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"BEFORE THE NATURAL WORLD STARTED DYING": LATENT CONSERVATISM, NOSTALGIA, AND DREAD IN THE MILLENNIAL NOVEL

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

"BEFORE THE NATURAL WORLD STARTED DYING": LATENT CONSERVATISM, NOSTALGIA, AND DREAD IN THE MILLENNIAL NOVEL

BY HANNAH DINA JANNOL

"Millennial Literature" is a new term in the critical literary space, which has described a slate of literary fiction works written by Millennial authors, featuring Millennial protagonists and themes. The present debate has to do with defining not only what this genre is, but what it means as an indicator of the contemporary zeitgeist. This paper intervenes in the standard narrative, that Millennial Literature is just a 21st-century recycling of typical literature by young people, who are often disillusioned, dreadful, and existential. Rather, my thesis argues that Millennial Novels are distinct for their latent conservatism. These novels criticize neoliberal feminist modernity for its dreadful, depressing lifestyle. Protagonists often feel bad about their lives working in sought-after white collar jobs, and then feel bad for feeling bad, knowing that under late stage capitalism, life could be worse. Instead of proposing a more radical alternative to the corporate work life, late stage capitalism, and environmental collapse which pervades the dread of these novels, the books support conservative values as a means of making meaning in a meaningless time. Millennial Novels are populated by stories about traditional religious practice, family values, and motherhood. In response to the question "What Now?" that Millennial protagonists ask themselves upon entering adulthood, many embark on plots fixated on the creation of families, children, and patriarchal modes of existence.

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In the last three years, the terms "Millennial Novel" and "Millennial Literature" have cropped up across newspapers, magazines, and literary publications. One panel of journalists described Millennial Literature's key features as "existential dread"; "thorny issues related to money and class"; "economic anxiety"; capturing "the ephemeral and ever-changing ways we communicate in our digital world"; how "love always seems to be slim in millennial novels" (Berman et al.). Some argue, then, that there is nothing novel about Millennial Novels: "Existential dread has been a theme of 'generational' novels for as long as novels have existed" (Berman et al.). The difference now is that this existential dread is being explored not through the lenses of "Ernest Hemingway or, even more recently, Jonathan Franzen," but rather "more female, queer and BIPOC characters get to confront the impending collapse of society" (Berman et al.). This begs the question: is this new genre just a more diverse version of *The Catcher in the Rye*? Ironically, another debate around what constitutes Millennial Literature is its whiteness. Some argue, as the previous passage does, that the genre is a representation of struggling young people in the 21st century. By contrast, the Millennial writer Jia Tolentino described the genre as "a growing family of fiction about highly educated white women who are trying to comprehend the coexistence of privilege and precarity." Defining Millennial Literature is messy because of these contradictions, and it being a burgeoning term. Millennial Literature may speak to a unique zeitgeist; or it might just reflect what people in their 20s always feel; it may be a privileged, white genre; or it might be a diverse one, about the precarity of modern Millennial life in late stage capitalism.

My thesis intervenes in the standard, popular narrative about what Millennial Literature is and offers a more specific take. I focus on what I believe to be the signature qualities of a Millennial Novel: the affects of dread and depression, resulting from conditions of modernity

and late stage capitalism. In response, Millennial Novels possess a latent conservatism in the form of nostalgia for traditional ways, family values, and religious practice. I will argue that Millennial Literature is a latently conservative genre which criticizes feminism, particularly as it relates to "white feminism." As the novels criticize contemporary, Western feminist ways of life, they do not then reach for something more radical, but instead revert to a desire for the past. Millennial protagonists create traditional family structures in new ways, celebrate religion, and lament modernity. They indicate a dissatisfaction with the state of modern life, one which has been lauded as the most progressive and livable. As a political and economically-oriented genre, it also necessarily criticizes capitalism from a Millennial perspective. The genre, based mostly around privileged, Western female protagonists who have recently graduated college and now find themselves miserable, empty, and yearning in their early careers, asks itself and readers: What now? I will focus on the following novels: *Severance*, by Ling Ma; *Detransition, Baby*, by Torrey Peters; *Luster*, by Raven Leilani; *The New Me*, by Halle Butler; and *Conversations with Friends*, and *Beautiful World, Where Are You?*, by Sally Rooney.

Feminism and latent conservatism are two key terms I use in my analysis of these novels. The books are latently, and sometimes not so latently, critical of feminism, though it is a particular kind of feminism with which they find fault. They are criticizing a neoliberal, white feminism, which promotes capitalist modes of liberation: "Where feminists once criticised a society that promoted careerism, they now advise women to 'lean in'. A movement that once prioritised social solidarity now celebrates female entrepreneurs. A perspective that once valorised 'care' and interdependence now encourages individual advancement and meritocracy" (Fraser). In her book on the topic, *White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind*, Koa Beck writes, "It's a type of feminism that takes up the politics of

power without questioning them—by replicating patterns of white supremacy, capitalistic greed, corporate ascension, inhumane labor practices, and exploitation, and deeming it empowering for women to practice these tenets as men always have" (8). Previous concepts of progress advocated for women's and other marginalized groups' participation in universities and careers, but these novels suggest that these institutions do not grant liberation or happiness.

When I say that this genre is "latently conservative," I am referring to a conservatism that advocates for gender roles, traditional religious practices, family values, and unlike pro-business Republicans of today, is anti-capitalist. Previous iterations of conservatism did not favor capitalism: "Throughout American history, conservative thinkers have recognized the destructive effects of laissez-faire capitalism on individuals, traditional institutions, communities, the nation, its cultural heritage, and the social order" (Kolozi 1). For the purposes of this paper, conservative refers to the desire to conserve and retain the past: "The essence of conservatism is the passionate affirmation of the value of existing institutions. This does not mean that conservatism opposes all change. Indeed, in order to preserve the fundamental elements of society, it may be necessary to acquiesce in change on secondary issues" (Huntington 455). These novels only acquiesce so much. When they do, it is as a means of re-affirming conservative values, in response to the dread and depression of a seemingly positive modernity. Feminism and conservatism are key terms because, though the novels do not spend a lot of time explicitly engaging with feminist politics, it is important to see how they reflect an implicit criticism of mainstream feminism; in another conservative turn, they do not consider something more radical, like women of color feminism.

I. The Meaning of Genre and Millennial Literature

Millennials, of which there are 72 million in the United States, (Statista) are a ubiquitous part of contemporary life. Cultural and political debate about why Millennials are ruining the American economy, why they are the greatest victims of the American economy, why they are lazy, why they are the most indebted generation, why they are too sensitive, is rife. Millennials are the most college-educated generation, while also the first generation to be worse off financially than their parents. They are the generation of internet access, social media, pornography, and yet are incredibly socially isolated, and the first to face a “sex recession” (Julian). In terms of access to white-collar jobs, civil rights, and technology, American Millennials are privileged, and at the same time feel an immense socioeconomic precarity and concern for rampant social inequity which remains from previous generations. Millennials have spawned a genre to make sense and to make meaning of these distressing, and confounding, phenomena.

It is important to note that etymologically, the word for “generation,” “generational” and “genre” come from the same etymological origins. It makes sense then, that some generations would give rise to their own unique genre. The word “genre” comes from French, and is related to the word genus, both of which have the “gen” root which indicates “everything in a particular category (a genre or a genus) belongs to the same ‘family’ and thus has the same origins,” according to the words’ entry on Merriam Webster. In this paper, genre does not describe a category of literature such as historical fiction, young adult (YA) literature, or science fiction. Rather, the genre of “Millennial Literature” explored in this paper and literary magazines refers to a certain aesthetic, thematic, intertextual, and theoretical commonality between a set of novels, which are then deemed as having certain important commonalities by writers, literary historians, critics, and academics. A literary genre is “composed of a constellation of recognizable forms

bound together by an internal dynamic" (Campbell and Jamieson 21). The internal dynamics of latent conservatism, affective dread and depression, nostalgia, critiques of capitalism and climate change bind these novels together. Recent theorists of genre emphasize "intertextuality" (Chandler 6) as a means of establishing genre. In other words, a series of texts may arise which reference one another; they exist in some relation to one another. Rather than individual novels which bear no similarity to one another, a literary genre is a series of novels which reflect similar sentiments, thoughts, themes. This distinctive definition of genre is important because it reveals how the creation of a new genre reflects a new kind of thought, lived experience, societal dynamic, politics, and aesthetics. Literature is a metric for the zeitgeist of the author's world and time period.

Two key examples of a generational genre are the Harlem Renaissance and the Beat Generation's literature. Both include different kinds of technical genres within them such as poetry, prose, novels, plays, but create a literary genre based on a shared historical moment, affective sensibility, aesthetic, and reflected zeitgeist. Notably, they share a certain generational moment. During the Harlem Renaissance, Harlem became "the literary capital of the world" which included dozens of artists, poets, writers, and other creatives who disagreed and came from many backgrounds but "had one thing in common - the determination, according to Langston Hughes, 'to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame'" (Gayle 71). The Harlem Renaissance is not defined simply by race; rather, the confluence of African American identity with a certain aesthetic, political, and artistic disposition: "The Renaissance itself was a combustible mix of the serious, the ephemeral, the aesthetic, the political, and the risque" (Wall 2). The Harlem Renaissance aimed to achieve equality and representation that Black Americans had never had before, and captured the artistic result of the Great Migration,

during which many Black Americans migrated from the rural South to major cities (Wall 4). Harlem Renaissance artists were also responding to modernity, to "its opportunities and its challenges: urbanization, technology, and the disruption of traditional social arrangements and values" (Wall 4). It was a distinct historical, political, and aesthetic moment for Black Americans, as well as for all Americans in a post-World War I country. Therefore, the genre is not about a certain stylistic form like poetry, but rather a cohesive grouping of a certain outlook and moment.

Another genre which is defined by a generational moment is the Beat Generation. Beat authors came about in the 1950s, after the World War II era of conformity. Beat authors wrote different kinds of works, but all as part of the same genre of mostly young men disillusioned with what they viewed as an insufficient, unliberated society. A shared belief system, generational moment, and historical moment created the Beat Generation genre. These touchstones of the generational genre reflect the importance in not only defining these genres, but also making a point of analysis when they do arise. Genres can speak to something specific in the zeitgeist.

Though Millennial Novels certainly do not speak to or for everyone (in fact, they represent a visible, privileged minority) they do speak to a growing class of people particularly in the West, who are graduating from college and entering the white-collar workforce at increasing rates, who find themselves depressed, dreadful, and precarious amid their relative privilege. Moreover, the concerns regarding late stage capitalism, isolation, new family structures, climate change, and socioeconomic precarity reflect a shared "impasse" in these novels. Impasse can be understood "as a political category," which "can be used to describe moments when disagreements or schisms occur within a group or when it is possible to imagine how to get to a

better future – conditions, for example, of political depression or left melancholy" (Cvetkovich 21). Millennial Literature as a genre comes uncomfortably close, but not quite to, impasse. The Millennial literary impasse has to do with a recognition that the status quo for women, feminism, and contemporary life is dissatisfactory, yielding disagreement on what to do. Certainly, the protagonists are at an impasse for what to do with their lives. However, Millennial novels do not imagine a better future. Instead, they nostalgize and romanticize the past in a latently conservative way. This is a defining element of the genre; they diagnose a broader socio-cultural impasse which is starting but not finalized.

Millennial protagonists see what their life is and what is on the horizon, and spend the novel analyzing why it is dreadful and depressing. They also experience the condition of depression and melancholy, which the cultural theorist Ann Cvetkovich argues is a "cultural and social phenomenon" rather than just a medical one (1). However, the novels do not propose or imagine a better future. In fact, none of the novels' conclusions are politically radical, imaginative, or generative. Millennial Literature exemplifies a different kind of impasse wherein "intellectual blockages" arise from "forms or critique that get stuck in the formulaic repetition of the failure of cultural texts to be progressive" (Cvetkovich 21). These novels are conservative, not progressive, except in their criticism of modern life. The conservatism, affective systems, and general pessimism of these novels ties them together as indicative of a certain zeitgeist, a certain feeling right now about modern conditions.

This pessimistic impasse is exemplified in a scene between Candace Chen, the protagonist of *Severance* by Ling Ma, and her mother when she is about to pass away. Candace's parents immigrated to Utah from China to find a better life for themselves and their daughter. However, their daughter does not know what to do with this supposedly better life. When she

asks her mother for advice on her deathbed, her mother says about Candace's father, "He wanted a better life for you, and it is only possible in America. You are the only child. You must do better or just as well as him" (190). However, Candace does not know how. She asks her mother directly, "But what do you want me to do?" (190) This is much more so the question of the entire book, and of Millennial Novels in general. The protagonists do not know what they are supposed to do with their lives, with themselves. They know that they do not like what they are doing, but do not know how to make something better. Her mother finally replies, "I just want for you what your father wanted: to make use of yourself, she finally said. No matter what, we just want you to be of use" (190). Candace does not know what this means. The vagueness of the statement, and the fact that Candace's job and skills in publishing have proved to be useless after a pandemic destroys most of the population, suggests the unsolved impasse of the Millennial Novel and this generational moment. That the mother passes away after this scene, without providing a clear answer, also tells of something bleak and pessimistic in response to the question "What now?" This scene's bleak tone and affective dread typifies the genre. Millennial protagonists feel as though previous generations expected life to be better for them, but find themselves lacking meaning or basic usefulness. Rather, they are precarious and depressed.

II. Millennial Affect: Dread and Depression

In this chapter, I will argue that dread and depression are affective cornerstones of Millennial Literature. I tie these Millennial literary affects in with my primary argument, that of latent conservatism in Millennial Literature. In short, Millennial protagonists are dreadful and depressed for their future and present, respectively, and as a result experience a nostalgia for a seemingly simpler and more meaningful past. Dread is "the fear of the unknown, the

apprehension of a future heavy with the possibility of danger" (Craft 521). Millennial protagonists experience dread because of the effects of late stage capitalism, climate change, and their lack of a clear future. Millennials are the most-educated generation, far surpassing Boomers and Gen Xers when it comes to high school completion, undergraduate attendance, and graduate degrees. However, Millennials have disproportionate amounts of student loan debt, little sight of home ownership, financial stability, or meaningful work. In the literature, Millennial protagonists live the most supposedly purposeful, meaningful lives, while feeling the most meaningless and useless, as per the scene in *Severance*. This dissonance produces dread and depression. In addition, Millennial Literature is situated within plots centered around late stage capitalist living and labor conditions, as well as the constant awareness of climate disaster.

I will use another touchstone of Millennial Literature, that of the office as a setting, to explore the affective dread that Millennials experience. Millennials do not just feel dread for the distant future, but for even the next month, day, or hour. Office scenes in Millennial Literature depict the dread Millennials feel. These novels are populated by office jobs which mark the meaninglessness, hopelessness, and emptiness Millennials feel in late-stage capitalist careers, as well as the negative affects which are exacerbated by their guilt or attempted distance from these negative affects; Millennials hate their jobs, then feel bad about hating their jobs, because they feel they should be happy. This tension between feeling bad and not wanting to feel bad relates to the ambiguity of privilege and precarity in Millennial Literature. This unique affective tone arises from the zeitgeist captured by Millennial Novels, that of a growing class of people who are simultaneously in a position of precarity, and in a position of privilege. It is important to note that for most people in the world, life is just precarious. However, the goal of this paper is to explore the specific subset of people writing these novels, and the protagonists in them. Though

the authorship of Millennial Novels is often diverse, they are also written by people who have attended elite universities, and come from privileged backgrounds. Various cultural critics "have noted that the privileges and security once distinguishing salaried jobs from manual labor are increasingly under threat, leading to the development of a new global 'precariat'" (Gregg 251). More people than ever are attending college and gaining white-collar professions. This means that more people are gaining privilege that is precarious due to late stage capitalism, climate change, and political collapse. Ironically, once a person gains work experience, a creative job, or a Bachelor's degree, they may become even more precarious, or at least more precarious than they had hoped. These books help us see a new category of person in the 21st-century West.

A large portion of this dread comes from the fact that the Millennials feel bad about feeling bad. Affect theory on minor or "ugly" emotions like melancholy, dread, sadness (as opposed to rage, ecstatic joy, passion) pinpoints the ugly feelings that ugly feelings produce. There is a "relationship between ugly feelings and irony" because these feelings have a "morally degraded and seemingly unjustifiable status" and therefore tend to "produce an unpleasurable feeling about the feeling (a reflexive response taking the form of 'I feel ashamed about feeling envious' or 'I feel anxious about my enviousness')" (Ngai 10). Millennial protagonists, for all their stereotypical whining, do not feel entitled to this whining; they are ungrateful but feel they should not be; they complain about unsatisfying lives and political precarity but feel bad because they know it could be so much worse. They are privileged: many white, all college educated, most straight, all living in developed countries and big cities; and at the same time precarious: indebted, on the brink of eviction or unemployment, facing environmental collapse. In affective terms, they feel bad, then they feel bad about feeling bad. This affect typifies the dread and depression in Millennial Literature. Feeling bad about feeling bad, ashamed about feeling

ungrateful, highlight the sense "in which ugly feelings can be described as conducive to producing ironic distance in a way that the grander and more prestigious passions, or even the moral emotions associated with sentimental literature, do not" (Ngai 10). Though Millennial Novels focus on the mostly mundane sex, personal, and professional lives of young people, they capture a unique affective tone held by Millennials.

Many professions in Millennial Novels evoke a sense of pointlessness and degradation, leading to depression. There is a feeling that work is pointless, but that in a hyper-competitive, capitalist job market, one must degradingly care about and put effort into a pointless job. In *Luster* by Raven Leilani, the protagonist, Edie, struggles at her first office job and then her later unemployed job search reflects this experience of college-educated Millennials. Edie is one of two Black employees in the editorial department of a children's publishing house. Her sense of degradation and pointlessness in the job is exacerbated by the racial dynamics of working in a corporate, white-dominated environment. Edie writes of her one Black co-worker, "So she's very popular around the office with her reflective Tobagonian eyes and apple cheeks, doing that unthreatening aw-shucks shtick for all the professional whites. She plays the game well, I mean. Better than I do" (14). Edie's sense of degradation and pointlessness does not just arise from a capitalistic work environment, it also arises from the degradation that comes from her racial positioning. Rather than work together, the two Black women are at odds in the office, subtly competing.

To add to the sense of depressive affect these scenes evoke, the job pays Edie just enough to live in an apartment infested with vermin, struggling constantly to make ends meet. A sense of professional dread has permanently set in, as Edie writes, "For the most part I've stopped worrying that she is compiling a list of reasons she should have my job, because now it is not a

question of whether she will take my job, it is a question of when" (14). Edie's writing about her situation comes off in some ways as unaffected, or disaffected. It is a nonchalant style of dread, of depressive affect, of feeling degraded by working to prove herself in a racist work environment, which is neither fulfilling nor well-paid. Edie's negative affects are so internalized at this point that they no longer land with any rage, just bleak awareness of the situation at hand without anything to do about it. Her situation is evocative of Ngai's writing on irony; Edie feels bleak and hopeless about her life's bleakness and hopelessness. Cvetkovich writes that for "many of us…everyday life produces feelings of despair and anxiety, sometimes extreme, sometimes throbbing along at a low level, and hence barely discernible from *just the way things are*, feelings that get internalized and named, for better or for worse, as depression" (14). Cvetkovich's analysis of depression reveals how depressive affect in literature comes from a certain gaslighting from modern life. The terrible quality of life Edie experiences is understood to be "just the way things are." It is seen as normal and acceptable to feel the way Edie feels, producing a sense of dread when a person feels that they should not feel how they feel, that something is terribly wrong. Edie has to accept what she is experiencing as normal and natural, when it is not. This forced acceptance produces a series of ironic affective dispositions, depressed feelings about depression, dread about dread. These complex feelings are simply labeled as depression, but Cvetkovich's analysis and Leilani's narrative reveal how depressive affect is rooted in something more complex than just feeling sad. Moreover, this affect is in some ways the most normal, natural response to the kind of life Edie leads. Her feelings are the way things are, but they are not the way they should be, or could be, as shown by Edie's much more tranquil and happy life when she leaves the office and the city.

Edie feels this sense of dread, degradation, and depressive affect in a job interview setting. While interviewing to be the receptionist at a clown school in New Jersey, the current receptionist tells Edie that she is underdressed for the interview (81). The decision of Raven Leilani for the job interview to be at a clown school cannot be overlooked. Firstly, it evokes a sense that this is all clownish, which is to say that it is all just a joke. "This" being the expectations set by the job market, as represented by this specific employer, as shown by Edie's description of the waiting room: "there are five other applicants combing furiously through their notes. They are all wearing pantsuits and they are all Asian…When the interviewer calls my name, his eyes sweep over me with confused disinterest and it is humiliating, but I feel a vague racial obligation to see it through" (81-82). As with clowns, there is a sense of absolute absurdism to the scene. That people are wearing suits, preparing notes, and are competing fiercely for a job which would land any of them in a position of being rent-burdened, underpaid, overworked in a job which could be done without a college degree, is absurd; Leilani is skilled at cultivating a bleak humor in her scenes of modern Millennial life. In an interview about this scene, the author remarked, "The friction between the tenor of her interior reality and the hyperbole of her exterior reality is an absurd kind of dissonance. Racism and sexism should feel absurd…Her deadened resignation to the brutality of her world shows up that brutality as mundane and functions too as the necessary armor to survive it" (Douze). As with her previous job, Edie is doubly burdened by a sense of racial humiliation and degradation. Oftentimes, she is the only Black person in a professional setting, and must prove herself – but for what?

The job interview scene emphasizes how these affective systems, Millennial economic conditions, and Edie's positionality as a Black woman come together. It is a scene which would likely resonate with many Millennials who believed that, like their predecessors, getting a

Bachelor's would grant them socioeconomic status and security. In reality, the influx of people with high school diplomas and college degrees, in tandem with capitalist economics which necessitate scarcity and competition for resources, leads to a situation wherein even underpaid, entry level positions require degrees, credentials, and years of experience. Jobs which would have hired a high school graduate now require higher education, recommendations, etc. In the U.S, "the competition over positional advantage for employment drives an arms race over educational attainment that produces diminishing returns on investment in the form of degree inflation" (Means 94). According to neoliberal, Western feminism, obtaining a college degree is undeniably important for gender equality. However, this thinking does not take into account capitalistic economic dynamics, or other paths to progress. The novel thereby implicitly criticizes feminism, but answers this criticism with a conservative story arc about joining a family in the suburbs.

The feeling of dread, not just for the interview, but for the job market in general comes through in this scene. There are no good jobs, and even the bad ones are highly competitive and degrading. Leilani skillfully cinches the depressive, degrading affect of the scene at the end, with a description of the interview experience: "I'm clearly not the front-runner for this job, and the more he talks about the historic model of the Italian buffoon, the more I realize I have misunderstood the requirements of the job" (82). The line "I have misunderstood the requirements of the job" lands with such a clear, sharp bite. The tone of irony, mockery of the position, which should have no real requirements at all, gets at the sense of sinking depression, hopelessness, and dread Millennials feel. Edie is experiencing the precarity which comes with certain privileges in the U.S. This evokes a specific political and literary affect. In this "precariat" there is an "expressive identity, since erratic employment prevents citizens from

attaining the state-sanctioned hallmarks of ontological well-being" (Gregg 251). Millennial Novels explore this growing identity and experience.

Gig work and temp jobs come up in a quintessential Millennial Novel by Halle Butler, both of which explore similar themes to *Luster* of degradation, pointlessness, and a depressive awareness of the situation at hand. *The New Me* captures the unique affective dread, depression of white-collar Millennial labor. In *The New Me*, the protagonist Millie obtains a job as a temp worker for a furniture company. Her life is populated by neurotic dread about her employment, co-workers, and office politics. As a result of office politics, the dread and depression in this novel are anxious. As per the title of the novel, at one point the protagonist concludes, "I should read a book, I should make some friends, I should write some emails, I should go to the movies, I should get some exercise, I should unclench my muscles, I should get a hobby, I should buy a plant, I should call my exes, all of them, and ask them for advice, I should figure out why no one wants to be around me, I should start going to the same bar every night, become a regular, I should volunteer again, I should get a cat or a plant or some nice lotion or some Whitestrips, start using a laundry service, start taking myself both more and less seriously" (50). Everyday these thoughts of contemporary-style self-improvement cross her mind in a manic frenzy. Likewise, Millie believes she will be happier once her temp job becomes permanent. None of these things provide her happiness, or come. Millie's experience, and that of other Millennial protagonists, portrays Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism. In their theory, chasing "the good life" ironically puts people further from it. Optimism is a relational attachment, in that people become attached to another object they believe will bring them happiness. However, according to Berlant, "These kinds of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it

initially" (1). In Millennial Novels, all of the aspirations and the objects characters use to obtain them make them more dreadful and depressed.

Jia Tolentino notes how the capitalist, Millennial lifestyle lends itself to this unique kind of anxiety, depression, and dread. About Millie, she writes, "What she needs is love, and a job that pays her enough money to live on. Instead, she clings to the very American idea that everything will get better through more work and more consumption. It has to. Otherwise, what would be the purpose of any of the things we're supposed to do?" Beneath Millie's existential dread and work-related anxiety, there is a larger commentary on the way in which everything causing these feelings have no purpose. Millie consistently believes that a new outfit, a yoga class, a good job, a clean apartment will bring her happiness. She muses, "My dreams are superficial and related to home improvement. There's a slight feeling of dread to them all" (91). This reflection highlights the cruel optimism and erroneous belief system under which she operates. Millie's specific disposition also speaks to another potential latent conservatism of Millennial Novels; rather than abolishing work or something more radical, Millie believes that her fulfillment will come from products and a job. Though the novel critiques this erroneous way of thinking, by showing that her dreams are tinged with dread, it does not offer another path. Rather, it continuously presents this false optimism without a serious critique or solution for it.

Millie's attempt to become a permanent employee in this company is a maddening, depressing narrative. She resolves that she needs to ask her supervisor for more work to prove herself, but cannot finish this extra work too quickly so as not to be a burden to the supervisor, or get more work than she actually wants to do. As a result, she artificially delays a bonus task of shredding documents. Millie thinks, "I have a paranoid fantasy in which Karen has chosen shredding for me to further alienate me from the office. I let it pass. Shred another sheet" (50). A

constant anxious, fearful dread leads up to the moment wherein Karen decides to fire Millie and replace her with an unpaid intern. Karen notices the still-unshredded papers, which "confirmed her suspicions that Millie couldn't be trusted with a simple but important task, and it gave her something concrete to take to Lisa. It was a hit, an assassination. Not exactly a lie, but a contrived circumstance" (98). Violent, extreme language like "hit" and "assissination" frequently come up in descriptions and internal monologues about daily office life. There is a sense of high stakes, life or death, do-or-die anxiety over interns, logo decisions, temp hires, and coffee break room conversations in *The New Me*. Karen and Millie are in a silent war over Millie's competence. When Karen prepares a long speech to explain Millie's termination to two executives, the futility of Millie and Karen's stress is revealed when the executives talk privately: "'Well, that was baffling.' 'Ah, you know. She's very . . .' 'Isn't she the receptionist?' 'Well, you know. She's a real go-getter. I know we're not going to have a party here.' 'I know you know. Wow. It kind of sounds like she wants to be the intern. Do you think that's what she's angling for?' And then they laughed at her again" (131). Butler reveals that after everything Karen and Millie passive aggressively fight over, none of it mattered or seemed that important to the higher-ups. A depressive mood marks the whole novel, as the sense that everything Millie and Karen have been taught to strive and work hard for is aimless is proven.

There is a suspenseful dread to the novel, as one wonders if Millie will be ruined by alcoholic tendencies, depression, or termination of her employment. In the end, she suffers from all of these, but it is futile. The affects of dread and depression in *The New Me* and *Luster* reflects a larger thematic concern in the novels, that the most privileged, purposeful lives are the most useless. The anthropologist David Graeber explored this concept in his book *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* wherein he contends, "we find ourselves, as a society, condemned to spending most of

our time at work, performing tasks that we feel make no difference in the world whatsoever" (49). Beneath the absurdism of office scenes in *Luster* and *The New Me*, there is a dread and depression which comes from stressing, suffering, worrying, and hoping, ultimately over jobs which are futile. Neither protagonist is explicitly seeking a job with a moral impact, but neither want to pretend that working at a clown school or sending emails for a furniture company are deeply meaningful, to themselves or otherwise. As a contrast, Edie is more clear-headed in her sense that everything going on is "bullshit," as shown through the novel's cutting, dry humor. However, Millie and other protagonists feel as though they need to find some deeper meaning and fulfillment from these jobs. When they do not, as Ngai points out, they feel bad for feeling bad. Graeber believes that this reflexive affect system is a result of working "bullshit jobs." He writes that there is "the misery of not feeling entitled to one's misery," thereby exacerbating hierarchical office politics which are allegedly meant to create fulfillment, but only do the opposite (150).

Beautiful World and *Severance* portray dread via the specific lens of economic and environmental doom. Their dread is less personal and more fixated on the wider future of ecology, labor conditions, and living conditions. Both novels' characters explore dread involving their impact on the environment, labor, and exploitation. They go beyond the matrix of capitalism, racism, exploitation, and futility that Millennial characters feel in the United States, and orient work-related feelings to the global present and future. Graeber contrasts the feeling of disentitlement to misery, with the misery of "knowing that one is doing harm," wherein one possesses "the misery of having to pretend you're providing some kind of benefit to humanity, when you know the exact opposite is in fact the case" (159). Ma and Rooney's protagonists feel this misery, along with the ironic affective distance described by Ngai.

In *Severance*, Candace Chen feels increasingly dreadful over her involvement in Bible product publishing due to its implications for labor conditions and the environment. She works on the production side of Bibles, which involves working with factories in China, where labor conditions are exploitative and harsh. The conditions under which the Bibles are made questions the moral-religious authority of those pressuring Candace to make cheaply, toxically-made Bibles. In one introductory scene, Candace tells a buyer that a new line of Bibles with gemstones are delayed because, "The gemstone granules are tearing up [the workers'] lungs…I mean, they're dying" (24). The woman on the other end of the phone expresses little sympathy, and after being told of the health risks of grinding gemstones inside factories, she simply threatens to move to a company which works in India. Candace "took the phone and yanked its cord out of the wall…jammed [her] foot into the basket, until I heard plastic crack" (26). She eventually plugs it back in. Candace does not just feel depressed or hopeless about her own job, but rather about its effects globally. No one seems to care about factory workers; everyone just wants their product. The phone which connects her to Chinese factory owners and Bible sales companies is a symbol of her enmeshment within a global system of exploitation, late stage capitalism, and environmental destruction. She feels guilty about her work, but does not know what else to do. She is getting further away from cruel optimism; she does not believe that what she is doing is explicitly good for herself or the world; she also does not stop. When her boyfriend offers to leave New York and live a more sustainable, peaceful life, she turns him down.

This disposition reaches its height as Candace continues to work in the office, even as a pandemic spreads across the globe. She describes going to work, for the company's image, while newer, harsher mandates come out about masks and health safety (208). Eventually, this pandemic kills nearly everyone in the United States except for Candace and a few others, who

roam the Earth together for survival, until the group's collapse. Notably, Candace comes to theorize that a person becomes sick with "Shen Fever" from nostalgia. She is not saying that memories cause the fever, which leads a person to unconsciously go through the same comfortable motions all the time, but rather "what if nostalgia triggers it?" (144). This theme of nostalgia speaks to a simultaneous dread for the future and a nostalgia for the past. In her search to kill families who are trapped in a loop with Shen Fever, she finds that most people just want to spend time with their families. Candace survives at the end of the novel with the hope of her pregnancy; the biological reproductive optimism of the ending reads as conservative as well, for reasons discussed in the section on family values. Simply, the novel is suggesting a somewhat conservative nostalgia for a simpler time, for simpler desires.

The cultural theorist Svetlana Boym argues that nostalgia is not all the same. Boym describes how nostalgia can be a productive or non-productive impulse which arises from different contexts. In her words, there is "utopian (reconstructive and totalizing) and ironic (inconclusive and fragmentary)" nostalgia, with utopian nostalgia trying to rebuild a mythical place or way of life, and ironic nostalgia longs but "without trying to rebuild it" (284). In *Severance*, both forms of nostalgia exist, although there are clear attempts to rebuild the past, especially as a means of avoiding the dreadful future. Understanding nostalgia as a longing for something which did or did not exist and the desire to rebuild it, highlights the effects between negative affects, longing for something better, and the impulse (as explored in the next section) to recreate traditional values. Millennial protagonists are hopeless, bitter, dreadful, depressed, and anxious about the present and future. With nowhere else to look, they look to the past for a glimmer of hope, of how to be in the world as adults.

In Sally Rooney and Ling Ma's novels, the protagonists express depression and dread for their present and future, despite it being the one lauded as the most developed and privileged. Candace Chen writes,

> The future is more exponentially exploding rents. The future is more condo buildings, more luxury housing bought by shell companies of the global wealthy elite. The future is more Whole Foods, aisles of refrigerated cut fruit packaged in plastic containers. The future is more Urban Outfitters, more Sephoras, more Chipotles. The future just wants more consumers. The future is more newly arrived college grads and tourists in some fruitless search for authenticity. The future is more overpriced Pabsts at dive-bar simulacrums. Something something Rousseau something. Manhattan is sinking. What, literally? Because of global warming? I snarked. (13)

This passage exemplifies the relationship between dread for the future, nostalgia, and late stage capitalism in Millennial Novels, particularly in Ma and Rooney's works. As the future looks worse, they feel worse, so they look back to past ways of life instead. The protagonists are dreadful because they inhabit a world which they feel is decaying under the facade of it improving. In a time of late stage capitalism, as Candace reveals, conditions are allegedly getting better under the guise of high-end supermarkets and fast casual food, but these phenomena make people like her feel worse. A similar sentiment is felt about the present by a narrator, Alice, in *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* by Sally Rooney:

> i was in the local shop today, getting something to eat for lunch, when suddenly i had the strangest sensation — a spontaneous awareness of the unlikeliness of this life. i mean, i thought if all the rest of the human population — most of whom live in what you and i would consider abject poverty — who have never seen or entered such a shop. and this, this, is what all their work sustains! this lifestyle, for people like us! all the various brands of soft drinks in plastic bottles and all the pre-packaged lunch deals and confectionery in sealed bags and store-baked pastries — this is it, the culmination of all the labour in the world, all the burning of fossil fuels and all the back-breaking and work on coffee farms and sugar plantations. all for this! this convenience shop! i felt dizzy thinking about it. i mean i really felt ill. it was as if i suddenly remembered that my life was all part of a television show — and every day people died making the show, we're ground to death in the most horrific ways, children, women, and all so that i could choose from various lunch options, each packaged in multiple layers of single-use plastic. that was what they died for — that was the great experiment. i thought i would throw up. of course, a feeling like that can't last. maybe for the rest of the day i feel bad, even for the rest of the week — so what? i still have to buy lunch. and in case you're worrying about me, let me assure you, buy lunch i did (17)

Eileen reflects not only Candace's negative feelings about the present, but also Ngai's theory of ironic distance when it comes to minor negative affects. Eileen emphasizes that this life that she is so horrified by is "for people like us!" She is aware that she should be grateful for all the packaged food and air conditioning, that she should not feel so depressed upon entering a

market, and yet she does. Feeling bad about feeling bad makes her feel worse. Moreover, the knowledge that these conditions are unlikely to drastically change soon, that this is the status quo, evokes more dread centered on the future. In *Beautiful World*, Eileen describes this connection between existential dread, depression about the present, and nostalgia for the past. Later in the novel, the character Eileen reaches a conclusion about why she feels so depressed about the present, and why that depression has aroused nostalgia in her for past times.

> I know we agree that civilisation is presently in its decadent declining phase, and that lurid ugliness is the predominant visual feature of modern life. Cars are ugly, buildings are ugly, mass-produced disposable consumer goods are unspeakably ugly. The air we breathe is toxic, the water we drink is full of microplastics, and our food is contaminated by cancerous Teflon chemicals. Our quality of life is in decline, and along with it, the quality of aesthetic experience available to us. The contemporary novel is (with very few exceptions) irrelevant; mainstream cinema is family-friendly nightmare porn funded by car companies and the US Department of Defense; and visual art is primarily a commodity market for oligarchs. It is hard in these circumstances not to feel that modern living compares poorly with the old ways of life, which have come to represent something more substantial, more connected to the essence of the human condition…This nostalgic impulse is of course extremely powerful, and has recently been harnessed to great effect by reactionary and fascist political movements, but I'm not convinced that this means the impulse itself is intrinsically fascistic. I think it makes sense that people are looking back wistfully to a time before the natural

> world started dying, before our shared cultural forms degraded into mass marketing and before our cities and towns became anonymous employment hubs. (219)

This passage emphasizes the series of effects between dread and depression within modern, privileged, late stage capitalist conditions, the ensuing nostalgia for the traditional past, and then the latently conservative recreation of traditional ways of life. Though this nostalgia can be problematic and conservative, as Eileen points out, she also highlights the fact that Millennials like herself are not nostalgic for times of massive inequality, but rather for the connection and purposefulness of life before hers. In other words, the characters and the books tease apart issues of affect, nostalgia, and conservatism. The impulse for the latter is latent, and enmeshed within these other formal qualities. As a result, Millennial Novels feature a desire for traditional religion and family values.

III. Religion in the Millennial Novel

Conventional, and sometimes even archaic, forms of Christianity come up in Millennial Novels. As opposed to New Age spirituality or some reformed version of traditional religions, which might be more expected among 20-something authors, traditional Christian practice plays out in novels by Sally Rooney and Ling Ma. Though more young Americans than ever are identifying as agnostic or atheist (Smith), Millennial Novels feature traditional religious forms when they feature religion. This genre component arises from a similar lostness, or longing, that leads to conservative impulses in Millennial Literature. In this section, the authors suggest that when their protagonists feel particularly purposeless in life, they can turn toward religion. This genre conserves an older way of life, a way of deriving meaning and thought. This latent conservatism arises from the sense of dissatisfaction with contemporary life.

Rooney's *Conversations* and *Beautiful World* include a certain nostalgia for the guidance and meaning of religion. Both books include protagonists reading, citing, and finding meaning in the Christian Bible. In *Beautiful World*, Alice struggles with seeing purpose in her career as a novelist. Alice begins the novel feeling that her work is "morally and politically worthless" (187). Toward its end, she writes about the Christian perspective on the benefits of novel-reading and novel-writing: "Jesus emphasized the necessity of loving others without regard to our own self interest. In a way, when we love fictional characters, know that they can never love us in return, is that not a method of practicing in miniature the kind of personally disinterested love to which Jesus calls us? I mean that sympathetic engagement is a form of desire with an object but without a subject a way of wanting without wanting; desiring for others not what I want for myself but the way I want for myself" (232). It is at least odd, and at most bizarre, to read a Millennial character unironically beginning a sentence with "Jesus emphasized." Christianity has been a catalyst for much of colonialism, (Rodney) capitalism, (Friedman) anti-choice legislation, and other sins of the past. As a result, young people have sought out other forms of spiritual enlightenment, but rarely traditional ones (Smith).

Still, Alice turns to a traditional historical form to find purpose in her life's work. Just as Alice begins to feel good about her work, she counters that it is hard to stay in the "Christian mindset" because she "can't seem to shake the conviction that nothing matters, life is random, our sincerest feelings are reducible to chemical reactions, and no objective moral law structures the universe" (232-233). There is a tension with the Christian belief system, or any belief system, and the modern secular belief system which has shed itself of all previous tradition or dogma. Evidently, the Millennial ethos, depression, dread – is incompatible with the beliefs which have previously, for centuries, given human beings a sense of purpose and meaning. This

tension helps to explain the dread and nostalgia in these novels. It is clear that the characters nostalgize, perhaps even envy, previous generations' ability to find meaning and hope easily through figures like Jesus Christ.

Alice's landing upon the Christian Bible as a sourcing meaning emphasizes the genre's criticism of previous progressive generations. More Americans identify as spiritual or agnostic, and fewer than ever identify as Christian (Smith). These passages also highlight the driving problem faced by literary and real-life Millennials: nothing replaced the traditions which were thrown out for being too conservative. Without Jesus, there is only the sense of randomness, reductibility, amorality, structurelessness of human life. There is no happy or politically acceptable alternative.

In Ma's *Severance*, the characters turn toward religion when modern life decays or proves to be unmeaningful. Like Rooney's characters, they do not shift toward a radical solution. They look back and conserve. Candace Chen, describes how her parents became religious upon moving to America from China. She writes that "need transforms into belief," as her mom would pray after a hard day of work, when she "sat down at the kitchen table and clasped her hands. It would become an important ritual, the one routine that granted her a sense of control. She practically invented her own life in America by praying, she liked to say" (180). It is not a new idea that people become religious when they are feeling lost, or feel a lack. That is precisely the point; the narration of finding purpose, order, meaning, control in Ma and Rooney's subplots are old and conservative. Additionally, Candace's mother only becomes religious once she takes on a Western, feminist style of life. She leaves her family, pursues a career with her husband in the U.S., gains independence. It is at this time that she becomes more conservative, at least

religiously. The mother's arc reflects the latent conservatism of Millennial Literature, vis a vis its simultaneous critique of contemporary feminist life.

Likewise, the apocalyptic plot latently favors traditional religious communal structure. Candace joins a pack of survivors of "Shen Fever," a pandemic illness which causes people to mindlessly repeat their routines until they rot. Candace believes nostalgia triggers the illness, not disease in the air, as the government reports. The protagonist describes the pack of survivors, who now obediently follow Bob, a survivalist who leads Christian prayer circles for a group of nine, mostly 20-somethings. Candace writes about this group, "We were brand strategists and property lawyers and human resources specialists and personal finance consultants" (3). The past tense of this passage emphasizes the meaninglessness of the Millennial characters' jobs. When disease and climate change take over the planet, people turn to a religious community (which turns into a cult). Candace's job in production design is proven to be useless, as she tries to overcome Bob's tyrannical treatment of the Shen Fever survivors. Instead of left-leaning radical works which imagine post-apocalyptic life as an anarchist or socialist utopia, *Severance* imagines the post-apocalypse under the thumb of a right-wing, religious man. This suggests that a Millennial Novel cannot imagine a radical future, only a reversion to the past.

Ironically, Candace worked in the production of Bibles before the apocalypse happened. Bibles made for religious, pious people are made by underpaid, overworked factory employees who bind paper and covers in occasionally life-threatening conditions in China. This contradiction highlights the tensions between meaning-making, modernity, careers, religion, and late stage capitalism under which Millennial protagonists work. When it comes down to the choice between the two, religion or modernity, the book suggests that what will be left is the former, even if it is oppressive and tyrannical. Despite the college degrees and skills of the

survivors, all of them aside from Candace obediently follow the increasingly strict orders of Bob. Their transformation into a cult after lives in finance and HR emphasize the need to make meaning, find structure – even if it is deeply conservative.

IV. Family in the Millennial Novel

This conservative impulse, catalyzed by unresolved dread and a nostalgia for seemingly better times, manifests as well in the form of traditional family values in many Millennial Novels. Many of these novels feature an emphasis on reproduction, motherhood, or the creation of families. According to Pew Research data, Millennials "came of age and entered the workforce facing the height of an economic recession," thereby experiencing a "slow start" to adult life (Dimock). Social reasons too, like the problems Millennials see with the conventional nuclear, heterosexual family in the suburbs, may have led to a decline in starting families. However, Millennial protagonists do not have an adequate replacement for a system which provided purpose and structure to human life in the past. When these novels begin, all of the protagonists are young, single women who are not particularly intent on getting married or having children. However, by the middle and end of the novels, much of the plots' focus narrows to concerns about motherhood, biological reproduction, traditional family life, and domesticity. This turn usually comes after a criticism of mainstream feminism.

It is possible that this struggle explains the latent, sometimes conscious, desire for traditional family values in Millennial Literature. This latent conservative longing appears in Millennial non-fiction works, such as *Failure to Launch* by Mark McConville. McConville is a clinical psychologist who specializes in families with young adults who have "failed to launch." McConville's book *Failure to Launch* has a latently conservative tone when it comes to its discussion of rapidly changing marital and family structure patterns, in ways which are similarly

reflected in Millennial novels. This piece of nonfiction literature on Millennials will foreground my discussion of latent conservatism vis a vis family values in Millennial literary fiction.

McConville lists three key reasons as to why Millennials are taking longer to grow up, often living at home with no serious plans for the future. The third reason, McConville argues, is that people are getting married and having children much later. In the past, people got married in their early twenties, (50) which enabled and also forced them out of their parent's homes. McConville reminisces on his own young adulthood: "When my generation went to college, there was an implicit expectation that we would meet our future spouses there. And indeed, within a year or two of my graduation, I and many of my friends were married" (51). McConville cites Jeffrey Arnett, an expert on young adulthood development, to blame events like later rates of marriage, more people than ever attending college, the women's movement, "the acceptance of sex outside of marriage" for the fact that "growing up today – regarding oneself as an adult – is a longer, slower, evolving process" (50). To be clear, McConville is not advocating for a reversal of the women's movement, sexual liberation, or marriage rates. This passage is not explicitly conservative. However, there is a latent, or perhaps implicit, conservatism to his analysis of why Millennials are failing to launch. Rhetorically, McConville is equating things like sex before marriage, waiting longer to get married, going to college, with not being an adult. He also identifies these new social trends as a problem in personal and societal development for young people. By contrast, his generation became adults more quickly – and are thereby associated rhetorically with things like maturity, competence, ability – because they got married shortly after college.

McConville's indirect, latent – yet apparent – conservatism explains latent longing for traditional family values in Millennial novels and life. Rapid social and political changes explain

why fictional and real people look back longingly at family. According to Pew Research data, "Fewer than half (46%) of U.S. kids younger than 18 years of age are living in a home with two married heterosexual parents in their first marriage. This is a marked change from 1960, when 73% of children fit this description, and 1980, when 61% did" (Livingston). This correlates to similar findings about Millennials marrying and childrearing not only much later, but much less than previous generations. These trends are amid immense criticism of the nuclear family, without much in the way of proposing a replacement for the needs that the nuclear family fulfills.

In other words, McConville and other writers imply that Millennial problems arise from a lack of family, not because they are heterosexist conservatives, but because they see that where Gen-Xers, Boomers, and others found meaning, purpose, support, or community through a spouse, children, parents, and extended family, Millennials do not have that. In an essay entitled "What Comes After the Nuclear Family?: Progressives need to articulate a new philosophy of family life," the family activist and advocate Nicole Sussner Rodgers writes, "There's also a lot of uncertainty about what exactly a progressive philosophy of family life looks like, including what's desirable and achievable. People can't yearn for a family life they haven't even imagined." This uncertainty and longing explains why, in the Millennial novels I explore, Millennial authors and protagonists return in uncomfortable, unexpected ways to the family unit. Millennial protagonists either try to create a progressive family structure, or retreat to their own nuclear families; either way, there is an embrace of something conservative. The conservative writer David Brooks wrote, about the fall of the nuclear family, "while social conservatives have a philosophy of family life they can't operationalize, because it's no longer relevant, progressives have no philosophy of family life at all." Millennials, who are largely progressive, are at a painful cultural crossroads wherein they desire an old, conservative framework for what it

achieves, while also trying to chafe against it, while also finding it socially and financially impossible to marry, buy a home, and have children. Of his life, McConville writes, “My own life structure includes my relationships with my wife and children.” The Millennials in *Detransition, Baby*, *Conversations with Friends*, *The New Me,* and *Luster* cannot say this for themselves, nor can they really say that anything structures their lives.

The novels possess a marked nostalgia for the past, when meaning and purpose were easily accessed via marrying and parenting early in life, among a traditional community. These novels are conservative in that even among queer and polyamorous characters, traditional family life and values are re-created. This fact also helps bridge the tension between straight, white Millennial Literature’s and more queer, racially diverse Millennial Literature to reflect a generational genre. In all of these, among all 20-something urbanite protagonists, traditional gender roles provide a sense of meaning and joy.

In *The New Me* the protagonist Millie is adrift, lacking in structure or purpose, and turns to her Boomer-aged parents’ nuclear family for it. Millie, a 30-year-old, temps at a furniture company for $12 per hour in the hopes of a permanent position somewhere someday, so that she can stop relying on her parents for rent. Jia Tolentino, a Millennial cultural critic, summarizes the novel as “a quintessential representation of Millennial life: “Millie spends her days stapling papers in pursuit of the elusive ‘temp-to-perm’ while teetering on the brink of total emotional breakdown. Her parents, comfortable retirees, subsidize her tiny apartment. She ruined her last romantic relationship. She has one quasi-friend, Sarah, but it’s a parasitic situation.” This analysis highlights not only the typical Millennial qualities of the novel, but its core loneliness, the protagonist’s lack of structure, family, and meaning. Ostensibly, friends and significant others can replace the nuclear family unit. However, when everyone is working multiple jobs, living

alone in crowded cities, it is hard for that "chosen family" to truly operate as a family, or to gesture toward something resembling a philosophy of family. Tolentino points out that Millie is "young enough to expect more from life than twelve dollars an hour at work and episodes of 'Forensic Files' on her laptop, but old enough to see that, although her job may be temporary, her feelings of insignificance and inadequacy might never go away." When she is at home with her parents, she feels significant. She belongs somewhere, she is a part of something, there are people she knows and people who know her.

Amid a depressive spell, Millie visits her parents. Despite their bickering and traditional marriage structure, the scenes with the old, married parents are the only ones in the novel with a happy tone. When Millie visits her parents, the reader lands upon a happy, if fraught, scene of family life. She narrates, "When we get home, my dad is in the kitchen making pasta by hand and listening to something contemporary and god-awful on Pandora" (163). Millie and her parents make conversation about the neighbors' ongoing construction work. Her mother "puts her arm around my waist and gives me a squeeze" as Millie learns from her mom about the debris and noise, saying, "'Yeah, that sucks,' pulling away slightly" (164). Her parents laugh about their home life, their Spoetzl recipe, which Millie's father helps her cook. Though the parents tease and squabble, evidence of the resentment which build up after years of a traditional, monogamous marriage – they are happy. The tone of this passage is happy. Millie finally acquiesces to the moment: "I don't want the sun to dip any lower" (167). This is the only time in the novel she expresses a desire to prolong the moment, as opposed to all of the interactions she has at work and with friends.

Millie's day with her mother is the only time she is happy in the novel. This day is populated exclusively by recreational consumerism. Millie's mom takes her shopping at the

GAP, a department store, a Clarks, a Target, and a Paul Mitchell hair salon (167). All of these big-name, corporate brands create an unexpected setting for a Millennial novel, and for a Millennial in general. In real life, Millennials are less likely to spend money in department stores, on luxury items, and participate in other shopping trends of the past. 1980s-style, in-door malls have declined in large part due to the shrinking of the middle class, as well as the inexpensive and efficient nature of online shopping, Millennial usage of which has been blamed for the destruction of in-person shopping (Luhby). As a result, Millie's mall visit emphasizes a nostalgia for the past, with conservative undertones. The happy mall scene with Millie and her mother highlights the economic disparity between Boomer parents and their Millennial children, who are the first generation to be worse off financially than their predecessors (Luhby). So firstly, this scene's latent conservatism has to do with a yearning for a time when a person could be middle class, and derive easy, simple joy from shopping at a department store. Today, people under 35 are more likely to shop at thrift stores, or inexpensive online stores (Borovic). Thrift stores are popular because Millennials care about the environment, and buying secondhand is said to be better than buying new clothing. Though Clarks and Paul Mitchell are not explicitly conservative ideologically, they represent an era of nuclear family units, suburban malls, suburban infrastructure, and free time spent participating in conspicuous consumerism. Millie's shopping with her mother also recollects a blissful, if ignorant, enjoyment of capitalism as mother and daughter within a nuclear family. All the names of the stores, the brands, the products contribute to a more socioeconomically conservative tone which reminisces on a culture of suburbia, shopping, corporations, a stable capitalist middle class, and family life. This is not to say that Millennials have withdrawn from the economy, but that Millennials participate in consumerism in a particular way: thrift stores, local cafes, small bookstores.

Later, Millie meets her parents happily for dinner. She writes "My dad tells us we both look very pretty, and it's simple, but it feels very nice" (167). It's a heteronormative, domestic, family-oriented scene: a nuclear family at a local restaurant, the mother and daughter having just finished a day of shopping, and the father telling the women they look pretty. Though not explicitly conservative, there is an implied conservatism here. Millie is unhappy as a single woman with a career trajectory, an apartment in a big city. Not only that, none of her friends in the same boat are happy either. The only people who seem to be content are her parents, who live a life from a previous generation. The implications of this sole happy scene are latently conservative, if ambivalent, about it. Millie does not decide to move to her hometown and get married. She also misses her family life deeply in the big city, and the ending of the novel suggests she does not find the same meaning, structure, or solace again.

If a Millennial Novel does not have a biological nuclear family for an aimless protagonist to find happiness in, they try to create one, or at least primarily find happiness through one. Many Millennial Novels have a plot which attempts an untraditional family structure. In *Luster* and *Detransition* these families feature three parental figures and one child. In *Conversations*, there is a polyamorous "situationship" which arises between a married man and a college-aged lover, as well as the married man's wife and his new girlfriend's ex-girlfriend. Though on their face, the sometimes queer-coded – sometimes explicitly queer – polyamorous and triad relationships which form appear to be progressive, there is an apparent conservative desire to them too. This portion of the paper will offer close readings of these family scenes. I will argue that these moments reflect a desire to conserve family values, or the value of family, as well as a leaning toward traditional gender roles.

In *Detransition, Baby*, a trans woman's ex-girlfriend, now a detransitioned trans woman living as a man named Ames, accidentally impregnates a cis, straight woman named Katrina. Ames, his ex-girlfriend, Reese, and Katrina attempt to create a triad to raise Katrina's biological offspring. Reese, though not a biological parent, has always wanted to have a child. She tells Katrina that the hormones she takes as a trans woman will allow her to help with breastfeeding (265).

Superficially, this novel comes off as extremely progressive, extremely queer. And yet, *Detransition* hardly makes it to listicles about Millennial Novels, despite the fact that it features Millennial characters, so many of the motifs included in novels in "Millennial Novel" listicles, all written by a Millennial author. All three of the characters are privileged New Yorkers, especially Ames and Katrina, who work at a marketing firm. Though all have their own apartments in gentrified Brooklyn, good jobs, access to a queer community, college educations (at least for Ames and Katrina), they are lonely and adrift. They have all of the things they have been told that will give them liberation – Katrina's ability to divorce her husband and stay childless, Reese's ability to transition and live as a woman, their careers, their independence – and yet they are unhappy. *Detransition* is mostly considered a queer novel, but it can also be a quintessentially Millennial Novel, whose queer themes even further crystallize the latent conservatism of the genre.

Detransition is a latently conservative novel for its affirmation of family values, traditional gender norms, and negation of queer family structures as a possibility. Throughout the novel, Reese finds that she can only truly affirm her identity as a woman via normative gendered experiences, like motherhood, facing abuse from men, and participating in traditional femininity. Moreover, the novel centers on the creation of a family. Though the novel's characters attempt to

make a family that Tucker Carlson would disapprove of (to say the least), it nevertheless represents a desire to conserve the value of family, against queer theory and activism which contests all family-making as heteronormative. Ultimately, the novel fails to create this family, suggesting simultaneously that the novel's women will only obtain meaning in their adult lives from parenthood, but that they cannot due to the queerness of their potential motherhood, thus doubly affirming conservative values. This novel typifies the demands Millennials have for *another way*, a way out of the past, but a lack of models and scripts put forth for them.

The focus on family in *Detransition* reads as especially conservative because it is a queer novel. Though queer theorists, activists, thinkers, and people are divided on the issue, it is more common in queer critical theory for the creation of family to face criticism and questioning. Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* is the strongest, and most polemical, source of this line of thinking. In his book, Edelman writes that " queerness names the side of those not 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" (3). He highlights that both pro-choice and anti-choice activists use the future of sons, daughters, and children as foundations for their argument. Though the book focuses on an array of other theories and calls into question the focus on a better future, it is a clear representation of queer theory's antagonism toward family-making, toward child-making. Edelman's work has been criticized. One reviewer wrote, "By simply dismissing queer parents as 'comrades in reproductive futurism', capable only of contributing to the homophobic scapegoating of the sinthomosexual, he ignores their possibility as allies on the frontier between the Child and children, between the future and tomorrow" (Fontenot 19). Criticisms such as these reflect the controversy surrounding family in queer theory. Nevertheless, it is still a surprise, a remarkable one, that the first novel by a transgender woman to hit *The New*

York Times Bestseller's List centers on the desire to create a family and perpetuate traditional gender norms.

Throughout the novel, the trans protagonist finds meaning through traditional gender roles. At the outset, Reese's biological plight is foregrounded as a major hardship for her. Reese desperately wants gender affirmation as a woman, which to her means being a mother, something incredibly difficult to do for someone who cannot give birth, cannot impregnate someone, and faces a discriminatory, expensive adoption process. The narrator writes about Reese, "In motherhood she could imagine herself apart from her loneliness and neediness, because as a mother, she believed, you were never truly alone…Perhaps equally important, as a mother, she saw herself finally granted the womanhood that she suspected the goddesses of her childhood took as their natural due" (26). It is unexpected for a queer novel to take such a transparently traditional approach to writing gender. *Detransition* seems to argue that gender is a performance, dictated by what society deems accurate. It follows then that a trans woman would do anything, even the conservative, to affirm her gender. Nevertheless, the protagonist could have gone in another direction, finding a new definition of womanhood, a new way to be a woman in America, or something more ambivalent. Instead, she relies upon clear, conventional narratives. For the purposes of a Millennial genre approach, it is notable that Reese's longing for motherhood is strongest in her early thirties. This time is marked by the switch from young adulthood, for many today a prolonged adolescence, to adulthood, to an actualized self. Like other Millennial protagonists, she finds meaning, stability, and hope at this time in traditional social roles.

Even though the potential family forged by Katrina, Ames, and Reese is unconventional, the novel's value system remains oddly traditional. Reese frames her uniquely trans Millennial

futurelessness as “the Sex and the City problem,” which is when women in their mid-30s face an impasse; they are no longer young enough to do whatever they want, and the pressure of cultivating an adult self creeps in. As per *Sex and the City*, Reese believes that the options available to women, cis and possibly trans, are “Find a partner, and be a Charlotte. Have a career, and be a Samantha. Have a baby, and be a Miranda. Or finally, express oneself in art or writing, and be a Carrie” (4). However, trans women have less of a clear path, given the lack of trans women in history, and the endemic of early deaths among trans women. Still, Reese reaches for this metaphor as a means of making meaning in her own life. However, the means are notably conservative. *Sex and the City* is a relic of its time; it tried to convey sex in Manhattan through the lives of four straight, cisgender, upper-class white women. This is not to say that the show was not progressive for its time; rather that it is not for Reese’s time, especially given its transphobic and homophobic content. Of all the ways to see the paths for adult womanhood, *Sex and the City* is remarkably dated.

As Reese becomes a Miranda, though, her path strikes a combination between conservative and queer which re-emphasizes the conservatism in Millennial Novels like *Detransition*. Conservatism does not necessarily mean a complete conservation of everything in the past. As per the definition used in this paper, it is an attempt to conserve the past within the conditions of the present. Conservative practices acquiesce, but only so much. The three are creating a family in a queer triad. The triad uses other queer families (like one in a house shared by a lesbian couple and a gay male couple who all raise their children together) as exemplary inspiration/inspirational examples. Still, the emphasis is on creating family. Rather than reject the future, or reproduction – social and biological – the novel more or less warmly embraces it, with a few tweaks for 21st-century queer Brooklyn.

A major issue Reese and her family run into is that there is no path set for families like hers, which explains some of the more conservative feelings in the novel. Other Millennial protagonists face the same issue; previous generations have taken down previous structures of living, without putting new ones forth. There is no way to be a woman, to make a family, without relying upon conservative structures. Even as families try to divide up household labor more equally and progressively, much of the weight still falls on women (Hochschild). Ames echoes this view when he tells Katrina and Reese, "I'm saying if we want to break an old pattern, we need to envision a new pattern in its place. If we want to break the pattern of typical two-parent, even queer two-parent nuclear families, we have to think through the logistics of the replacement" (257). The logistics of replacement are difficult, which explains why the triad not only struggles to actually replace old models, but ultimately fails to create this reinvented family altogether. The novel doubly affirms its conservative values by foregrounding itself as a book about wanting family, traditional gender roles, and by negating the ability for queer people to get what they want in adult life. Ames "has taken to saying that every generation must reinvent parenting, and he, Reese, and Katrina, will be part of their own generational reinvention" (253). They are not though. The novel's bleak end reflects Sussner Rodgers' point about the future of progressive families: "To build a progressive philosophy of family life will undoubtedly push older generations out of their comfort zone, but it's necessary, urgent work. Without a well-articulated philosophy of progressive family life, the void will inevitably be filled with shame and confusion." In *Detransition*, the novel ends without the family or the child. It also ends without a future or real ending for the characters. Reese grieves the loss of the motherhood and child she could have had. The bleak, empty final pages highlight the dread and conservatism of Millennial Literature. Rather than propose a different ending than family, the ending implies

that there is nowhere else to go. When the possibility of motherhood fails, the plot collapses in on itself, implying that there is no future or story to tell without a family or child. Despite being a progressive novel by other standards, it is remarkably conservative and non-radical.

Luster affirms family values, motherhood, and traditional gender roles through happy family scenes and a critique of independent, big city life for single women. Edie, a Black Millennial finds herself living in the home of a white couple in an open marriage; she begins dating the husband, Eric, but ends up enmeshed with his wife, Rebecca, and their adopted Black daughter, Akila. Edie is in the same boat as other Millennial protagonists: she has a college degree, an apartment, an office job, but finds herself adrift, unfulfilled, deeply alone and in lots of debt. Eventually, she is evicted from her apartment, finding herself quasi-parenting Akila for irregular amounts of money.

Like *The New Me* and *Detransition*, *Luster* has a latent conservatism which gives rise to an ambivalence about its politics. On the one hand, the novel is an apparent critique of whiteness, suburbia, class, and performative wokeness. On the other, it affirms conservative values. Edie finds meaning, happiness, and calm as the member of a traditional, nuclear family. In the New Jersey home, Edie finds herself drawn to Akila in a parent-like way. Though there are significant problems, she also experiences a level of purpose and tranquility there that she cannot and has not on her own. One critic wrote that “this stealthy domestic reconfiguring of a novel that began as a challenge to the domestic is an ingenious move on Leilani’s part; the putative homewrecker has become part of the family. Abandoning the chaos of New York for the carpeted hush of suburbia seems very ‘Get Out.’ The twist is that Edie wants to stay in. There is calm in New Jersey. Insulated from the world’s pressures, she starts to paint again” (Schwartz). As the passage states, the novel begins by criticizing the domestic: Eric and Rebecca open up their

marriage, like so many do, because ostensibly the heteronormative, monogamous, nuclear family structure is insufficient, suppressive, and unsatisfying. However, Edie is not any happier in a polar opposite position as a single, independent woman. What's more, she finds joy, structure, and advantages in the suburbs.

Leilani herself has stated that the more family-oriented scenes are the ones that were intended to be joyous. The Comic Con scene, where the entire family unit goes to the convention with Akila, is the only clearly happy scene in the novel. Leilani said in an interview, "I pulled a lot from my own childhood and from some of my own preoccupations for the things Akila loves. I wanted to be able to talk about a union between two Black women who are at very different points in their lives but also need each other. But I also wanted to talk about geekery—like I needed to write about Comic-Con [laughs]. And so in a book that is a lot about loneliness, a lot about isolation and what we do to cope with that, it was important to me that there would be points of joy—and with Akila, that joy was her fandom" (Muchnick). Though Leilani does not explicitly draw a connection between the scene's joy and the family-oriented nature of it, there is a latent association between these things. There is a desire for community amid the loneliness that Edie's character explores; she solves the problem by taking on a familial role. Akila solves her loneliness in the fandom community, which signifies a family of sorts. Though the novel is usually progressive in its critiques on race, class, and gender, it also reflects something more conservative.

The novels which do not feature a cohesive, traditional family unit, attempt to make one. In *Conversations with Friends*, after the protagonist sleeps with a monogamously married man, and his wife finds out, she simply joins their marriage. Frances and Bobbi are two college-aged women who used to date in high school and now do spoken-word poetry together. They meet

Nick, an actor, and Melissa, a writer, when Melissa decides to profile the two young poets. Bobbi has an emotional and occasionally physical affair with Melissa, and Frances has an affair with Nick.

While this love rectangle seems messy, modern, polyamorous, queer – and it is – its key moments are also highly familial, conservative, and domestic. Melissa, upon finding out about the affair, sends Frances a long email about it. Everyone accepts what has happened, and comes to terms with it. Frances plays the wife role in Nick's home when Melissa is out of town. The four become a family unit in their own way:

> When the four of us spent time together, [Bobbi] and Nick often engaged in pretend arguments or other competitive activities from which Melissa and I were excluded. They played video games after dinner, or magnetic travel chess, while Melissa and I talked about impressionism. Once when they were drunk they even raced each other around the back garden. Nick won but he was tired afterwards, and Bobbi called him 'elderly' and threw dead leaves on him. She asked Melissa: who's prettier, Nick or me? Melissa looked at me and in an arch tone she replied: I love all my children equally. Bobbi's relationship with Nick affected me in a curious way. Seeing them together, each giving the other all of their attention, gave me a weird aesthetic thrill. Physically they were perfect, like twins. At times I caught myself wishing they would move closer or even touch one another, as if I was trying to complete something which in my mind remained unfinished. (175)

The diction and tone of this scene reflects the latent conservatism in *Conversations with Friends*'s central plot. Melissa's description of her "children," (175) Frances's description of Bobbi and Nick being "like twins," evoke feelings of family, parenthood, and idyllic childhoods in domestic settings. Melissa positions herself as the "matriarch" of the "family" by referring to everyone there as *her* children. Though Bobbi asked a flirtatious question, Melissa responded with something not only neutralizing, but saccharine and family-oriented. Melissa chose to have no children; Nick wanted them but she wanted to focus on her career.

This conservatism may arise because Millennials lament a lack of direction in their personal lives. They note their inability to buy a home, to marry, to have children, to launch stable careers. These laments read as latently conservative. Not all of the protagonists consciously, passionately affirm all existing institutions. Some do it somewhat passionately, some do it implicitly, some do it consciously, and others not. Either way, this affirmation of traditional values is apparent. Almost all major Millennial Novels I examine feature some emphasis on family values, or the attempt to create family. Perhaps it is the cognitive dissonance of Millennials' rejection of heteronormative, heterosexist, traditional family values from the past, combined with their lack of a replacement and lingering desire for purpose and structure, which altogether produces a political, personal, and cultural conundrum which has contributed to the birth of a genre attempting to arbitrate/mediate these issues. This dissonance and latency is important because it highlights the problems brought forth by McConville, Brooks, and Sussner Rodgers, which is that Millennials need family, or something to replace family, but do not have it, and do not know what to do about it. As a result, family keeps cropping up in Millennial Novels in unconventional, yet still conservative ways. In response to changing societal

structures, Millennial novels do not propose radical futures or possibilities; they conserve older modes of life.

Conclusion

In closing, Millennial Literature is a unique genre in its own right featuring affective dread and depression, which instigates a nostalgic impulse in the plot and characters for traditional, conservative lifestyles. Millennial Literature features primarily female protagonists who are simultaneously privileged and precarious. They have college degrees, jobs, apartments, and live in affluent countries. At the same time, there is a sense of oncoming economic or environmental collapse, financial problems, existential dread and burnout. Moreover, even without those issues immediately present, Millennial plots focus on the dissatisfaction, frustration, and depression their characters feel in their supposedly enriching, creative jobs, in their comparatively privileged lives. There is an element of irony, and in the words of Laurent Berlant, cruel optimism, to the books' leading characters. The speakers know that they are privileged, or should be happy, but they are not. This leads to dread about dread; the monologues about modern life essentially ask how the protagonists can be happy when they already have all the things that were supposed to make them happy, but instead feel depressed. Though the term "feminism" does not explicitly come up, these books criticize the sort of white, neoliberal feminism under which their characters operate. Life in the corporate world and big city does not make the characters happy. In fact, protagonists often explicitly state that this sort of life is the source of their unhappiness. Cruelly, the women continue to pursue the kind of life which is making them depressed; even when they are aware of these affective dispositions, they do not forge any radical solutions.

At this point in the novels' system of affects and effects, the characters turn toward a conservatively nostalgic impulse for the ways of the past. This is unexpected, as Millennials and perhaps even contemporary literature is associated with progressive thought. Millennials are thought of as a liberal group, and are writing contemporary literature, which is often associated with timely, progressive modes of thinking. On the surface, these novels are progressive; most Millennial novels are written by and about young women, many feature queer and or writers of color. However, the actual narratives presented in these novels are latently conservatism. *Luster, Conversations, Detransition,* and *Severance* use family-making or motherhood as a way to finding meaning. The protagonists make implicit, or sometimes explicit, criticism of neoliberal progressive modernity, without taking a radical stance. Though novels are not a political manual, they do reflect the politics of their time, especially when there are so many which are so similar at once. This new genre marks a moment in time wherein young people are feeling especially hopeless. Though the heteronormative, upper-middle class nuclear family is certainly not the path to liberation, its destruction (among other traditional practices like religion) was not replaced with anything. Today, young people are searching for the replacement, akin to the characters of *Detransition*. This project is a difficult one and requires creativity. It also requires changes to the systems, such as careerism and late stage capitalism, which have shaped American life for the last several decades.

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