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The Intersections of Empathy and Mobility

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Research Statement

For my Capstone essay for the English Literature Major, the course ENG 472, I chose my topic based on two novels I had read during the semester: *NW* by Zadie Smith and *Remainder* by Tom McCarthy. Although at first I found no similarities between the two novels at the outset other than their location (London), after reading through both novels and having class discussions, I began to make deeper connections. I was first perplexed by their differentiating perceptions of London society, and in researching the scholarship that focused on the relation between the novels and geography on websites accessible through the Drake Memorial Library, such as JSTOR, Project Muse, and the MLA International Bibliography, I found scholarship that not only explored the effects of geography on the protagonists in the novels, but also of the relationship between geography, empathy, and the protagonist. To narrow down my research, I used the advanced search options in the databases, such as JSTOR and Project Muse, to focus on empathy and geography, either separately or together (in separate searches for each novel) rather than other themes that appear in the novels. To determine the validity of the scholarship I found, as I know searching on JSTOR can result in varied and unspecific sources, I read through each article partially, then also scanned the works cited page of each article, to look for other sources to use, or also to see if certain authors or articles reappeared in bibliographies, which was evidence that the article I found was part of the present discussion of the text, and a reputable piece of scholarship to apply to my essay.

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ENG 472

Dr. Karl

10 May 2018

The Intersections of Empathy and Mobility

The pervasive tension created by social, economic, and racial disparities in modern society result in instability and immobility. When combined, these factors lead to crises of social conditioning and individual strife that become cyclical and inescapable. The societal push for empathy, for individuals to take into account and understand others' struggles, does not improve social class mobility, rather it is the forcefulness of empathy that creates a false sense of development. Thus, I argue that the effort to make an empathetic society results in having the opposite effect, and instead facilitates disassociation, alienation, and furthers the decomposition of societal growth and an individual's sense of place within it. So, people become victims of social patterns rather than agents of their own mobility.

In both *NW* by Zadie Smith and *Remainder* by Tom McCarthy, the narrators find themselves at emotional crossroads with their identities and with their home, London. In *NW*, the narrators Leah, Natalie, and Felix struggle with internal battles, in which they all fight to defy the path they have taken and the social roles they are expected to fill, as they attempt to take agency over their lives. Nevertheless, Northwest London defines their lives through its physical structure and its transportation system. The narrators trap themselves within the dichotomy of empathy and emotional disconnection, as the two opposing mental processes lead to their continued struggles and, for Felix, a loss of life.

As for the narrator of *Remainder*, who after his accident traps himself within reenactments, he uses London as the stage on which he manipulates events; only to be able to repeat them with precision. This narrator's absence of empathy explores how complete disconnection destroys hope for achieving individual growth and change. The tie between the protagonists in these two novels is found in their self-entrapment in cycles and in the boundaries of London, because of the influence of their experiences within the city over their present ability to move forward, upward, and out. Therefore, I argue that emotional, spatial, social, and economic statuses are interconnected and function to entrap an individual. Additionally, I will argue how empathy, and lack of empathy, also works to uncover and explain how social factors obscure an individual's belief in their individual mobility. In essence, agency is obsolete when confronted with the pressures that ultimately determine fate, and the protagonists of these two novels are driven by the inner conflict between agency and submission to fate.

The desire to achieve fluid mobility, both in physical and social forms, is the root of the internal character conflicts that drive the characters in *NW* and *Remainder*. By fluidity, I mean the will to move on from one place to another; the protagonists in *NW* are as successful as crabs climbing out of a bucket. Physical mobility differs from social because it not only pertains to spatial mobility, such as movement within London, but also refers to the control and autonomy over one's body and personal growth. Repressed desires for, and fears of physical mobility and autonomy are apparent in all three narrators of *NW*, as they struggle with locating themselves in the social space of *NW*.

Leah is at a crossroads between the past, which she does not want to move on from, and the future with Michel that she is afraid to confront. The result being "Leah's

present life as she experiences it is out of joint precisely because of the pressure of the past” (Powaza-Kurko 158). Leah, unlike Natalie, does not wish for any physical changes, neither to move from the apartment complex she and Michel live in, nor for bodily changes to occur, like her pregnancy she terminates and the birth control pills of Natalie’s that she steals. Leah’s narrative is a compilation of internal pressures, in the way that “her individualistic geography of both time and space is self-contained, immobile” (Slavin 103). Leah strives to stay in one place rather than move and desires physical autonomy; a goal she achieves as she both begins and ends the novel laying in the hammock in her back yard. Not only is her return to the hammock symbolic of her immobility, but also the hammock’s pendulum-like movement that follows the same arched path, represents how she may swing physically away from her home on Kilburn Road, but eventually always returns to her center; her home. These desires of stagnation reflect a rejection of social expectations for constant forward motion. I argue that Leah represents the antithesis of mobility and exemplifies the safety of immobility, in that immobility leaves no room for growth but to Leah, is better than working towards social mobility only to be and unsuccessful. Leah would rather not waste her time trying to achieve a nearly impossible goal. While Natalie’s narrative of vast social and physical mobility contrasts Leah’s, that they end up together and in the same space demonstrates that they do not escape societal pressures that maintain cycles that repeat like bus routes. Meanwhile, Felix’s attempt to escape his position, to derail and challenge the path of social mobility leads to his demise.

The conflict with physical mobility is reflected in the characters use of the public transportation system, both in their reasons for using it, their destinations, as well as the

interactions. Be it Leah or Felix, “public transport comes to signify a refusal or an inability to buy into the upwardly aspirational values of...Britain” (Elkin 2); this is because their experiences with or on the bus or the tube reflect and respond to the great crisis they are experiencing. Felix experiences physical mobility “not only geographically but also psychologically: from present towards the past, and then towards a better future” (Powaza-Kurko 158), as in the course of his section he wakes up with his new girlfriend, disconnects with Annie, his past girlfriend and last tie to his drug addiction, feeling like “a man undergoing some not-yet-invented process called particle transfer, wonderfully, blissfully light” (Smith 189), showing his optimism for the future. For a ‘better future,’ he buys a car for economic prosperity, and attempts to be empathetic to the pregnant woman on the bus, asking one of two men to move for her without thinking (193), a decision made due to his ‘blissfully light’ feeling, done so swiftly that it ironically seals his fate in the same moment, as he “found himself shoulder charged” (194) by the two men. As much as Felix works towards economic mobility through buying a car to refurbish and socially mobile through being a Good Samaritan as he tries to help the pregnant woman have a seat, the tube, the literal representation of mobility, fails him. Even though as he lay dying Felix can see the tube, it or the people on it cannot see him, and he watches as a woman boards “and let the doors fold neatly closed behind her” (198); doubling the close on his life. Smith uses the transportation system as a metaphorical and literal vehicle that confronts how social expectations, racism, and classism “radiate beyond one individual neighbourhood, and structure society as a whole” (Elkin 3). In effect, the transportation system in *NW* serves as a social critique that spreads across the lives of each character, for Smith to show just how great is the divide

between social and racial disparities; making the bus and NW microcosms for the issues faced by all of London, and framing the characters narratives as essential in displaying London's "lack of center and the need for a multiplicity of narratives" (Slavin 101). As Elkin states, "Felix's murder turns the mirror on a society in which something is not working," which supports my argument that Smith is showing that if the bus system were to be expanded past the neighborhood of NW in the novel, and another bus followed through another part of London, similar social issues would arise and be seen from and in relation to the bus.

The struggle to achieve fluid, physical mobility is ever present in *Remainder*. In specific, in the narrator's infatuation with the 'tingling feeling' he experiences when his reenactments are performed perfectly. He describes the feeling as, "I felt weightless...my body began to glide fluently and effortlessly" (McCarthy 144), after the liver lady's first successful exchange with him. But to feel this once is not enough, and in her reenactment of the reenactment he feels, "the tingling started in my right hip and seeped upwards, up my spine" (145), as a result of his need to perfect actions as well as repeat them and the feeling. The tingling is most potent in the more violent reenactments as a result of his own psychological entrapment caused by his obsession with reaching a level of autonomy, of separation of mind and body, that is always a hair-width out of reach at the moment in which he feels the weightlessness and tingling. The narrator pushes the boundaries to reach this feeling, made impossible by his obsession with self-constructed cycles and repetition, as he moves from his apartment building to reenactments of murders that occur across the city. As he shifts to murder scenes, his descriptions of the sensation become even more centralized in the absorption of the moment; as he explains

“The guns were being fired, I was being hit” (McCarthy 216), he allows himself to be absorbed into the perspective and death of the victim so as to avoid and replace his lack of resolution. It is not only London itself that traps him, as even in the end he is flying in circles above London, where he once again feels, “weightless...a sensation of being held just above something” (McCarthy 306), and falls back into this trap of being just out of reach of the resolution he searches for through reenactments, but never finds. The goal is never reached and growth not achieved because he never breaks the cycle of repeated action, but strives for the same outcome of weightless feeling, to avoid growth.

Social mobility is also cyclical. That is to say, no matter how the characters believe they are moving up the social ladder, their insufficiency of resources to achieve physical mobility inevitably suck them back into their original position. The confinement of the physical boundaries of London plays a large role, both in the way it facilitates a social conditioning of poverty, and in the way that it incites repetition. *NW* uses the setting to exploit class immobility. Being that the protagonists grew up in *NW*, they are not “fortunate enough to be born and live in the middle and upper brackets of society, it is still possible to believe in the myth of autonomy” (Hui 386), but rather subject to the debilitating effects of social class, which “restricts people to where they are born and belong to” (Hui 387). Hui argues that social class is restricting because, in a neighborhood like *NW*, a person born into the lower class will not know a reality any different than the lower class, therefore they will follow what they know and return to the same social class. For example, although Natalie escaped the lower class position of her immigrant family, becomes a lawyer and explores other boroughs of London, she ultimately returns to *NW*. What this means is that, even though Natalie’s social class no

longer confines her, she is still constricted spatially. Hui describes this geographical constraint of growth as a result of habitus, or the product of social conditioning as it relates to the individual's condition (388). That Natalie and Leah grew up in Caldwell of Northwest London makes it no surprise that they both end up there; as Hui points out, Natalie negates her husband's offer to live in his house in Marylebone, outside of NW, and decides to buy a house in Kilburn so she is still in NW and still close to Caldwell (390), and more importantly Leah. Although Natalie lives in NW, she hosts dinner parties with co-workers and friends from the upper class she has become a part of, to which Leah and Michel are invited, alienated, "each time the awkwardness remains...Leah caught wrestling the breast of a duck" (Smith 96-7). The presence of Leah and Michel represents the intersection of Natalie's identity, and that Natalie continues to invite Leah and Michel demonstrates how she refuses to release her past for a life in a higher social class. Natalie tells an anecdote of Leah and Michel's street altercation rather than have them tell it is an attempt at including them, but rather it further alienates them as other, as directly after the other guests share their own anecdotes "linking them to matters of the wider culture, debates in the newspapers. Leah tries to explain what she does for a living to someone who doesn't care. The spinach is farm to table" (Smith 97). Leah's description of the ensuing conversation extorts the differences between her life, of which nobody cares, with details of interactions in the wider social context that are related to people of a higher social class. Albeit these differences that make Leah and Michel uncomfortable, Natalie is persistent in inviting them because of her and Leah's past friendship. This refusal to leave the past and Caldwell behind, to separate from the past she spent her whole life disassociating from, from changing her name from Keisha to Natalie to

marrying Frank, a man of higher social class, all demonstrates how the emotional value placed on geography determines fate.

In the same vein, the narrator in *Remainder* never deals with the accident nor fully heals from it, which manifests in his obsession with reenactments, and specifically with how he feels serenity in falling, a sense of hyper-awareness and disconnection with himself when he feels he reenacts perfectly (McCarthy 215). The act of falling attracts the narrator in multiple ways, in how he falls when he reenacts murders, such as falling off of the bike, the fall that causes the heist to go wrong, and even in the way he accepts how the cats fall off of the roof and only orders for more cats to be placed on the roof and inevitably fall to their deaths (156). Therefore, “Rather than presenting himself as a nameless victim of a faceless crime...the narrator emerges as an embodiment of his own undoing: he is the remainder, the residual, the shard” (Miller 637), and his focus on repetition and reenactments is the manifestation of his feeling of being unfinished and unresolved. So, he breaks down the process of every movement and action of his reenactments as compensation for his inability to process and accept his accident as an accidental occurrence rather than a planned, plotted occurrence. He is obsessed with controlling actions because he cannot accept the accident that was out of his control. The act of falling is then “just short of a reveal” (Miller 639), as close as he can be to disconnecting from his past, and a reminder of the undisclosed object that fell on his head and caused his mental shift. Therefore the repetition of falling objects, animals, and people throughout the novel functions as forming the novel into a reenactment of the accident.

Along with the physical boundaries of London that keep the protagonists from escaping these cycles, the struggle between empathy and lack of empathy also impacts their views of place, of others, and of themselves. Douglas Hollan explains empathy as being either the ability to simply detect others' emotional states, or understanding another through knowledge of the context (71). I will focus on the second form of empathy for how it can result in negative consequences due to a misinterpretation of the context behind the person's emotion, which in *NW* drives the characters to stronger feelings of dislocation and disassociation with others. Leah does not only fail in her attempt to be empathetic towards Shar, but also rejects their empathetic interaction and convolutes it into anger because she identifies with Shar. Hollan explains empathy as an automatic function in response to those a person relates to, and that through empathy "important boundaries between groups are constructed and maintained, including class and status distinctions" (73). So, when Leah realizes she relates to Shar, she rejects her because this connection threatens to destroy the social class boundary that separates them. Leah also risks her own desire for physical autonomy when she reveals her pregnancy, and thus, "it is as if her access to Leah's home also allows access to Leah's body" (Houser 130), as Leah expresses her desire to have autonomous power over her body in the first pages of the novel, as she ruminates on the words, "I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me...I am the sole. The sole. The sole" (Smith 1-2), repeating the word 'sole' to emphasize her autonomy. To Leah, empathy represents a threat to her self and her comfort within immobility, because, empathy being a two way street, it opens up a channel through which another person can access her body and mind; therefore threatening the physical and social boundaries that she covets as protection from change.

As a result, “her desire to live outside time directly affects her mobility” (Slavin 103). In Leah’s objective viewpoint, “she fears the destination...something to do with death and time and age...any change risks fatally upsetting this balance. Why must the moment change?” (Smith 28). Leah’s thoughts in this moment are connected to her study of philosophy in college, of which she gained the mantra of “time as a relative experience” (Smith 36), which explains her wish to contain time and her life within the same boundaries, so as to maintain time a relative, controlled space. As Houser describes, she is “deeply frightened by the possibility of changing places. Within a world defined by instability, she does not want to experience change at all” (133). Leah’s fear of change stems from her fear of forward mobility, of a destination other than where she is, because a change could result in the loss of her self, or a regression into drug addiction like Shar. This fear of change is reflected in the never changing transportation system/bus route, which is a foil for the constancy she wishes to have in life. Simultaneously, the bus route mirrors her avoidance of motherhood, “as if to echo her own stalling on the route to maternity” (Elkin). The bus forces Leah to confront her decision to have an abortion. As the bus contradicts her desire to remain physically immobile, her decision to continue with the abortion demonstrates her adherence against personal growth.

Leah’s attempt at empathy emphasizes her fear of change. Leah decides to be empathetic towards Shar, thinking she is doing the right, caring act. But, this is false empathy and she does not understand Shar’s goal to get money for drugs. Later in Leah’s section, after approaching Shar on other occasions and shouting, ““Proud of yourself? Thief. I want my money”” (Smith 45) to shame her, Leah attempts to be empathetic again. This time, she offers Shar help to overcome her drug addiction, as she believes an

addict would wish to do (61). However, it is evident that even in the act of handing Shar a flyer for addiction centers, Leah still fails to understand Shar because “Shar puts her finger in Leah’s face. ‘Can’t take no more. Can’t take it’” (Smith 61). This scene shows the shortcomings of empathy when implemented as a means for curing social issues. Shar rejects Leah’s offer of help because it is coming from a woman who appears as though she is socially above her, and “[Shar] remains an externalized embodiment of Leah’s unacknowledged fears; Leah vacillates between despising her and patronizing her, but never actually sees her” (Houser 132). Therefore, Leah’s offer is taken as condescending rather than empathetic, because Leah is afraid to understand Shar; she is afraid that if she did, she would revert back to that life. Leah’s repressed past of reckless drug use returns in the shape of Shar, which serves here in *NW* as a means of keeping Leah afraid of the result of mobility. So, that Leah’s help is rejected opens up the social implications of empathy as a tool for creating social bonds, and shows that instead empathy becomes patronizing and the social gap grows. This failure of empathy serves as a critique that negates the idea of how empathy is meant to coerce social cohesion. Furthermore, it comments on how Leah’s emotional incapacity is shared by Natalie.

Natalie is not capable of empathy either because she does not understand herself. Although Natalie escapes her lower class upbringing through her education and marriage, she only achieves the appearance of a successful life. As a child, “she began to exist for other people” (Smith 208), and through changing her name from Keisha to Natalie, which occurs abruptly in section “59. Proper Names” (Smith 239), of Natalie’s section, when Leah first introduces her to white friends. With her name change, she tries to separate herself from her Jamaican roots and assimilate. However, Natalie’s change in name is the

root cause of her struggle with herself and empathy. As the daughter of Jamaican immigrants, she is not meant to “belong to a dominant narrative of London” (Slavin 101), but rather to complicate the narrative. Due to this disconnect with herself, her ability to relate to others is lost, albeit her achievements. It is not until her online sex experience is revealed, and her username marks Natalie’s return to herself. But even with this spark of self-acceptance, she still struggles to connect emotionally with Leah, only able to offer “a selection of aphorisms, axioms and proverbs” (Smith 398), even though she understands she must admit to Leah a secret of her own to achieve this connection, her “instinct for self-defense, for self-preservation, was simply too strong” (Smith 399). Natalie cannot be empathetic because she refuses to admit truths even to herself, and in this way she and Leah mirror each other.

For Felix, public transportation is the context in which his empathy is misinterpreted. Felix’s empathy produces rejection and separation, specifically of race because he decides to support the pregnant white woman, rather than defend the two black men who have their feet up on available seats on the “98”. The racial tensions that emerge as an implication of being empathetic is an example of how “in the contemporary social context of deep economic and racial disparities, empathy is lopsided” (Houser 136); although Felix is acting for the good of another, he is punished. After his interaction, “Felix felt a great wave of approval...and just as surely, contempt and disgust enveloping the two men and separating them, from Felix” (Smith 194). That is to say, in a place such as NW, expressing empathy means to choose one person, one race, or one group, over the other, and in this way Felix alienates himself from the men and from receiving help when they rob and kill him. The negative consequences of Felix’s

demonstration of empathy towards the woman is explained through various cultural beliefs of the reasoning behind and implications of empathy, as Hollan explains, “Such widespread fear and wariness of empathetic-like knowledge challenges its conception as an essentially altruistic response...if its roots are in altruism, its consequences may end in harm rather than in benefit to others” (72). Thus, Felix’s death is a reasonable outcome of his empathetic act, because of the way that the altruistic, selfless act converts to be perceived as an affront to the two men Felix asked to move. As with Shar, empathy becomes condescension. Felix’s failed empathy strengthens the function of public transportation as a means for maintaining social and physical positions. Felix deviates from this structure of relations between social class and race, and “by assimilating himself to everyday British transport courtesies...Felix has betrayed the collective and signed his own death warrant” (Elkin), as “no one looked” and the two men are radiating contempt for Felix (Smith 194). By enacting a basic empathetic response and breaking the assumed courtesy of siding with the two men who are also black, Felix works to break the cycle of racial and economic separation that is clearly demarcated on the train as the woman assumes the men are Felix’s “friends” (Smith 193). Felix is punished and seen by all on the tube as the ‘other’ who has no place in NW because he acts outside of the behavior expected of him. So, Smith writes Felix’s murder to emphasize how people like him, who attempts to break social cycles, are rightfully punished or killed for their dissidence to the expected behavior.

As the antithesis, the narrator in *Remainder*’s absence of empathy examines the issues of an overly empathetic society. Because the narrator feels no emotion, as a result of the brain damage received from his accident, he is incapable of understanding the

emotions of others. Therefore, he acts linearly, without the interruption and conflict caused by emotional connection and empathy in decision-making. Hollan proposes that violence such as genocide or torture towards other social groups is caused by the ability to turn basic empathy on or off, and explains that turning empathy off results in “various ways in which people learn how to dis-identify from or dehumanize others” (73). The narrator demonstrates this extreme result of turning off empathy, through not only his treatment of Naz and the actors who perform his reenactments, but of his acceptance of Naz’s idea of killing all of the people involved in his bank heist. He imagines them being ‘vaporized,’ “being fed through a tube and propelled upwards, turned into a mist...saw through my mind’s eye a plane bursting open and transforming itself into a cloud... ‘That’s beautiful’” (McCarthy 275-6), as though they are not people, but objects, insignificant air molecules. His character shows that empathy ultimately has no effect on society, because there is no hope for another to empathetically connect with and stop him from performing the acts he wishes to. The narrator’s focus on reenactments connects to his position socially and economically, because his eight and a half million pound settlement allows him to create them. The narrator places value on the construction of his apartment building and other spaces to perform reenactments. If value is defined as, “the expenditure of labour in the abstract, measured in time...both material and immaterial” (Soule 55), then the narrator’s value placed on the sites of his reenactments is both economical and personal. The economic aspect relates to his use of people, their labor, and the materials or commodities needed to construct the apartment building exactly as he imagines it. It is also shown in his exploitation of Naz who obeys his every command, even that the liver smells like cordite (McCarthy 140), and to hire workers as well as

actors for the reenactments. The narrator demands this material value of labor with a disconnected, obsessive command. On the other hand, the narrator converts this material labor into having personal, immaterial value; in the way that “it is material at the site of production, but its capture and representation in the commodity renders it immaterial in exchange” (Soule 55). As he takes his first steps for his first reenactment in the apartment building, he “felt like an astronaut taking his first steps across the surface of a previously untouched planet. I’d walked over this stretch a hundred times...now it was fired up, silently zinging with significance” (McCarthy 141-2). In other words, the labor results in nothing more than a stage for his repetitive reenactments to take place, and has no function or value to it other than to please the narrator’s demands.

It is this conversion, of the labor and acting into an immaterial value only valuable to the narrator, that demonstrates how a lack of empathy facilitates disconnection, and ultimately a violent end. For example, the narrator’s emotional disconnection ranges from his nonchalant reaction to the cats that fall to their deaths off of the roof (McCarthy 156), to his anger towards the pianist for doing anything other than playing the piano while the reenactment was “on” (157), and how in the end he is pleased by the death during the bank heist and follows through with the ‘vaporization’ of the bank heist actors. This escalation in events is rooted in the narrator’s lack of empathy, as he moves from event to event without stopping to consider the implications the reenactments have on others, such the way Naz psychologically breaks down into a state of disassociated silence, of appearing “all locked up and vacant” (McCarthy 302). The narrator disconnects so completely that he feels the tingling sensation when Robber Four is accidentally killed. His first reaction is to say, ““Beautiful”” (McCarthy 291), then

progresses to the tingling sensation which “flowed outwards from my spine’s base and flowed all around my body...swallowing everything up into its contentedness” (293), one which mimics that of an orgasm, demonstrating that absence of empathy breeds an uprooted sense of pleasure. At the height of this description, the narrator describes the dead body of Four as a work of art, or a lake reflecting the nature around it as, “Four had opened himself up, become a diagram, a sketch, an imprint. I lay down flat...and followed the reflections” (294). His voyeuristic fascination with the dead man and his pool of blood escalates into physical pleasure as he states, “I moved my head over to Four’s body and poked my finger into the wound in his chest...parts of his chest...like rising dough. The flesh was both firm and soft” (294); a carnal, sexual description that reflects the dangers of a mind that emotionally disconnects. Through the vivid description of the dead man, McCarthy emphasizes the immaterial value that the narrator is the sole recipient of. This focus on his satisfaction in achieving the tingling feeling in reenactments, the immaterial value, and the use other people, or labor and materials to his benefit, as a means of using his social mobility to his benefit, supports how he is the antithesis of empathy, and shows how empathy fails when overpowered by self-invested greed in an economically driven world.

In neither novel do any characters arrive at a resolution of their internal conflicts. Rather, when the novels end, the characters only complicate their struggles, and have only dug themselves deeper into the paths of their cycles. Natalie’s marriage falls apart as her participation in online sex is revealed and she tries come to terms with herself. Similarly, Leah’s marriage deteriorates as she refuses to accept the change that her husband Michel wants and represents. Michel is driven by “physical advancement in

space with advancing through life” (Elkin), and in his desire for economic advancement that he pursues through online stock trading, and for having children with Leah, he represents both societal expectations and Leah’s opposite. As her opposite, Michel should have the ability to incite his wife to move forward with him, but this disconnection lies within Leah, who “cannot meet her husband in all honesty, for she hides too much from him....she clings to her youth fearing maturity and its challenges” (Powaza-Kurko 158). While Michel knew of her first abortion, she does not tell him about this pregnancy or abortion, nor that she has been stealing Natalie’s birth control until he finds the pills. Leah hides her actions from Michel because of the fear of admitting to Michel she does not want children. In an effort to save Michel from pain, Leah makes the revelation abundantly worse. From this tension created by their opposing drives, and by Leah’s silence to Michel about her lack of desire for having children, the conflict within Leah and of her marriage erupts.

In *Remainder*, the reenactments function as repetitive cycles that the narrator closes himself into. The narrator not only complicates his struggle with accepting and living with the effects of the accident, but his struggles lead him to orchestrating a mass murder. The murder of the final reenactment actors closes the novel into its largest cyclical pattern, as Naz and the narrator devise an aviation accident (Miller 643) in which the plane explodes. To the narrator, to enact an accident onto others is his final attempt at feeling as though he has agency over fate; he plans an accident to compensate for the accident that changed the course of his life. When in the airplane with Naz after the bank heist reenactment, the narrator wonders “perhaps their plane had already exploded...I imagined a team of aviation accident investigators reconstructing the plane...”

(McCarthy 305), with a distanced, non-empathetic reflection, in which his focus on the reconstruction of the plane fragments reflects his focus on constructing the apartment complex for his reenactments, as a result of his inability to reconstruct the object that fell on his head, or the event of the accident himself. The narrator continues in this scene with his final reenactment, which results from the pilot telling him he must land the plane, that “‘I’m afraid the Civil Aviation Authority’s commands override yours’” (McCarthy 307), to which the narrator responds, “the feeling of weightlessness, suspension, I didn’t want it to stop... ‘Tell them I am hijacking you,’ ...I reached down into my bag, pulled out my shotgun and brought the barrel back up straight” (307). The visceral bodily attachment he experiences in relation to repetition overwhelms his ability to think logically. So, as a result of his obsession with reenactments the narrator is hijacked by his own desires to feel weightless, like a part of a complete cycle of a plane flying in a figure eight, of experiencing an event where there is no remainder, no residual, just a cycle, in which “the weightlessness set in once more as we banked, turning, heading back, again” (McCarthy 308). However, this agency the narrator takes does not resolve the residual effects of his accident, but only entangles him further into the psychological issues that have manifested. Therefore, the narrator’s final reenactment represents the height of the residual effects of the accident, and demonstrates that he did not achieve to erase the feeling of being the residual of the accident, but that he has made himself, the remaining scrap of the accident, much larger and worse, reinforcing the power of personal entrapment in cycles over personal growth.

When compared, the novels demonstrate that social and individual changes are not achievable through emotional extremes. Rather, actions made without thought,

without micromanaged, step-by-step planning or philosophical questioning, drive people towards change. For this, Felix stands out among the other protagonists as the paradigmatic figure of social change and mobility, exemplifying how rumination and deconstruction of individual actions leads to misinterpretation of context, and unnecessary violence. The same violence is seen on a larger scale as a result of Remainder's narrator's infinitely cyclical and analytical thought process that facilitates his psychological deterioration. While Felix follows mantras that teach him to act, instead of wait to be acted on, he is set apart from Leah, who thinks so as to avoid action, and Natalie, who overanalyzes her actions. Smith writes Felix as having all of the components necessary to be socially mobile, yet has him killed for being in the wrong place and saying the wrong thing to the two men. Smith employs irony as she cuts Felix off just as he is about to break free from the social cycle to critique the unfairness in the cyclical nature of poverty. That is to say, as much as a person can work to climb out of poverty, the social pressures that reinforce the structure of localized poverty are unbeatable. So, Smith comments on the failure in society to provide the ladder for those who wish to climb out of social or physical contexts that detain them and become mobile, and instead expects them to conjure up the ladder themselves with resources that do not guarantee mobility or success. In this way, Remainder critiques the unnecessary grandeur of what the wealthy spend their money on. The comparison of the novels shows the hypocrisy of a social system, a social ladder, in which the wealthy expect the impoverished to achieve upward mobility through hard work. Even though the wealthy have the means to transform the neighborhoods riddled with poverty into areas of growth, it is more common that their money is spent on objects of immaterial value, and the

individual struggling to be upwardly mobile is ignored and pulled back down by the social surroundings that confine the poor into situations of immobility and stagnation.

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