of autofiction to fill that space. In Dix’s account of the genre, recent academic interest “in research about life writing” in the anglophone context prompted scholars to plumb the archives of a rich, French critical engagement with the large body of French autofiction, allowing “the field of autofiction to” come to its “moment of effective emergence in English in both theory and practice” that we see today (7).

In the *Story of Me*, Worthington develops a definition of autofiction in which it is only the term “autofiction” that can trace an etymological lineage to France, while the form and content of the novels being discussed and read today in the US are firmly rooted in the metafictional tendency that emerged in American postmodern literature. This genealogical distinction allows Worthington to assert that the “defining characteristic of autofiction” is that

the author of a work and their namesake author-character that appears in a work "become divergent yet metaleptically interconnected entities" in the course of depicting fictional events (2). This results in a text that, made clear first and foremost through paratextual cues, "is meant to be read primarily as a novel," while "autobiography or memoir is meant to be read as a true story" (3). American novels from the post-war period that first flirted with the idea of including a character sharing the same name as the author—Worthington points to Kurt Vonnegut's appearance in *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), and John Barth's authorial intrusions in his short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) as examples—would represent the true genetic forebears of contemporary autofiction. These works often feature "the self-conscious *insertion* into fiction of a male authorial figure who tries, often unsuccessfully, to gain and keep control of his narrative," which often stubbornly insists on its autonomy despite the author's best efforts (Worthington 45). These metafictional gestures respond to a historical moment in which the status of white men "as the universal and objective societal 'norm,'" and the concomitant possibility for a white male writer to assume a "disembodied authorial authority" over *any* narrative, becomes increasingly untenable (51). Therefore, "called upon to reveal their positionality," white male authors utilize the "autofictional approach" with the paradoxical result of "recenter[ing] white masculinity" (51, 48).

> If a writer 'enters' his novel as a character, claiming that he has lost or is losing control over that narrative, not only does he make himself (or at least, a characterized version of himself) the thematic venter (protagonist) of the novel, but he also foregrounds his creative powers by reasserting his authorial power within the pages of that novel. Autofiction thus recenters the decentered figure of the wounded white male author figure" (48).

This view, which comes to see autofiction as a "symptom of authorial anxieties that stemmed from the literary gains made by women and writers of color and the declining cultural capital of the traditional figure of the author" allows Worthington to see the genre "as a largely white male endeavor" ("We'll Make Magic" 8). Therefore, the "unsparingly truthful, often psychoanalytic explorations of a writer's selfhood" that most resemble the works coming out of the autofiction movement arising in 1970's France "would likely be termed 'memoirs' rather than 'autofictions'" within the "American literary context" ("We'll Make Magic" 4). While Worthington recognizes that authors who identify differently certainly write autofiction, it is the practice maintained by and for the purposes of white men she centers in her critique of the genre.

According to novelist Tope Folarin, however, the publishing industry as a whole has failed to recognize the extent to which autofiction is written by people of color, suggesting that Worthington's critique of autofiction as primarily a gesture by white men responding to their decentering by historical circumstances may be less a generic feature than a tendency of a particular demographic. Folarin, whose autofictional novel *A Particular Kind of Black Man* came out in 2019, wrote in October 2020 that authors of color who write novels that are formalistically identical to autofiction—including "*Man Gone Down* by Michael Thomas, *The Residue Years* by Mitchell Jackson, *What We Lose* by Zinzi Clemmons, [...] *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi," and his own novel—are rarely, if ever, described as being writers of autofiction. Instead, "when the autobiographical content of these novels is addressed it is simply described as being, well, autobiographical" (Folarin). Since autofiction is perceived to be "at the cutting edge of literary innovation" while "autobiographical fiction is as old as time," these writers of color are left out of the lively discourse surrounding an emerging form. The consistent citation of white writers as examples of authors of autofiction is all the more alarming since autofiction "is not a literary

movement—or at the very least [...] autofiction's practitioners have not indicated they are working together or issued some earnest manifesto declaring their intentions to the world"—but a category "created by critics, which perhaps explains why this genre's generally acknowledged membership is so homogenous" (Folarin). Folarin notes that officially-designated "autofiction writers benefit from an ongoing, ever-recurring conversation about their work that constantly probes and redefines what they have accomplished and extends the lifecycle of their work beyond the typical book promotional time frame." This critical attention on "The Offices of Cusk Heti Lerner & Knausgaard," Folarin's joke that the combined names of autofiction's most cited authors in their combined form creates the impression that they're "partners in a kind of literary professional services firm," gives them the material benefit of lingering sales while Black (and other marginalized) writers are not welcome to the lucrative club of the avant garde.

Notable in Folarin's critique that autofiction's critically-imposed homogeneity produces unfair sales advantages for white writers is how it centers on the marketing power contained in a term like "autofiction." Autofiction's novelty certainly contributes to its ability to attract critical attention, but it is autofiction's ability to meet the market-based demand that authors separate themselves in a field of literary competition that informs Christian Lorentzen's critique of autofiction as a symptom of contemporary "careerism" ("Vying Animal"). For Lorentzen, careerism has become "the dominant literary style in America," and constitutes a ceaseless activity that goes "above and beyond the usual" business obligations for writers such as "dealings with editors, agents, and Hollywood big shots." Examples of careerism include "[i]nstitutional jockeying, posturing in profiles and Q&As, roving in-person readership cultivation, social-media fan-mongering, coming off as a good literary citizen among one's peers," and all other activities that professional writers must perform as "a matter of necessity

and survival" in the field of competition. In Lorentzen's view, when an author's writing itself is recruited in the service of fulfilling the careerist injunction to craft and "idealize their fictional selves," that is, to self-brand, an "autofiction of self-flattery" can result ("Vying Animal"). Lorentzen's description of the incessant self-development demanded of the contemporary author elucidates, and his identification of autofiction as a possible outlet for meeting such demands, elucidates many of the salient features of autofiction that make it so amenable to recruitment in careerist efforts. These are the same features that Konstantinou and I center in analyzing autofiction's formal responsiveness to the unique demands placed on the subject under capitalism's late, neoliberal form.

For Konstantinou, "autofiction, [...] at least in its contemporary variation, is not a genre" in the strictest sense, but "an aesthetic gesture or practice or mode [...] that takes place at the intersection of genre and marketing." Autofiction, then, represents "a way of grappling formally with a larger ongoing historical condition or crisis"—neoliberalism—under which "the individual is increasingly charged with the job of managing his own portfolio of human capital" (Konstantinou). Therefore the "internalization of marketing into literary form, and the identification of self-promotion with the author function" begets the rise of a practice of writing which can unite the artistic impulse with the neoliberal injunction to stand out in the field of competition (Konstantinou). Neoliberal subjects, treated as entrepreneurs of themselves, are under the consistent pressure to individuate and take control of their own identities as yet another text to be authored. While this may be done by any number of methods, authors find in autofiction the opportunity to center their own fictionalized avatars in their works, giving them control over what Wayne Booth calls the "Career Author," the "author-image evoked by a work and constituted by the stylistic, ideological, and aesthetic properties for which indexical signs

can be found in the text" (Schmid). The career-author image, conjured by each individual reader, functions as a signal of what features to expect in a new, unread work, contributing to readerly impressions of which authors he or she "likes." In this way, the career-author image, especially when steered purposely in a work of autofiction, can function like a corporate brand, purposely fashioning a body of aesthetic features that appeal to certain demographics. Autofiction allows the author to apply their craft directly to shaping the effect produced by the paratextual appearance of their name on the cover of a book, even in subsequent, non-autofictional works.

In his article "Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon," Mark McGurl's analysis of the author in the age of the service economy provides another promising avenue by which autofiction's status as a practice of neoliberal subjectivity can be understood. In the "Age of Amazon," fiction writers have learned to self-figure as enterprises in the model of the post-Fordist, service-sector dominated economy, an epochal development in relationality between provider and consumer that "comes freighted with a complex social psychology of servility and entitlement, servility and domination, and indeed servile domination" (Hochschild qtd. in McGurl 453). McGurl argues that the contemporary author's sensitivity to the market demands a highly flexible producer, one who responds to shifts in consumer sentiment in "real time." While the author strives for instantaneous reaction to consumer demand, McGurl's study reveals the recent historical development of an imaginary that locates literature as precisely the site in which a subject can effect the temporary abatement of the perpetual march of "real-time" experience. McGurl argues that "what makes fiction so interesting as a 'neoliberal' commodity is its partial temporal disjunction from the real-time regime" as it has come to constitute "the virtualization of quality time" (465). Fiction, "consumed during alone time, [...] finds its thematic substance in the narrative dilation of human intimacy and intrigue, while its most typical grammatical form—the

past tense—indicates its imaginary removal from the real time of the reader's present" (McGurl 465). This makes it capable of "carving out spaces for autonomous sociality as against the relentless demands of work" (465). "The task" for the writer, then, becomes "to stay in the moment—forever," a project that mirrors Amazon's mission of always staying one step ahead of changes in consumption habits (perhaps by shaping them itself) (467). If somehow the paradoxical simultaneity of "[r]eal time and long term [...] is exactly the formula for enduring literary value," then we can surmise that autofiction is the genre that most happily marries the "now" with the forever. While McGurl makes no mention of autofiction directly, it represents the development in the novel most formally suited to achieving the direct transubstantiation of fleeting, real-time experience into the concretized form of "the literary text," which "can now in theory live forever, for as long at least as humanity does, or its servers" (469). One side-effect, perhaps, is that a logic which orients the aggregate intentionality of "life" towards whatever textual production can be made of it creates a pressure-system in which "life will be meaningful only insofar as the work" that results "remains available as an object of experience, an occasion for the real-time enjoyment of virtual quality time, that is, for reading" (469). The writer of autofiction, then, must retain the paranoid awareness that every decision taken, and every move made *in their real life,* while available for fictional manipulation, has some extra-experiential responsibility to some reader "out there." The application of McGurl's framework to autofiction results in the revelation of a subject of neoliberalism who, paradoxically, living only for its own interests and its own development (the historical paragon of narcissism), must in fact recruit every ounce of its subjectivity in a stance of permanent servility towards the customer.

Perhaps the expansion of servility, called up by neoliberal subjectivity as structured by the service economy, is why there is such a clear tendency among contemporary authors of

autofiction to center a fictionalization of their careers as at least one of the anchoring plot conceits of their novels, a feature shared by Krauss's *Forest Dark* and Heti's *HSAPB?* and *Motherhood*. As Konstantinou notes, "contemporary autofiction, from Dave Eggers to Ben Lerner to Sheila Heti to Rachel Cusk," exhibits an "obsess[ion] with the process of publishing and the mechanics of the writer's life." This is due to the fact that "under neoliberalism, the individual" author "becomes something like a firm, who must: on the one hand, manage his own inner resources, his drives, his talents, and so on, and then, on the other hand, must, like any independent firm, hire and fire agents, editors, and publishers and must navigate personal and professional relationships that will, in time, get absorbed back into the maw of his writing" (Konstantinou). The careerist dimension of the autofictionalist's life is clearly legible in the work itself, but what's perhaps worth noting at this point is how those activities that most explicitly deal in marketing and achieving competitiveness, in so many cases, is presented as a source of pain, frustration, and ennui in the writer's life. The neoliberal careerist injunction seems to clash with cultural narratives that animate the author's decision to pursue literary life in the first place, inciting feelings of ambivalence and guilt. Literary criticism's abiding interest in literature's capture by—versus the availability of modes of resistance to—neoliberalism is especially pertinent given the way that works of autofiction often stage the neoliberal subject's "grappling" with its own understanding of its activity.

Aaron Colton, a scholar interested in representations of writer's block "in postwar US literary culture," stages a confrontation of many of the different views of the extent of neoliberalism's capture of literature in his reading of Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (497). Colton, like McGurl, does not discuss autofiction directly, but instead sees *HSAPB?* primarily as a "New Sincerity" text that follows in the example set by David Foster Wallace in

his manifesto-like essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (469). In Colton's view, *HSPAB?* and other works of New Sincerity, which consciously turn away from the depersonalized irony associated with postmodernism, offer "a powerful method for contesting the preeminence of neoliberalism" by "animating personal feelings" and paying a "characteristic attention to expressive dilemmas" that "grants writers access to a register of epistemic critique which neoliberalism otherwise renders unavailable" (471). Specifically, he argues, Heti's deployment of the "künstlerroman" —a version of bildungsroman in which the development of an artist is traced—"become[s] a vehicle for interrogating constraints on expression, refusing responsibilization, and dethroning neoliberalism as the only conceivable rationale" (472).

Colton's reading offers a rebuttal of sorts to Rachel Greenwald Smith, as her critique of the "affective hypothesis," a critical framework built on "the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience" would necessarily implicate New Sincerity as a movement (Smith 1). In *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2015), Smith argues that the affective hypothesis represents a key interpretive trope of a disordered cultural logic that "imagines the act of reading as an opportunity for emotional investment and return" within the same neoliberal framework that "imagines the individual as an entrepreneur" (2). In this distinctly neoliberal imaginary of art, the affective contents of literature highlighted in the "affective hypothesis" are only those which Smith calls "personal feelings": feelings which "function like private property" not in that "they are secret or interior," but in that they are "'privatized'" (2). Personal feelings appearing in literature "circulate outside the self" in a manner akin to copyrighted intellectual property, "enrich[ing] the individual through their carefully calculated development, distribution, and expansion" (2). As an alternative, Smith offers that the cultivation of a literature of "impersonal

feelings"—which, for example, might use formal innovation to "emphasize the materiality of language" rather than "give weight to sentimental connections" or employ techniques to achieve "distance" from the personal rather than an "immediacy" with feeling—could be used to decommodify feelings in an effort that restores a figuration of "affect [...] as a commons" (58). Though Colton agrees with Smith's base-level assumptions about the pervasiveness of neoliberalism as a mode of subjectivity, he argues that "the personal/impersonal feelings dichotomy" imposed on contemporary literature by Smith's critique "also prompts us to reject literatures that, although rife with personal feelings, nonetheless offer responses to neoliberalism worthy of critical evaluation" (471). It is possible, in other words, to use an exploration of one's personal experiences and feelings to effectively "write against" neoliberalism.

In reading *Forest Dark, HSAPB?*, and *Motherhood*, I hope to demonstrate that autofiction's reactivity with the prevailing model of subjectivity is unique among literary forms because of the multivalence of its connection with neoliberalism. Autofiction serves the neoliberal, careerist interests of the author while simultaneously offering a fictionalized, textual representation of that subjectivity as a legible object of critique for both author and reader to consider. Unlike reality television, which merely reifies the understanding that life is an endless competition in which the subject eagerly partakes, Krauss's and Heti's autofictions depict subjectivities defined by a persistence of crisis. These novels show us crisis as inherent to that structure. Neoliberalism makes progress a condition of subjectivity, a condition that by definition is impossible to live up to. The incessant careerism identified by Lorentzen as a condition for survival becomes one of just many examples that autofiction shows us of how the progress-seeking subject is fate exist

"I don't think they even know the rules;" learning to compete in *How Should a Person Be?*

In Sheila Heti's two autofictional novels, *How Should a Person Be?* (2012) and *Motherhood* (2018), author-characters self-consciously wrestle with the implications of adopting the moniker "writer," an identity that both describes a model of individual enterprise while simultaneously hosting a multiplicity of cultural meanings and connotations. As both works are organized around the answering of a question as the proposed intradiegetic justification for their writing, as they share the development of similar themes, and as they both include the adoption of mechanical invention devices that introduce extra-ideological decision-making apparatuses, Heti's pair of novels invite being read in tandem. Adherence to Heti's real-life career arc also suggests a paired reading. Sheila, the author-character/narrator of *How Should a Person Be?* in her twenties, struggles to carve out an individuated identity for herself among a milieu of artists in Toronto, eventually developing herself into a highly transparent version of "writer" that is essentially purpose-built for the production of autofiction. *Motherhood*, like an unasked-for sequel that immediately rolls post-credits after an ostensibly happy ending, throws a wrench into the future projected by its predecessor. Instead, *Motherhood* depicts an unnamed writer in her late thirties living with the consequences of a dedication to maintaining the "writer" identity adopted at the end of *HSAPB?*. Finding not a "happily ever-after," but a life occupied with frenetic activity necessitated by merely remaining a writer, this author-character (whom I'll call "Heti" in order to differentiate her from both Sheila, the name of the author-character of *HSAPB?*, and the real life Heti) suddenly finds herself confronted with the demands of another, conflicting cultural narrative: the inseparability of motherhood and womanhood.

As I'll argue, Heti's autofictions are not limited to a cynically fulfilling the "marketing" function identified by Konstantinou. Instead, Heti's novels demonstrate autofiction's capacity to make the subject of human capital under neoliberalism a legible object of critique that other

forms often reify by turning that logic into plot. By critically engaging the adoption of a "perfected" neoliberal subjectivity as described by Wendy Brown in *HSPAB?,* which is then systematically revealed as incoherent, destabilizing, and unfulfilling in *Motherhood*, Heti's work is able to pierce the screen that allows for the unquestioned pursuit of self-enterprise. In so doing, the application of the logic of capital venture—a logic that requires the subject to achieve continuous growth, development, or progression as well as a deep identification with one's "enterprise model" as an all-encompassing identity formation—to all spheres of activity in order to survive in a competitive field is demonstrated as a force that renders the stable maintenance of identity nearly impossible. As "Heti" in *Motherhood* continuously finds herself receding from a steady belief in herself as a writer, her struggle to retain a comfortable identification *with what she certainly already is* becomes the main source of conflict in her life. In *Motherhood*, "Heti's" ruminative, recursive inner conflict, animated by the impossibility of fulfilling the neoliberal injunction to achieve continuous progress, is resolved anticlimactically by psychiatric intervention near the end of the novel. In this way, Heti's autofiction reveals an important aspect of neoliberal subjectivity that even Brown's groundbreaking work and other studies of workers in the "new economy" do not easily address: the incoherence of that subjectivity in an economic system in which enterprise-style growth cannot be achieved on a continuous basis by the individual. The neoliberal subject as depicted by Heti acts according to a set of instructions that renders unresolvable inner conflict a default reality of daily life.

The real-life experience that, in its rough outlines, correlates to the events depicted in *HSAPB?* happened while Heti was writing her first published book, a short fiction collection called *The Middle Stories* (2001). At the time, she had been struggling with finishing a commissioned play, and when the opportunity arose to publish a collection of stories with Dave

Eggers's press, McSweeney's, it became paramount that she did "what need[ed] to be done to get the book written," including molding herself into "the person" she "need[ed] to be to write [the] book" ("First Time"). This process of radical self-reconfiguration into a specific model of "writer" has since become an abiding interest of Heti's, and a repeated trope in her literary career. As she says in an interview with *The Paris Review*, "I like inventing the self that makes that book." Published over ten years after the events that are attributed with inspiring it, *HSAPB?* dispense with the short story collection as a plot point, and instead invents the self that makes the autofictional novel. Its main conflict is centered on the figure of an aborted play, but its author-character "Sheila" sets out in pursuit of a more general answer about "how to be" through a myriad of methods. Whether she envies the traits and attributes of others, receives Jungian psychoanalysis, or seeks he quiet dignity of competently laboring in a high-end hair salon, every avenue comes up empty. The answer that she ultimately comes to is that a person should be unified in purpose such that every aspect of his or her subjectivity is oriented towards a certain oneness. In Sheila's case, she attains unity under the enterprise-model of "writer." *HSAPB?*, as a bildungsroman about coming of age as a neoliberal subject, depicts "Sheila" learning how to effectively capitalize on her entire existence, including "all the trash and the shit inside" her (277). In so doing, she is figured as the ideal author of the autofiction represented by the novel.

In *HSAPB?,* the writer's block "Sheila" experiences in trying to complete her play is never overcome because the actual work required constitutes an experience outside the flow of life that ruptures its wholeness or unity of purpose. She repeatedly considers "cancel[ling] the play not because it's *dangerous*, but because life doesn't feel like it's in [her] stupid play, or with [her] sitting in a room *typing*" (*HSAPB* 82). The problem of a discontinuity of experience pits the neoliberal injunction for self-development against the activity of the playwright, who must take

time away from the self in order to sit and write, even if that writing constitutes a more directly economic activity than a journey of self-development would seem to. But the two activities are continuously conflated by Sheila. As she says when considering the appeal of entering an "ugly painting competition" with her friends, "I had spent so much time trying to make the play I was writing—and my life, and my self—into an object of beauty" that it had become "exhausting and all that I knew" (13). Driven to efface the distinction between herself and her play, Sheila is frustrated in her attempts to undertake the development of each under the banner of a single project aimed at producing a unified "object of beauty" (13). Whether it is a pressure originating from the particularities of her art-world community or located in a widely held cultural idealization of the artist, the inclusion of aesthetic criteria indicates the displacement of the economic content from the neoliberal growth impulse. Sheila's desire to merge the totality of her life experience with the practice of her writing mirrors the neoliberal "model of the subject [...] that reconciles the contradictory commitments" inherent in "liberalism, in which individuals were shaped on the one hand as citizen-subjects and on the other hand as economic subjects" (Smith 5). It has become a cultural standard, at least in the middle- and upper-classes, that individuals "love their work" or "do what they're passionate about," creating the idealized life-image of a professional who "lives their dreams" as the standard bearer of neoliberal subjectivity. The ideal subject under neoliberalism then is a venture that unifies all affectivity towards a single purpose. It is a true "individual," impossible to divide. Sheila's striving for that consolidation of purpose is precisely what produces the writer's block that dooms her play. She is unable to integrate her self-image into the "beautiful," the category in which art objects are found.

Sheila's interpellation of neoliberal subjectivity, taking on the form of an urgent quest for

oneness, becomes troubled by her understanding that "[t]here was something wrong inside" of her, "something ugly, which [she] didn't want anyone to see" (22). This ugliness, if revealed, would "contaminate everything [she] would ever do" and belie "the upright, good-inside person [she] hoped to show the world" (22). She looks for a way to "correct [her] flightiness, confusion, and selfishness," and "which ever" else "revealed [her] lack of unity inside," the thing she most "despised" about herself (22). This fear of a priori contamination causes her to search for an ideal image that she can use to overwrite herself, replacing her ugliness with something new and perfect, and in so doing makes a series of missteps that take her further away from achieving unity of purpose. She gets married at a young age ("the only way to repair this badness was devotion in love," she thinks), divorces, pursues perfection as a servile sex object with a man named (no joke) "Israel," and moves (briefly) to New York in order to "become important" (which would be the "the one thing that would justify the ugliness inside me," she thinks) (22, 189). But none of it works. Her marriage becomes a "brick wall" she needs to "*punch* [her]*self through*" in order to access the freedom of self-determination (44). Her divorce fails to help her "return to the play with new vigor," leaving her absented by the feeling that fate had been guiding her decisions (41). Her pursuit of perfection in objectified degradation on behalf of "Israel" only adds to her sense of shame when she becomes aware that, in keeping with a request to write him a letter "in the style of a letter home from a first-year university student or camper," while baring her vagina to someone at a restaurant "how sick it was that all this time I had been having so much trouble writing my play, yet instead of laboring away at it, here I was writing this fucking letter—this cock-sucking letter of flattery for Israel!" (205, 222). In all of these attempts to achieve unity—to fulfill the neoliberal injunction to orient oneself wholly towards an economized model of growth and achievement—she fails to account for her internal ugliness *as*

an asset to be developed.

Her persistent mistake in determining how a person should be, illustrated repeatedly through these various examples, is that each answer she arrives at, each ideal she pursues, is one that produces herself "as an object, or as an image to tend to, or as an icon" (183). "Instead of developing the capacities within," Sheila misidentifies the ontological state required to achieve unity by "treating [herself] as [an] object to be admired," constituting an "attempt to make the self into an object of need and desire by tending to the image of" herself (184). She allows herself, "in [her] freedom," to "wan[t] to be like coke to the coke addict, food to the starving person, and the middle of the night to thieves" (184). To give a name to it, Sheila repeatedly self-figures as a *commodity*, misplaced in a neoliberal economic framework that has undergone the "subtle shift from exchange to competition as the essence of the market" (Brown 36). As Foucault explains, since "what is sought" by neoliberalism "is not a society subject to the commodity effect, but a society subject to the dynamic of competition," the model of subject or "[t]he *homo oeconomicus* sought after is not the man of exchange or man the consumer" but "the man of enterprise and production" (147). Sheila's attempt to trade on her personal aesthetic worth in order to receive validation, however, is essentially an act of exchange. In attempting to become the desired commodity, Sheila hopes that she will be determine her worth by "establish[ing] the equivalence of two values" via the "free exchange between two partners" (Foucault 118). But in neoliberalism, the "most important thing about the market is competition, that is to say, not equivalence but on the contrary inequality" (120). Thus, the commodity as fetishized by the market cannot stand as the determining analogy for the individual subject under neoliberalism, as this subject, like an enterprise, only has value insofar as it can achieve continuous progress and demonstrate its superiority over the competition—always in motion,

always overcoming. The neoliberal subject relies on the "incorporation of all subjective potential, the capacity to communicate, to feel, to create, to think, into productive powers," in other words, the unity that Sheila lacks (Read 33). Sheila, who should be developing her capacity to create value, becomes misdirected by the imagined concretization of value found in the aesthetic, resulting in the wrong ontological transformation: becoming object rather than subject. As she explains,

> …the three ways the art impulse can manifest itself are: as an object, like a painting; as a gesture; and as a reproduction, such as a book. When we try to turn ourselves into a beautiful object, it is because we mistakenly consider ourselves to be an object, when a human being is really the other two: a gesture, and a reproduction of the human type (*HSAPB?* 184).

Establishing a pattern that holds even through *Motherhood*, Sheila, like the author-character that succeeds her, often makes progress towards finding the answer to the central question of "how a person should be" only in fits and spurts; regression almost always follows. Sudden moments of clarity come through in moments of reduced consciousness, such as in dreams, or, as in the example above, the hazy aftermath of a period of cyclical heavy drinking and cocaine use at night paired with intensely focused but empty work during the day. As a result, Sheila only fully internalizes the implications of discovering the fault in her self-commodification very late in the novel, when, in deciding to end things with Israel, she decides to debase herself with such intensity—cuddling up with Israel's flaccid penis and announcing her intention to sleep that way through the night—that the "humiliation brought on [her]self would humiliate him, too" (272). Her action successfully ensures that none of "his desire for [her] might remain," and, after watching him silently dress and leave the next morning, she reflects

triumphantly that "[w]hat [she] had done in the night [...] felt like the first choice [she] had ever made not in the hopes of being admired" (273). That done,

> Now it was time to write. I went straight into my studio and thought about everything I had, all the trash and the shit inside me. And I started throwing the trash and throwing the shit, and the castle began to emerge. I'd never before wanted to uncover all the molecules of shit that were such a part of my deepest being which, once released, would smell forever of the shit that I was, and which nothing—not exile, not fame—could ever disappear. But I threw the shit and the trash and the sand, and for years and years I just threw it. And I began to light up my soul with scenes. I made what I could with what I had. And I finally became a real girl (277).

The result of those "years and years" Sheila spends revealing what she once worked tirelessly to conceal is implied to consist of the text that forms, at least in part, *HSAPB?*. Her model of "writer," understood as one of those who "are destined to expose every part of themselves, so the rest of us can know what it means to be human," functions through a radical transparency (60). But it also, clearly, is one that orients a unity towards the maximization of inner-resource exploitation. Like McGurl's writer in "The Age of Amazon," Sheila's arrived-at construction of "writer" sees a life that, in its every "molecule," even the "shit" ones, becomes meaningful to the extent that it produces a worthwhile reading experience. But even in the rough bildungsroman-adjacent outlines of its character development, *HSAPB?* does not leave readers with the untroubled impression that Sheila's invention of "the person that would make this book" should be taken simply as a figure of triumph.

Here is where the "Ugly Painting Competition," undertaken by Sheila's friends Margaux

and Sholem, enters as one of the most important figures in *HSAPB?*. The proposal of the contest and its eventual resolution effectively bookend the novel, and Sheila's announcement that she "wanted to make an ugly painting—pit [hers] against theirs and see whose would win" should be taken as an invitation to consider the novel itself as an undeclared entry (13). Most obviously, the Ugly Painting Competition is a *competition*, making clear that the distortion of "art" the idea represents is not limited to the uncommon injunction to *make ugly*, but is charged by its entrance into a decidedly neoliberal space of competition. Sholem approaches his entry as an "intellectual exercise that he could sort of approach in a cold fashion," deciding that his method would be to "just do everything he hated when his students did it" (13). The result is so visually repulsive that he hides the painting away and becomes depressed for weeks. Margaux's entry, which turns out to be "inadvertently beautiful" features a black and yellow "rainbow coming out of a hole with a sunrise," and is titled *"Woman Time*" (289-290). The vastly different approaches make it impossible to choose a winner since each seems to excel according to different criteria. At this point, "uneasy" that "no winner had been declared," the group decide that the criteria for determining the winner of the competition would be decided by *another* competition, a game of squash. Sheila and two other friends take their places to observe the match. "The game," which "went very slowly at first, then grew more and more focused," is depicted with all of the intensity of a major tennis tournament (305). However, "[a]fter about half an hour of" of increasingly intense gameplay, Sheila and the other spectators realize that they don't know who is winning, so they focus "more intently [on] the game" (306). Eventually, one of them says "'I don't think they even know the rules. I think they're just slamming the ball around.' And," the narration confirms, "so they were" (306). Those words, which close the novel, are clearly "punched-up" and played for humor. But the ending also suggests that readers ought to consider

whether the criteria for selecting a winner in any competitive field could always be determined by the result of some other competition, which in turn is itself contingent on the results of yet another competition, etc. The recursivity of such a structure produces a circular logic with no “bottom,” and Sheila’s hard-won entry into the competitive field, the “ugly painting” that is the novel she produces by learning to capitalize on herself completely and achieving a unity of purpose, is suddenly revealed to be merely the buy-in to a pyramid scheme with nothing propping it up outside of an endlessly iterative and meaningless competitive algorithm. The narrative structure of the novel, in which self-development leads to self-actualization as a writer of autofiction, is finally undermined. This brief complicating moment reveals that Sheila’s bildungsroman to achieve unity of existence is not the narrative telos initially suggested, an insight that, like so many in the two novels, is only fully explored much later as we see the author-character of *Motherhood* become mired in that same endless recursivity.

***Motherhood*: writing on the ‘identity treadmill’**

By the time we catch up with the author-character of Heti’s *Motherhood* (2018), we find a well-known writer in her late thirties who makes a book project out of deciding whether or not to become a mother. Reviews of the novel have focused, understandably, on this central conceit; the question of motherhood is the driving force of the novel and “Heti’s” conclusion—to not have a child—represents a notable departure from most of the body of work that thematizes the subject. “In all the literature about motherhood,” writes *Guardian* reviewer Lara Feigel, “there remains very little about voluntary childlessness” (Feigel). Reviews have not failed to take note of the other thread running throughout its pages—that of “Heti’s” uneasy relationship with her identity. While the future-oriented question of whether or not to have a child weighs heavily on the mind of Heti’s narrator, “[t]he biggest presence in her life,” as seen in the contemporary

timeline of the novel, "is her writing," and "in particular," Dwight Garner notes in his *Times* review, "the book we are holding." As much as "Heti" dwells on the idea of becoming a mother, she frets equally over the act of writing and, crucially, the idea of being "a writer." If "Heti" is anything like the real-life Heti—celebrated, widely-reviewed, listed regularly among the law-firm rundown of autofiction writers joked about by Folarin—which the novel heavily implies is the case, then "Heti's" inability to ever experience real comfort in being what she certainly already is, "a real writer," represents a legible depiction of the fraught proposal inherent in contemporary neoliberal subjectivity that the individually continually develop. This idea of "making oneself," essential to a logic that demands continuous self-development, remains in *Motherhood*, like in *HSAPB?* before it, a major theme of the novel. The problem with the "making oneself" as demonstrated in *Motherhood*, I argue, is that its origin as an edict of the business firm that tasks the subject with continuous growth or increased profits renders it structurally unavailable for the individual subject.

Motherhood teems with characters in a state of beginning. There are several new mothers with whom "Heti" consults, such as friends Erica and Mairon, who feel old identities slipping away in favor of taking on the rewarding mantle of motherhood. "Heti's" boyfriend Miles, in his late thirties, is beginning a long sought-after career as a lawyer. At the outset of the novel, we similarly find a "Heti" who "[has] for so long been putting off starting a new book," but has several ideas in play (*MH* 10). As "Miles has begun working long hours," "Heti" considers whether "to make a change and run off to New York and have fun" with her newfound alone time, "or to *be a writer* as [Miles] put it—as he reminded me that" she is (10). It's clear that one source of Heti's insecurity in her status as a writer is the extrinsic pressure to perform her own identity in keeping with the archetypical careerist author. Miles argues against "Heti's" plan to

go to New York by asserting that "that once a writer starts to have an interesting life," that is, once someone begins to enjoy the benefits of their status as a successful writer, "their writing always suffers" (11). Further, the question of motherhood is seen as the ultimate affront to this conception of the writer. In a dream sequence, "Heti" finds that her "breasts seemed to be the soggy breasts of an old woman" before "realiz[ing] they were not soggy breasts, but two flaccid penises" (133). "Heti" describes the dream to her friend Teresa, who tells her that "*Breasts are what give life, while phalluses represent a creative or generative power—generating works of culture or art*" (133). Theresa's interpretation of the dream joins in with the neoliberal, careerist view that demands the artist hand themselves over completely to their craft, making any consideration of motherhood an undesirable impulse. Miles as well sees the demands of parenthood as incompatible with the lifestyle demanded by the artist, telling "Heti" "that one can either be a great artist and a mediocre parent, or the reverse, but not great at both, because both art and parenthood take all of one's time and attention" (35). The dream "Heti" symbolizes this dichotomous view in imagining her life-giving power as necessarily superseded by the generative power of the artist. But the dream, in depicting that generative power as flaccid, reveals what is ignored by the many outside voices that describe the writer-identity in terms of its career arc—"Heti" senses that the artistic drive is not one that can always be "on"—cannot always be stimulated—which frustrates the injunction of constant investment and improvement demanded of the neoliberal subject of capital. Artists are commonly understood to operate outside of the logic of commodity production and are idealized as those who create only in response to inspiration or some urgent political mandate.

The construction of "writer" that "Heti" identifies with is much closer to the inspired model of artist, one that has great privilege and responsibility in managing its freedom. It is also

a writer with great control over the performative power of its texts. *Motherhood* "will be a book to prevent future tears," "Heti" announces (16). It will be a book

> to prevent me and my mother from crying. It can be called a success if, after reading it, my mother stops crying for good. I know it's not the job of a child to stop her mother from crying, but I'm not a child anymore, I'm a writer. The change I have undergone, from child to writer, gives me powers—I mean that magical powers are not far from my hand. If I am a good enough writer, perhaps I can stop her from crying. Perhaps I can figure out why she is crying, and why I cry too, and I can heal us both with my words (16).

While the writer has "powers," "Heti" must remind herself that she needs to remain "grateful for" the opportunity to "follo[w] this tiniest thread of freedom, which is to write" (136). Being a writer is "all [she] ever truly wanted," and she actively discourages herself from becoming covetous of financial security (136). "Don't throw it away," she tells herself, "chasing even more riches—more than what you're owed. You are owed nothing, and what you do have—this expanse of freedom—do not gamble it away" (136). The tenuousness of her status and the fear that she'll lose the right to claim "writer" as her identity seem to constantly occupy "Heti's" thoughts. "Heti's" experience as a neoliberal subject completely obviates capital accumulation as an attainable goal, making the careerism constantly promoted by Miles seem quaint, outmoded. However, as the structure of any neoliberal subjectivity requires some sense of progress or growth, what is accumulated instead is a closeness or affinity with what "Heti" already is—a legitimate writer. Accumulated, that is, until some setback comes along that seems to wipe out all progress, once again sparking her sense of guilt for not appreciating what she has been able to retain in an economic epoch that has resulted in "a significant increase in the number of

Americans experiencing downward mobility" (Rose). "Heti" reminds herself that she must "[b]e grateful for Miles, and this apartment right here, and being able to write" (136). "Just because you get one thing," she reasons, "doesn't mean you get it all" (136).

"Heti," however, is forced to face her deep-seated feelings of class yearning thanks to her unexpected reacquaintance with Nicola, someone whom "Heti" "hadn't seen since grade school" and runs into on the street (132). Nicola, a mother of four, is also herself in a state of beginning; she "is trying to return to the working world," and one of the first things she does is to "congratulate ["Heti"] on the success of [her] latest book" (132). While Nicola seems to prize "Heti's" critical and sales achievements, her recognition of that success sparks in "Heti" a realization that she spends almost all of her time working and sees very little financial reward in return. In answer to Nicola's offering of congratulations, she returns "apologetically, *Well, writing is the only thing I do. I don't cook or do laundry, exercise or go out much. I just sit in my bed and write*" (132) This makes her "feel like a weak and pale child compared to everyone else" (132). "Heti" allows herself to slip into that other, older capitalist guilt of not sufficiently enjoying life, finding that she "believes" she "want[s] to have adventures, or to breathe in the day, but that would leave less time for writing" (132). When the freedom and creativity of writing once "felt like more than enough," she now likens herself to "a drug addict [...] missing out on life" in order to feed her habit (132).

She berates herself for falling into a fantasy, that "all the riches in the world were waiting" for her "when only one is—writing this now" (135). "*How stupid*" it was to believe she "could have what Nicola has; a marriage, a house and children" (134). She is beset with regret and guilt for feeling that anything was due to her other than a retention of her identity: "When did I start thinking of writing as the path to a bourgeois life? That it could get me there and keep

me there? When did I become so greedy? To be a thirty-eight-year-old woman and want to be respectable in all the ways Nicola is" (135). Nicola's "respectability" is, of course, linked with the newly aspirational class signifiers of home ownership and being able to meet the costs of raising children. "Heti's" desire for Nicola's life is "misplaced," so she learns to "[l]ook at her life like a beautiful ocean liner, a grand old steam liner passing by," to "see that life as it waves at [her] from the deck" (135). She begins to think of her question "*Should I?*" as to whether or not to have a child as a misunderstanding of "the real question, *Could* [she]?" (135). "No," she resolves, "you could not" (135). Here, merely entertaining of motherhood as a possible choice, the central question of the novel, is figured as a retrograde class yearning that gets misconstrued as a biological or cultural imperative. In the very next scene "Heti" dreams that she is graduating from an educational institution and finds that she "has tears in [her] eyes, [her] feelings start[ing] to overwhelm [her]" (137). The pride of accomplishment, however, is quickly undermined when she "really *look*[s] at the audience" and "realize[s] that no one [is] paying attention to [her]" (137). In that moment, she realizes that "it [is] silly to get so emotional about *a rite of passage of the middle class*" (137). Here, "Heti" is drawing a line connecting the rich affective connotations of motherhood with the affective dimension of the cultural middle-class existence even as it becomes too expensive for an increasing portion of the population.

It's notable that "Heti" deploys her awareness of the inanity of class yearning and the empty affectivity of class-specific cultural norms in order to convince herself, to justify, her lifelong sentence of endlessly receding from, and then working to reattain sameness with, what she already is—a writer. "Heti" feels that her work, far as it comes from providing financial security, is morally righteous as it is in service to "who [she] is inside," that kernel of her "true" self that wants to be a writer above all else (135). Stripped of the profit motive, Heti's neoliberal

rationality seeks progress circularly, receding from and then approaching the perfection of her writerly identity. To grow into more and other roles—mother, writer, artist, wife, member of the middle class—is an overreach, a "greediness," in the sense that the expansion of responsibility cannot be squared with the efforts required to achieve sameness with just one of these roles. As "Heti" explains, limitation of expectations is not the same as outright self-denial, despite the fact that most of us are "miserly with ourselves when it comes to space and time" (169) "Having a child," however, justifies "the impulse to give oneself nothing" by "mak[ing] that impulse into a virtue" (169). What makes motherhood so unappealing to a subject already oriented towards some other enterprise model is that it results in a moral imperative "to be virtuously miserly towards oneself in exchange for being loved," and "having children gets you there fast" (169-170). While one could easily imagine a neoliberal subjectivity that orients itself to "motherhood" as its enterprise model, undertaking a venture in which all activity is unified towards developing of the value of one's children as a capital investment, "Heti" stubbornly persists with the decision made in *HSAPB?* to stick to the model of radically transparent autofictionalist that rendered her a competitive entity in the first place.

Indeed, the "marketing" that Konstantinou sees as the signature function of autofiction is part and parcel of neoliberal subjectivity. But what must be accounted for is that the adherence to a financialized logic in the guidance of all activities, even those that seem to never result in the accrual of any profit or progress, means that the marketing must go on—even if it ends up *costing* money. "Heti" notes how, when returning from an extensive trip to Europe to market a novel, she makes the "mistake" of impulsively buying "Miles his favorite cologne at the airport in Amsterdam" (97). "This tour was so expensive," she muses. "These tours always are" (97). Formalized promotional activities designed to increase Heti's rank and profile as a writer and

expand her brand in other markets may in reality represent a net financial loss. Even if a writer were to reinvest all of their profits into expanding the sales of their next book, there is no guarantee that the amount of profit gained will outpace the outlays of the marketing spend, but the marketing is seen as an essential component to life as a writer.

But “Heti” is not entirely helpless when it comes to enacting the edicts of neoliberal rationality. To an even higher degree than in *HSAPB?*, *Motherhood* is rife with methodological attempts to contest the reification of the neoliberal subjectivity that has placed “Heti” on the identity treadmill. One of these is the inclusion of a randomness-generating mechanism inspired by the *I Ching*, an ancient Chinese manual for accessing divine inspiration. The *I Ching* instructs users to toss a set of three coins six times, resulting in a value which corresponds to one of sixty-four “hexagrams” which in turn form answers to questions the coin thrower can ask, usually with the purpose “discerning the pattern behind incessant changes” that seem to be part of life (“Philosophy of Change”). “Heti” adapts and simplifies this practice such that, in *“flipping three coins on a desk*,” a result of “*[t]wo or three heads”* returns an answer of “*yes*” and a result of “*[t]wo or three tails*” returns “*no*” (5). This opens her version of the coin flips to the answering of an unlimited field of possible yes or no questions, and her adherence to whatever answer the coins furnish provides a decision-making matrix that allows her “[t]o move away from the distortions of [her] mind and feel what actually is” (27). This coin-based method is similar to “Sheila’s” use of a tape recorder in *HSAPB?* which seeks to incorporate the cold mechanicality of verbatim transcription of conversations as “a way of getting out of [her] imagination” (La Force). The introduction of the coins as a disinterested mechanism for data processing in *MH*—insofar as it remains beholden to responding to whatever interest is embedded in the questions being asked— allows for the emergence of a logic not driven by neoliberal rationales. It also,

somewhat ingeniously, produces the effect of an agential interlocutor, further heightened by the novel's status as autofiction and the pre-title page paratextual note which asserts that, "[i]n this book, all results from the flipping of coins result from the flipping of actual coins." "Heti's" frequent consultation of the coins provides some of the novel's most memorable and humorous scenes, such as when the coins lead "Heti" to place a large plastic kitchen knife on her dresser as the talisman of the "demon-angel" that "brings [her] bad dreams" (57).

Motherhood is also notable in its complete rejection of growth narratives, achieved in part by its depiction of "Heti's" definancialized neoliberal subjectivity as a cyclical retreat from and approach to what she already is. But the novel's status as autofiction gives it additional license to flout traditional plot structure via the mechanism of confessionalism, allowing antidepressant medication, initially pursued by "Heti" as a palliative for PMS symptoms, to serve as the resolving force that quiets her inner conflicts. Towards the end of the novel, "Heti" becomes increasingly unable to function within her relationship, and she feels no closer to being comfortable with her writing practice or coming to a final decision about whether or not to have children. She even loses faith in her coins, deciding that "[r]andomness is useless and leads nowhere" and that "[i]t is better to believe nothing than to believe things randomly and haphazardly" (191). Her emotional turmoil is such that she reaches the point of accepting whatever rationality presides, since one needs "to have a foundation from which to rule one's behavior and life" rather "than this randomness and haphazardness, which leads as much to absurdity as it does to anything true" (191-192). However, one night, before falling asleep, she suddenly hears a voice that tells her "*You need to control* yourself *if you are to have more meaning in your life*" (207). While this certainly sounds like a typical neoliberal edict, it prompts the realization that "the pain" one is given should be "only as much as you can handle—like a

glass of water filled to the brim, the water hovering at the meniscus, not running over" (208). "The question" she realizes she needs to be asking "is, *Is what I am suffering characteristic?*" (209). As she explains, "Some suffering feels characteristic, it's deep and familiar in your bones" (209). "Other suffering," though, "feels alien, like it should not be happening to you" (209). While she initially attributes the unrelenting anxiety and sadness that permeates the later portions of *Motherhood* to acute PMS, whatever the root cause of the problem, the antidepressants work extremely well. Suddenly, she no longer chafes inside of her relationship, even asking Miles at one point, "*Are you always this nice to me*?" In return, "He sa[ys], *Yes*" (240). She also finds that, in a moment of decision, she is effectively unconflicted about her desire to not have a child, even seeking out the morning after pill after having unprotected sex with Miles. The central source of internal conflict in the novel suddenly loses its bite. The efficacy of the medication suggests that the pain might indeed "alien" in the sense that it is the result of some biological imbalance, a strictly medical issue that is successfully treated. The pain is not "characteristic" of a body working as it should. But the logic of her suffering, is, I argue, "characteristic" of her subjectivity

"Heti" realizes immediately the implications that her successfully receiving treatment for depression has for her novel. "What kind of story is it when a person goes down, down, down and down—but instead of breaking through and seeing the truth and ascending, they go down, then they take drugs, and then they go up? I don't know what kind of story that is," she thinks (243). She is also left to question all of her past obsessions, including that radically transparent model of writer adopted as the resolution of *HSAPB?*. "I had wanted to think about the world," she thinks, "but my anxieties forced me to think about myself—as if pressing into my face an injunction: *first you must solve this problem—the problem of yourself*" (241). In turning the self

into the unavoidable problem to be solved, the figure of the "alien pain" of her depression begins to seem inseparable from that of neoliberal rationality. Once the pain is gone, whether purely medical or not, Sheila's need to always either live a life more in keeping with the figure of the writer as understood by the abiding cultural narrative *or* to work harder in the model of the careerist writer simply melts away. She instead is left with "[t]he feeling that there is little in life left to strive for; something having been accomplished, not much left to do. A feeling of uselessness, of the end of the world coming, of other's people's lives having no purpose, of all of us doing whatever we feel like, no collective direction in which we're all taking part" (264). While Sheila's closing sensation of purposelessness lacks any of the intentionality associated with narrative, she is finally free of the logic of enterprise that turns angst into ambience and makes an expectation of continuous progression into a source of unlimited failure. At the end of her novel, she "can't pretend" she has "come to any answers, or any great wisdom" that needs to be shared (242). Even the central question of becoming a mother becomes irrelevant as the character ages past its relevance, and the novel quietly ends.

Does the character, left without anything to strive for, simply cease existing? The answer is of course yes. The novel ends: the text is finite. But the charge of *Motherhood* refuses to dissipate so readily. The reader, knowing *Motherhood* to be a work of autofiction, is unable to experience the fictionalized character of Sheila without calling up her double: the real-life author Sheila Heti. The autofictional novel may end, but the author lingers as the author-character's ghostly after-image, though unleashed from the text, free to move about and act in our world. It's true that this effect rewards engagement with subsequent products: new books, movie adaptations, author talks, interviews, blogs. The author gains viability as a suite of related experiences under the banner of a single brand. We want to solve the puzzle of the fact/fiction

divide: Is Heti OK? Did she really take antidepressants? How long did it take to flip all those coins? But the effect achieved by autofiction is not limited to its development of brand loyalty. Just as Sheila reminds us of the reality of Sheila Heti, the fact of Sheila Heti forces us to face the fictionality of Sheila. We have no choice but to reckon with her as a construction. As such, the rendering of the insuperable dilemma of neoliberal subjectivity in a fictionalized version of herself teaches us that, at the very least, *it's possible to know* you're in the neoliberal trap, on the identity treadmill. Sheila Heti's persistence despite the character Sheila's obsolescence at the end of narrative becomes a figure for the possibility of getting out, getting off the treadmill.

Autofiction as parasitic self-invention in *Forest Dark*

Nicole Krauss's fourth novel, *Forest Dark* (2017), consists of two separate narratives following thematically parallel tracks in alternating sections of the book. One of the stories, written in the third person, follows the parable-like tale of Jules Epstein, a wealthy New York lawyer who, having "caught the disease of radical charity" following his divorce, begins to systematically divest himself of his assets and travels to Tel Aviv, the place of his birth (Krauss 11). The other thread, written in the first-person, follows an author named Nicole who travels to Israel to revisit the architecturally brutalist Tel Aviv Hilton resort, a perennial vacation-stay of her childhood, before being looped into a surreal conspiracy involving the papers of Franz Kafka. While Epstein's story conforms to the conventions of novelistic fiction, critics have keyed on the shared first name and the biographical similarities between Krauss and the novel's Nicole, whose first-person narration is "characterized by the meandering intimacy of contemporary autofiction" (Clark). While the novel's plot calls readers to question to what extent the Nicole sections are strictly autobiographical, the critical consensus is that this portion of the work is indeed autofictional (Clark, Lorentzen, Silman). However, autofiction's role in *Forest*

Dark is not limited to its deployment as one of two distinct modes of narration. Autofiction as a practice becomes an object of scrutiny in both of *Forest Dark*'s narratives, which coalesce to form a meditation on autofiction's potency as a tool for characterological self-fashioning.

While Epstein returns to Israel to feel closer to a sense of home, Nicole is drawn to the Tel Aviv Hilton by a confluence of desires, impulses, and an odd request. The first of Nicole's reasons to travel to Tel Aviv happens to be in service of one of the core tropes of autofiction: metafiction. Suffering from years of writer's block, Nicole is drawn by a hunch that the Hilton will provide an access point to finally beginning her next novel. If she were "going to write a novel about the Hilton, or modeled on the Hilton, or even razing the Hilton to the ground, then it made sense," she thought, "that the obvious place to finally begin writing was at the actual Hilton itself" (Krauss 64). The second reason she goes to Israel is to get the perspective of distance on her "failing marriage," which fulfills another core convention of autofiction: confessionalism (42). Critics note that Nicole's marriage problems are at least partially a reflection of Krauss's real life 2014 divorce, "a public split with fellow writer Jonathan Safran Foer" that became a source of public speculation thanks to rumors that Foer had attempted (and failed) to enter into a relationship with actress Natalie Portman (Silman, Loomes). But third, and most importantly for the plot, Nicole is informed by her father's cousin, Effie, that one Eliezer Friedman—an old colleague of Effie's at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who went on to "bec[o]me a professor of literature at the university in Tel Aviv" but "never gave up his ties to the Mossad"—wanted to meet with her, implying that it concerned something of grave importance (60). This is where the fictional meets the autobiographical, propelling Nicole on a journey that will lead her to eventually being abandoned in an IDF safe house in the remote Israeli countryside, starving to death with Friedman's dog while persistently transfixed by an

unopened, beat-up suitcase purported to contain a trove of undiscovered papers belonging to Franz Kafka.

One of the conundrums that *Forest Dark* presents is how to make sense of the pairing of the two seemingly unconnected, alternating threads of the novel. Many note similarities between the two characters' plot arcs. Reviewer Heller McAlpin describes Epstein and Nicole as "two strivers [...] [u]nable to find consolation in their usual outlets" of "love, wealth and power," or "writing," and thus "head, impulsively and compulsively, to the Tel Aviv Hilton, an important landmark in both their lives." Additionally, he notes that each "fal[l] under the spell of a scruffy mentor who promises to take them to higher spiritual realms" once they get there (McAlpin). The stories, however, "run on parallel tracks, never intersecting," running counter to a tendency in contemporary fiction that any multiplicity of plot lines or narrators inevitably come together (McAlpin). *Forest Dark*'s alternating sections are so seemingly disconnected that one reviewer felt that the book isn't a novel but "really two novellas," only "connected by the theme of questing for meaning" (Zimmerman). There is, however, one connection between Nicole and Epstein that seems to have escaped notice: Nicole's story is autofiction; Epstein's story results from a response to autofiction.

The opening chapter, which focuses on the origins of Epstein's change from wealthy lawyer to spiritual seeker, tells us that Epstein's project to systematically divest himself of wealth "had begun with a book" given to him by his youngest daughter, Maya (Krauss 11). "[T]he little autobiographical book, the testament of a man alone facing God" was written "by an Israeli poet, Polish-born," when its author "was only twenty-seven" (11) The book "had overwhelmed" Epstein, who feels himself shrink in comparison with the precociously wise author. As he explains, when Epstein was "twenty-seven, he himself had been blinded by his

ambition and appetite—for success, for money, for sex, for beauty, for love" (11). His reading prompts Epstein to ask, "What might his life have been if he had applied himself with the same intensity to the spiritual realm? Why had he closed himself off from it so completely?" (11). The book that had such a drastic impact on Epstein correlates with Pinchas Sadeh's *Life as a Parable* (1958),[4] likewise written when its Polish-born, Israeli-poet author was twenty-seven and similarly a testament that "man is alone within God, that he is part of a vague cosmic dream" (Katz 159). Sadeh, who "was born in Lemberg, Poland, in 1929, and immigrated to Palestine with his parents in 1934," in part "attain[ed] the status he achieved" thanks to the success of *Life as a Parable*, an "autobiographical novel" that became "one of the first cult-books in Israeli culture" (Katz 160). *Life as a Parable* is perhaps most noted today for the fanatical response it evoked in readers, who identified fiercely with the author and caused him, "[f]or a few decades" at least, to be "revered as something of a guru" (Izikovich). Sadeh's "unusual novel," provoked a dedicated following as he "became, both on account of his writing and his sequestered, self-dramatized way of life, an idol for young Israelis and would-be artists" (Feinberg).

Flagged initially by Epstein's response to a book that undoubtedly refers to *Life as a Parable*, Sadeh's presence, once detected, seems to announce itself continuously throughout *Forest Dark*. For one, Epstein's entire journey is spurred by his response to a novel that would probably be considered autofiction had it been published today. *Life as a Parable* is said to "foreshado[w] Expressionistic principles," seen throughout Sadeh's oeuvre, "mainly, the work of art as a cry of protest and an expression of the self" (Feinberg). Written "in confessional style,"

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[4] Pinchas Sadeh, first name variously spelled Pinhas or Pinḥas in English transliteration, is the author of twenty-one books published in Hebrew, including poetry collections, novels, novellas, and children's books. Only two of his works are available in translation in English, including 1966 and 1989 editions of *Life as a Parable* and 1989 and 1990 editions of *Jewish Folktales*, an anthology of folk legends from both European and eastern contexts "selected and retold" by Sadeh.

Sadeh's novel "interweav[es] reflections and meditations on human existence and nature with personal experiences" (Feinberg). This description of the book could easily be reapplied to Heti's *Motherhood* or the portions of *Forest Dark* narrated by Nicole, but Sadeh's influence on Nicole's story reaches further than the shared autofictional mode of narration. The conflict of opinion that arises between Nicole and Eliezer Friedman is in many ways an articulation of a debate in Israeli intellectual life that many see originating with Sadeh's introduction of a "rejection of the ubiquitous collective experience in favor of far-reaching individualism" into the discursive field (Feinberg).

Friedman, as it turns out, invites Nicole to Israel for the express purpose of entrusting her with a uniquely dubious literary task: to furnish an ending to a script for "a play that Kafka wrote near the end of his life" so that it may be made into a film (89). Additionally, he would also like her to take charge of sorting through and cataloguing the contents of a mysterious suitcase, once owned by Kafka's confidant Max Brod, that by quirks of inheritance law has become the private property of an Israeli citizen, Esther Hoffe (88). The details reported in the book about the suitcase mirror the real-life suit in which a suitcase thought to contain "drawings, travel diaries, letters and drafts" by Kafka fell into the private ownership of a Tel Aviv family, resulting in "more than 50 years of legal wrangling" between the National Library of Israel and the estate of Esther Hoffe (Batuman). This kernel of reality, by effect of its treatment in autofiction, raises the possibility that someone really did approach Krauss (or somebody else) about working with the contents of the suitcase in an artistically dubious manner—which is of course unlikely, but the charge of that possibility is inherent to the playful negotiation that the novel asks its readers to perform between credulity and incredulity.

While the novel certainly delights in toying with the plausibility of its implausible plot,

Forest Dark is equally concerned with discussing the implications of writing in relation to questions of what role it plays in the forging of national—and personal—identity. Here is where Sadeh's philosophy and "indifference to the destiny of Israeli society" as espoused in *Life as a Parable* reenters the frame, now reflected in Nicole's insistence contra Friedman that her writing cannot be beholden to the interest of the nation (Katz 161). Friedman, in making the case to Nicole as to why it is her duty to take custody of Kafka's papers, articulates a conception of identification with the nation over and beyond one's individual identity as a discrete agent in pursuit of only self-development. Though "[w]riters work alone," Friedman tells Nicole, "when they are guided naturally toward certain themes—when their instincts and our goals converge in a common interest—one can give them opportunities" (Krauss 84). Nicole interprets this justification to finish Kafka's play as a mission "[t]o cast Jewish experience in a certain light" or "to put a spin on it in order to influence how [Jewish people] are seen" (84). "Sounds to me more like PR than literature," she says (84). This disagreement between Nicole and Friedman rehearses an ongoing debate among contemporary "Israeli intellectuals unwilling or unable to simply accept the Orthodox form of Judaism" (Katz 172). Though they all similarly "struggl[e] to define their Jewish identity and its place in Israel," the intellectual class has adopted different approaches to the problem (Katz 172). The first approach, according to Gideon Katz, "can be summarized as 'Judaism as culture,'" a view in which "the entire spectrum of contents that are unique to the Jewish people are perceived as the Jews' own creation" (172). As Katz describes it,

> In Israel, this approach is characterized by the presence of a certain national tone—Jewish creations, i.e., works that were created by Jews, are the property of the nation. The people voicing this view strive to provide a literary or a philosophical interpretation to religious contents, thereby accounting for or

> strengthening their affinity with or their ownership over them (172).

This is the view represented by the ex-Literature Professor Eliezer Friedman in *Forest Dark,* who likewise understands Jewish identity as inscribed in important texts, thus rendering those texts collective property. “You think your writing belongs to you?” Friedman asks Nicole after proposing she finish Kafka’s play (125). “Who else?” She responds. “To the Jews,” he says, to which Nicole “[breaks] into laughter” (125). He further reveals his sense that writing isn’t just about crafting a certain perception among outsiders, but can be performative in the sense of writing collective identity into existence:

> You’re looking at it too narrowly. What we’re talking about is much larger than perception. It’s the idea of self-invention. Event, time, experience: these are the things that happen to us. One can look at the history of mankind as a progression from extreme passivity—daily life as an immediate response to drought, cold, hunger, physical urges, without a sense of past or future—to a greater and greater exercise of will and control over our lives and our destiny. In that paradigm, the development of writing represented a huge leap. When the Jews began to compose the central texts on which their identity would be founded, they were enacting that will, consciously defining themselves—inventing themselves—as no one had before (84-85).

In this view, the totality of Jewish literature is essentially writing the same text: Jewish Identity. The act of narration then becomes the delineation of a single thread of a collective experience, woven together in the intertext of the closed social body.

An opposing approach, as described by Katz, is the one represented by Sadeh, who “relinquishes the collective aspect of Judaism in order not to harm its ability to serve the

individual," a position Katz terms "Spiritual Judaism" (174). Likewise, Nicole rejects any injunction to write on behalf of the nation of Israel or the Jewish diaspora. She instead adopts the view of Sadeh, who "strongly emphasizes the difference between man's lonely and authentic existence facing God, and life in society and, to a large extent, in the world as we know it in general" (159). But clearly, she is not alone, as "Sadeh's religious ideas" have become widely adopted, and their "attractiveness […] for contemporary Israeli culture stems from their individualistic leaning" (174). The implication, of course, is that the subjectivity called in contemporary culture rewards individualism, and Sadeh's ideas arrive at the kairotic moment for maximum impact. Nicole, though she internalizes Friedman's de-essentialized notion of identity which avails the collective self for manipulation by cultural agents, adopts Sadeh's logic of reserve in the formation of her self-identity through the performative action of her writing, rejecting any responsibility of developing communal identity alongside her own.

Sadeh's philosophy of individual religiosity is a good case study of the way that neoliberalism, far from dispensing with all forms of collectivity, instead flips the paradigm of the individual's relationship to that collective such that it is the individual that benefits from the strength of the collective. As Smith writes, "Neoliberal society requires and encourages engagement with others," however "these forms of association are largely understood to lead to the enrichment of the self" (6). If neoliberal capitalists privatize the state, then it can be said that Sadeh privatizes theology, reversing the target of its enrichment from the social container to the development of social body as a field of individuals. Krauss's embedding of *Life as a Parable* into *Forest Dark* also problematizes autofiction as a modality of narration that can seductively spin a false narrative that sells, for instance, the promise of full self-actualization. Epstein's response to *Life as a Parable* is one example of this misuse of the power of the fictionalized self.

While the book does inspire Epstein to change, it is a change motivated by the deep inadequacy that arises from his self-comparison with the young Sadeh, setting Epstein off on another venture of competition in his long life of winning and succeeding. Though goal of profit accrual is replaced by its obverse, Epstein still frames a life-story enunciated by the financial logic of growth—growth of the spirit, of wisdom, of inner-peace. After reading the book, Epstein "began to bestow with the same ferocity with which he had once acquired" (9). His disavowal of his former self is driven by "an irresistible longing for lightness[,] […] a quality, he realize[s] only now, that had been alien to him all his life" (10). Then, "after nearly a year of chipping away at the accumulations of a lifetime," he reaches what he believes to be "the bottommost layer": his parents (12). Here the boundaries of self extend impossibly into the past, into the lives of others. He shifts his spending to charitable contributions that exact the return of memorialization of his parents. Beginning with a bench in a small Florida park, these gestures appreciate in scale and emotional inadequacy until Epstein funds the planting of a new forest in the northern Negev desert and promises to bankroll a film that he is, unknown to him, unable to pay for.

Characterological self-fashioning via autofiction is one of the potencies of autofiction, and it is this feature that motivates the association of autofiction with marketing. "This is the first time," Lorentzen writes in his review of *Forest Dark*, "I've come across a work of autofiction that's at heart an elaborate project of self-flattery." He reads the novel's juxtaposition of Epstein and Nicole as an implicit judgment of Epstein's spiritual flailing, unprincipled giving, and the fact that he "abandons his family and disappears completely" in search of himself ("Krauss's *Forest Dark*"). "Nicole," on the other hand, "doesn't quite go all the way" and returns to her children, which Lorentzen argues constitutes a stance of self-congratulation ("Krauss's *Forest Dark*"). While, in my estimation Lorentzen is too committed to reviewing the novel negatively,

he does identify *Forest Dark*'s concern with how autofiction traverses the text/real-world divide. The real difference between Krauss and Sadeh's autofictions is that Sadeh opportunistically benefitted from the fantasy of absolute self-possession erected in his fictional persona. Sadeh's numberous relationships with young women seeking to inhabit that way of life came to be the source of public scandal, as these relationships "almost always ended badly" (Izikovich). Krauss, on the other hand, in continuously raising the implausibility of her plot, takes up an ethical stance on the limits of self-fiction, disabusing readers of any impression that the events in the novel "actually happened."

Further, Krauss warns readers that the textual self that narrates the novel is something altogether different from the Nicole Krauss writing the novel. In the final scene, Nicole returns home to Brooklyn to find that the "lights were on inside our house. Through the front window I could see my children playing on the floor, heads bent over a game. They didn't see me. And for a while I didn't see myself either, sitting in a chair in the corner, already there" (294). Nicole's uncanny intrusion into her own domestic scene indicates the incommensurability of the fictionalized author-character and the author, separated ontologically by the divergence of temporal states inhabited by writer and the written. At the climax of Nicole's story, just moments before she resolves to escape the desert safehouse and return to her family, she finally understands how she would have liked to have responded to Friedman's request that she complete Kafka's play on behalf of the Jewish people. She writes: "Only now that he was gone was I ready to argue with him, to tell him that literature could never be employed by Zionism, since Zionism is predicated on an end—of the Diaspora, of the past, of the Jewish problem—whereas literature resides in the sphere of the endless, and those who write have no hope of an end" (269). The writer, subjectivized by neoliberalism, orients her activity to the "endlessness"

of productivity, of overcoming crises, of finding material, of *being* a writer. As Brown puts it, in neoliberalism "[p]roductivity is prioritized over product," and "enterprise is prioritized over consumption or satisfaction" (65-66). This reorientation of economic rationality, in the case of the novel, hinges on the centering of the author in the literary act, who must continue to inscribe herself into existence, putting to record, by sheer fictional invention if necessary, what a stable reality, facts, communal identity, and history cannot do on her behalf: justify her existence and call into being her activity. However, Krauss's explicit fragmentation of the narrating-self calls attention to the impossibility of enjoining the finitude of the novel with the endless horizon of growth presupposed in financialized subjectivity.

Conclusion: autofiction without the self

Wendy Brown, in critiquing the limits of Foucault's conceptualization of neoliberalism, asserts that it is crucial to account for the way that "capital circulates certain truths to sustain its power as well as its legitimacy, or better, to sustain its legitimacy as power" (75). The focus of her project in *Undoing the Demos* is to uncover the ways that the "neoliberal triumph of *homo oeconomicus* as the exhaustive figure of the human is undermining democratic practices" (79). The nation-state, in identifying itself with "the imperative of cheapening labor and expanding markets, the imperative of economic growth, the imperative of constant renovations in production […] to generate profit, and so forth" has necessitated atomized consensus building at the level of the individual (75). What autofiction adds to this discussion, I argue, is the way it reveals self-narration as a technique for both legitimizing and contesting this rationality of governance. All three of the author characters of *HSAPB?*, *Motherhood*, and *Forest Dark* experience crisis and attempt to use the self-narration afforded by autofiction to regulate their subjective relations to their identities. But each of the three novels also complicate this notion,

ending on notes of ambivalence that are run-through with the capacity to refuse a logic that equates narrative continuance with progression and growth. Sheila finds she's entered a competitive field where nobody knows the rules, a chain of signification whose nodal point is the competition itself. "Heti" writes an autofiction that has a deeply unsatisfying ending—*deus ex machina* by psychiatry, halting "progress" despite the continuance of narrative. Nicole arrives home and finds that she's already in the room, playing with her own children, while the Nicole of the novel that keys on endlessness as the domain of the writer is found to be something else, a fragment of the self intruding into reality. In all three novels, the subject of self-construction that is called for by neoliberalism is a site of failure. As the texts end in ambivalence, the author having long since retreated to write something else, what's left is a trace of the contaminant around which the subject of neoliberalism coalesces. Having been given a sample, readers can then detect the fundamental fictions around which their own lives are narrated.

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