No One is Talking about the Hivemind: Exploring Postdigital Affect in the Metamodern Moment

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2   Introduction

i am not a digital thing so onetime

after many months spring had come

and i rode my bike to school and my eyes hurt

at the green green bodies of the trees

(Diaz 2022, 51)

If there is one thing that this stanza, from Maxime Garcia Diaz' poem *A sim child has to go to school* (2022), underscores, it is the desire to affirm a being outside of the digital sphere. Diaz emphasizes the uniqueness and specialness of seemingly ordinary phenomena. She rides a bike to school. Her eyes hurt, perhaps from the sun, perhaps from the bright colors of her surroundings, of the trees whose bodies are green, green, the brightest of greens. Yet it is through this affirmation that she intimates that these observations are far from self-evident. In essence, she points towards a tension between the experience of being outside, being 'not a digital thing', and the version of herself that *is* digital, that does not ride her bike to school or encounter 'green green trees'. These modes of being are positioned as separate, as existing on opposite ends of a spectrum, as being in turmoil with each other. And while the digital is portrayed as the standard, it is the non-digital that seems most desired.

A similar desire springs forth in Patricia Lockwood's 2021 novel *No One is Talking About This*[1]. Lockwood's narrator, strongly hinted to be herself, finds herself encapsulated in a continuous online sphere, in what she calls the "portal". It is in this portal that her emotions are regulated; she is intensely affected by relatively minor occurrences, such as a pet bee dying (Lockwood 2001, 36-7), yet reacts in monotone fashion to the constant stream of 'actual' events of importance. Only when something truly drastic happens in her near environment, namely her sister giving birth to a severely disabled child who soon after passes away, is she able to 'feel normally' again in the world outside of the portal. Just like Diaz, then, Lockwood's narrator has difficulty navigating the online-offline binary, and yearns for a more offline presence, in a clichéd yet accurate sense, a state of being in the moment.

What underlines Diaz' and Lockwood's works is a notion of affect, not simply to feel certain things, also to feel at all.

This thesis' main interest is this specific form of affectivity. It is a form of affect which arises in the online-offline dynamic and the tensions which stem from opting in and out of the digital sphere. I look to analyze this affect, not on an individual level, but rather nudging towards a broader zeitgeist-like observation, using Raymond Williams' notion of structures of feeling as inspiration. A structure of feeling, as I will portray in the following subchapter, can however not be charted without turning to singular works. I will therefore take two works as cornerstones of this affective zeitgeist of the here and now. These will be the works mentioned above: the Dutch poetry collection *Het is Warm in de Hivemind*[2] (It is Warm in

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[1] Further in this thesis abbreviated as *No One.*
[2] Further in this thesis abbreviated as *Hivemind.*

the Hivemind) by Maxime Garcia Diaz, and the novel *No One is Talking About This* by American author and poet Patricia Lockwood. Both contain musings on what it means to be offline, online, and both at once, yet both will be studied in light of their respective focusses regarding this subject. Diaz' work, through a corporeal lens, brings into relation the body and the digital. Where does the body find itself in relation to the online world? Is it physical flesh, keeping the user grounded in 'real' life and 'real' sensations and feelings? Or does the body, too, find itself encapsulated in the digital sphere? Further, her work reflects what Sianne Ngai theorizes as "ugly feelings", states of being and emotions which fall outside of the straightforward, often-studied 'basic' emotions such as anger, happiness, sadness, but rather encompass lingering, gnarly feelings (Ngai 2005, 6). An affective reading of this collection informed by these ugly feelings will be positioned as one aspect of the broader structure of feeling this thesis aims to envision. Lockwood's work is more explicitly concerned with (dis)engagement with the digital[3]. This (dis)engagement, and its characteristics of a dialogue between irony and sincerity, distance and attachment, reflects what is coined by Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen as the pendulum of the metamodern era (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2017, 10), which is also seen to oscillate within these same binaries. Why is it that engagement in online spheres makes you cynical and ironic, while disconnecting creates space for genuineness? Should you desire for one or the other, or desire to sway between the two?

Within this binary, I will also turn towards Spencer Jordan's theory of the postdigital condition (2019). In his work *Postdigital Storytelling: Poetics, Praxis, Research* he charts a development in our engagement with digital media within which the classical opposition

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[3] . I use (dis)engagement as a term to denote that I discuss engagement and disengagement within the same instance.

between being on- or offline has ceased to exist. To him, "the postdigital world then is not one that has moved beyond the digital; instead it is a place where the digital is now ubiquitous and consequently invisible" (Jordan 2019, 11). It is of no use to study the boundary between online and offline, as this boundary has become oblique in a fully digitized society. While thus providing us with a valuable lens through which to study the increased digital connectedness of the 21st century, this concept stands in tension with the (dis)engagement in the works this thesis studies, as well as with Pepita Hesselberth and Joost de Bloois' politics of withdrawal (2020, 2). According to them, we are witnessing an age of increased popularity of withdrawal from the public arena, or in relation to this thesis the digital public arena. This theory posits withdrawing as a "means to renounce in order to reconnect and reconstruct" (Hesselberth and de Bloois 2020, 3). People choose to withdraw not simply as a means to escape, but also, almost akin to withdrawing in the military sense, to reconfigure, consider alternative forms of engagement, consider the purpose of engagement itself. It thus departs from a notion of affect, withdrawing out of feelings (of stress, overstimulation, inability), towards a more strategic conception of withdrawal: withdrawal towards a goal. It is this conception of withdrawal that I will bring into Jordan's theory of postdigitality, together being instrumental in viewing and doing justice to the tensions which arise from Diaz and Lockwood's works.

The starting point of this thesis, however, lies with the question of the characterization of the (argued) demise of postmodernism, and the 'something' that has replaced it. In the years following the turn of the millennium, the consensus has surfaced that the postmodern cynical and deconstructional worldview has come to subside just as the modernists' naivety and romanticism had in the years before it. That is to say, they have both come to subside as the dominant cultural logic, for their inherent characteristics can remain present in art and

language in one form or the other. The question of the defining cultural logic of a generation does at this point demand a new answer, as the plurality, cynicism and inherent instability of postmodernism are increasingly scrutinized, while a desire for sincerity, also seen in a neoromantic movement (van den Akker, Vermeulen 2010, 8), associated with modernism, has made its way back to the forefront of culture. It appears to no longer be sufficient to scrutinize objective truths and continuously turn to deconstruction and pluralism as an answer that is paradoxical in nature, as there tends to never be one 'answer'. It is postmodernism imploding inwards, leaving no room for theory to move forward (Storm 2021, 3). Inevitably, then, a desire is created, and now signaled, that there *should* be a way forward, and that this must be found beyond the cynical borders of the postmodern. If the postmodern is thus indeed making way for something new, then the most crucial task for scholars of cultural studies, literature, media studies, and philosophy right now is to loudly ask and thoroughly dig out what this something new is. I view this task as mine to take part in, especially as a young graduate student, who sees this changing attitude in the world and the peers around himself. And, perhaps more crucially, in the works of literature and art that I engage with, most explicitly in Lockwood and Diaz´ works. It is a big task for a graduate student to aim to *add* to the theorization of the postpostmodern period, yet it is one that lies at the core of my motivation for this thesis. Through engagement with affect theory, which can be seen as one of the components of the broader theorization of a generational structure of feeling, and theories of the (post)digital, I hope to bring insights from contemporary society's engagement with online spheres to further plurify scholarly work on the metamodern. For if there is one thing defining the contemporary culturally, that is (as I will portray) not yet sufficiently addressed in current theories of the postpostmodern, it is this negotiation of online-offline presence.

The central question of my research thus is: how is affect generated in a (post)digital sphere, and secondly, what forms does this affect take? Departing from this follows the third, broader question: how does this then relate to the structure of feeling of the current period in art and society, and further, how can this add to the theorization of the postpostmodern period? In answering these questions, I will first analyze *No One*, followed by *Hivemind*, with both body chapters together forming the central structure of my thesis. I will follow these chapters with a discussion in which I combine the takeaways of my analyses, before proposing my addition towards metamodern theory. My conclusion will also serve as a look forward towards implications of the research I have conducted, and possible future research.

2.1   CONCEPTIONS OF THE METAMODERN

While there are multiple conceptions of theorizations of the postpostmodern period across various disciplines, the one that this thesis primarily engages with is that of the metamodern. First proposed by theorists Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen in their 2010 essay *Notes on Metamodernism*, metamodernism is a response to a romantic turn in art and literature in the late twentieth and early twenty first century (8). This turn is seen to be marked by an adherence to a revaluation of sincerity, beyond the landscape of postmodern cynicism. As pointed out above, this does not involve a complete departure of postmodern thought, or a complete return to the modern or romantic worldview. Rather, van den Akker and Vermeulen turn to a metaphor of movement, in the form of oscillation, to build their theory. The metamodernist sensibility is marked by oscillation "between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment" (2010, 2). The theory sees oscillation

as a continuous movement, back and forth, between these two poles. No one side is favored, no one side is dominant, yet they are not strictly present simultaneously. It is a stance which springs forth from works like David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1995), in which a romantic, comic tone is alternated with a horrific and tragic counterpart (van den Akker and Vermeulen 2010, 10), or from works of architects Herzog and De Meuron's "negotiations between the permanent and the temporary" (8). Crucially, in this stance the metamodern subject is notably self-aware. It is a subject adhering to an "informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism" (5), realizing in a postmodern sense that their idealistic worldview is unrealistic, or at the least naive, but not letting this stop them from chasing it. They derive the value of their ideals from this chase, knowing deep down that it is futile.

When returning to their original text in 2017, van den Akker and Vermeulen expanded on their theory, which they still uphold, by periodizing the 2000s and situating metamodernism further in contemporary society (2017, 1-19). Painting a broad picture of defining developments of the twenty-first century, they see "a growing group of people disaffected with neoliberal globalization, disenfranchised with representative democracy and at ease with the internet as a means to discuss, cultivate and rally around shared frustrations" (13). These aspects are seen to be fertile ground to solicit a metamodern stance. They spark anger, disenchantment and pessimism yet allow for spaces to emerge where this pessimism is collectively combatted within new forms of community. Further, van den Akker and Vermeulen reinforce their earlier prerequisite that what they describe as metamodernism is not an active push for a new way to shape and view the world, but rather a description of a structural sensibility (2017, 6). In this they, rightfully, draw on Raymond Williams' notion of structures of feeling (6). In his original 1977 text on the topic, *Marxism and Literature*, Williams makes an attempt to chart the lived presence. He posits that "the strongest barrier to

the recognition of human cultural activity is [this] immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products" (Williams 2007, 17). Cultural theory, he claims, is hindered by its ability to only analyze fixed forms that provide insight into cultural norms that are and have been, but are unable to provide a grasp of that which is less tangible, the fleeting feelings that exist in the present and in interaction between persons and persons, and persons and art. These have, in his view, been continuously relegated to the subjective sphere (17). They are seen to be people's own, personal reactions to the world around them. Following this argument, it can be concluded that what is then analyzed as valuable are only fixed, objective forms. To Williams, this is a mistake. In response, a structure of feeling is proclaimed as a solution, a way to chart a totality of sensibilities as it is lived and felt. It totals a collection of similar feelings that are dominant in any given present, formulating a broader consensus of what is the dominant feeling in a specific time. Essentially, it forms the framework of the type of statements that van den Akker and Vermeulen make.

It remains of importance, however, to, while acknowledging the academic value of theorizing this vague, intangible concept of feeling, also recognize that it is challenging to make solid statements on it. As Susan Sontag put it in her essay *Notes on Camp*, "a sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable" (Sontag 1999, 54), and as James MacDowell elaborates, "part of the challenge is to walk a line between over- and under-defining" (MacDowell 2012, 7). Thus, while this thesis will also, besides pulling from Raymond Williams' theory, draw substantially from affect theory, I plan to place my research in the midst of this (almost) ineffable field. I aim to be aware of the fleetingness of sensibilities and (structures of) feelings, and hope to sit comfortably in this fleetingness, trusting that it may even open up space for new ways of thinking and formulation.

2.2   METAMODERN THEORY AND DIGITALITY

There can however be argued to be one omission from these different visions of the metamodern. They seem to insufficiently address the influence of the advent of the digital age, both in the cultural objects they use to substantiate their theory, and in the inherent statement of their theory. What is the worth of a theory that purports to chart the structure of feeling, or dominant cultural logic, of the now, yet insufficiently takes into account the arguably defining feature of this now? The internet and all its nodes have changed how media is accessed, how meaning is created, how subjects relate to each other and to the world around them. Alan Kirby addresses this in his vision on the postpostmodern period, aptly dubbed *digimodernism* (2009). His theory takes textuality as key, namely the computerization of text, and puts forth the idea that this computerization "yields a new form of textuality characterized in its purest instances by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple authorship" (Kirby 2009, 1). It has brought text to a more communal form, where anyone is free to create text, alter text, question text, with no real threshold. As such, new forms of meaning are created (3). While these observations deserve to be recognized as poignant and important, digimodern theory fails to chart the broader structure of feeling that metamodernism addresses. In an analysis of textuality and its changes over time, it provides a good break with postmodernism and manages to coherently point out a new form of textuality and its a/effects. Yet while (post)modernist theory draws on the textual, it combines this with the previously discussed ineffable sensibility to portray a more affective, whole, picture. To return to van den Akker and Vermeulen's words, these different

iterations of modernism are the "dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies" in a specific time period (2017, 4). Kirby's digimodernism lacks the breadth to capture this.

Thus, finding ourselves in a position where metamodernist theory fails to take into account digitalization as a defining feature of the now but its alternative digimodernism not being a viable alternative, an addition is needed. As illustrated, I recognize in this thesis that metamodernism most accurately captures the current structure of feeling, thus see it as my task here to add to this theory through engagement with the role of the internet in society. Henceforth this takes me back to my objects of study, *No One* and *Hivemind*. While both are media in 'traditional' print form, they (implicitly) comment on matters of digitality, and make use of language derived from an internet-based textuality in the process. They can be considered as works of the internet, representative of a relationship with media that is characteristic of the twenty-first century. As so, an analysis of them can help substantiate metamodern theory. Where Luke Turner ended his eight-point *Metamodernist Manifesto* with the call to "go forth and oscillate" (2011), my response would be: we must scroll forth and oscillate!

3   NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS

3.1   INTRODUCTION

Opening the first page of Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* means encountering another act of opening, with the narrator in the first sentence opening the 'portal', an analogy for the social media used throughout the novel. "Inside, it was tropical and snowing, and the first flake of the blizzard of everything landed on her tongue and melted" (Lockwood 2021, 3). From here onwards, this blizzard of everything encumbers the reader, forming an avalanche of strains of thought, media references, aloof political commentary and self-deprecating, sexually provocative in-jokes. That is, until roughly halfway through the novel, as it is a novel in two parts. Part one finds the narrator constantly dipping her mind into this portal and splurging every train of thought on the pages. She navigates her life as a celebrity in the portal, as someone who travels the world to speak about the internet, and as a partner to someone who is not in the same sense always online. Part two sees her dissociated from this portal, as a result of a drastic occurrence in her life. Her younger sister gives birth to a child born with Proteus syndrome, "a rare condition characterized by overgrowth of the bones, skin, and other tissues" (Medlineplus, 2012). The baby survives the birth, yet it passes away soon after, having had a short life which was simply unlivable, experiencing sensory underload which stands in contrast to the narrator's sensory overload. This shocking experience manifests itself in a remarkably tender manner. It ends up standing as a reminder that there *is* indeed life outside of the portal, bringing some relativization to the narrator's "extremely online" (Wallace 2020) life.

Lockwood's novel is in all senses an extremely current work and commentary. Thematically it primarily engages with the human relationship to technology, not necessarily technology in a (meta)physical sense, as in what technology allows us to do physically and technically, but in a more social sense: technology as how it has shaped human interaction, how it has shaped the dynamic between the subject and media, the subject and other subjects. It is about the types of connection we make in an increasingly connected media sphere, and places this increasing connectedness in question. In a broader sense, it also explores how consumerism, neoliberal politics, gender, and sex manifest in such a digital surrounding.

While not a memoir such as her first novel *Priestdaddy* (2017), it can be read as a piece of autofiction[4]. Lockwood blends experiences of a narrator, experiences which we obviously cannot verify to be strictly hers, with a perspective, a lifestyle, and events, such as a tweet going viral leading to internet 'fame', which seem to mirror her own[5]. It is unclear which events mirror actual occurrences, yet the tone and structure do not constitute as belonging to that of an autobiography. As such, it engages with notions of subjectivity, as "autofiction has been inherently equated with [..] the fragmentation of the subject and the blurring of ontological boundaries between fact and fiction" (Gibbons 2017, 118). Lockwood's subject is not a stable subject, as its identity is largely unclear due to this blurring of boundaries and also due to having never been named, positioned spatially or even specifically temporally.

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[4] Subgenre of autobiography, birthed by postmodern writers who "started to play with and deliberately perform the fictional element" of autobiography. "Autofiction transgresses the boundaries between autobiography and literature as well as the boundaries between literature and life", as described in the *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction* (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2019, 2).

[5] Before making a name in the poetry and literature world, Lockwood was mostly famous for her Twitter presence. See: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jan/30/patricia-lockwood-thats-whats-so-attractive-about-the-internet-you-can-exist-there-as-a-spirit-in-the-void

Her subjecthood exists through relationality, through the connections with the portal, and (lesser so) with the persons in her life outside of the portal.

3.2   HOW IS NO ONE TALKING: ON TEXTUALITY AND TONE

Crucial to approaching this novel in the context of (post)digital affect is a reading of its specific textuality, and the tone it achieves through its unique approach to written, novelistic text. Lockwood shows awareness of the differences between ways in which text structurally feels and functions in online spaces and in a novel form. In many ways, it can be said that she tries to replicate facets of online discourse, speaking on structure and tonality that is, and experiments with print work as a new mold in which to pour these facets. The benefits of a written novel remain. It is a work that can be printed, that can put forth one thematic whole, that is tangible and lasting as opposed to fleeting and temporary. It is the way for a young writer to comment on online discourse while temporarily placing themselves outside of that sphere. Yet *No One* chooses to do so while still experimenting with the form of this discourse. I contend that through its *feed*-like structure and (post-)ironic tone, it brings core features of the digital to print work, bringing with it forms of affect that are characteristic of online engagement, yet take on new forms when finding themselves springing from tangible, paper pages.

3.2.1 Scrolling Through Printed Pages

The affective reality of being online is in part created by the phenomenon of a feed. Social media platforms, almost without exception, take the form of continuous, vertical streams of short chunks of information consisting of a combination of text, image and/or video. This is commonly known as a feed (Chandler and Munday 2016). The assumed way of navigating these feeds is by scrolling, usually from the top, where newer or more user-relevant messages appear, down towards the lesser relevant regions of the platform. This is often an unending process until the attention or interest of the user wavers, and they are taken back to the top of the feed, where with one click new information has subsequently appeared. It is a format of fragmentation and seemingly random yet algorithm-dictated arrangement, within which often un- or loosely related 'posts' follow each other suit. It leads to a situation within which social media can be said to be pre-emergent, to turn back to Raymond Williams' work, as "the liveness of social media is a situation that is experienced (i.e. felt) before it becomes something coherent" (Simpson, Maddison and Ellis 2018, 70). It creates an affective reality where the user is confronted with a piecing together of liveness, where each post carries with it an affective expectation, but wherein the affective whole is created by the user themselves, yet in this sense moves away from being purely affective, as it becomes 'registered'. If affect is the ""missing half-second" [...] prior to that activity being made conscious" (72) and exists in the sphere of pre-emergence, then emergence is what happens in the totality of the feed, between the different posts, linking them together. This structure is more semantically available, and can be better articulated into an active present that can be charted.

By applying this feed-like composition to the form of a novel, Lockwood's work more precisely brings this affective structure of feeling to light, henceforth making it semantically available. The following extract provides an insight into how this 'feed' functions:

...

She could not feel her first fingertip. This is the way that your ear used to get soft, pink, and pliant, and the swirls of hair around it like damp designs, from talking on the telephone.

...

Her husband would sometimes come up behind her while she was repeating the words no, no, no *or* help, help, help *under her breath, and lay a hand on the back of her neck like a Victorian nursemaid. "Are you locked in?" he would ask, and she would nod and then do the thing that always broke her out somehow, which was to google beautiful brown pictures of roast chickens - maybe because that's what women used to do with their days.*

...

He did not have this problem, this metastasis of the word next*, the word* more*. He took as much as he needed of something, and that was enough. When she asked him once what his last meal would be, he replied, instantly and thoughtfully, "Banana. Because I wouldn't want to be full when I die."*

...

One hundred years ago, her cat might have been called Mittens or Pussywillow. Now her cat was called Dr. Butthole. There was no way out of it.

(Lockwood 2021, 21)

This extract is exemplary for how the entirety of *No One* is written. She starts with a short personal observation, then unrelatedly switches to an occurrence happening to her, involving her husband. Next, she aloofly analyses this occurrence, before returning to a completely unrelated train of thought right after, about time-specific cat names and what this could mean. On face value, what thus appears significant off the bat is the structure of short pieces of text, intermittent with ellipses. Each no longer than a few sentences, the pieces read as independent pieces of thought. While not written in first person, as most online posts would be, they are fleeting observations that come and go as fast as attention wavers for the regular social media user. A piece of thought, a tweet, an Instagram post; the similarity is there. Interestingly, through this approach Lockwood creates a new logic of paging. While of course being confined to the physical aspects of a material piece of literature, *No One* resists the self-evidence of a novel adhering to a format defined by these pages. In choosing to divide her text in bit-size pieces of information, the pages themselves become irrelevant, with these pieces functioning as new blocks, new ´pages' on a near-endless page. It creates a flow of reading that is at once jittery and fluid.

This leads to a reading which can be seen as temporally multiply affective. The logic of social media, of the feed, is concerned with the temporal present. Raymond Williams used this term to denote how culture is not fixed but active and flexible (Coleman 2018, 68). Where in Williams' time this activeness was hard to trace between the fixed forms of cultural output, digital media make the temporal present more traceable. "The connectivity, instantaneity and constant availability of social media creates a present temporality; a temporality that is concerned with the now" (68). In short, social media renders the present temporality visible; it shows what happens in the between-spaces of culture. To return to my characterization of the subsequent affect as multiple, it is again the moment where the feed

meets the pages of the novel where this affective temporality of the present meets a different temporality. Overarching the short 'posts', the novel engages in storytelling, with a structure of buildup and denouement, all described in a past-tense voice. It is a form of telling that sides more with a having-emerged temporality, a linear composition which functions as a whole, a whole which has been and which can be told in retrospect. If affect is to be understood as that which occurs to the brain "prior to that activity being made conscious" (72), then the narrative overarching form that I point to here can be seen as what makes it conscious. It essentially guides the reader into making formative the many fleeting affects that they encounter. Reading *No One* is thus engaging with the lived, fragmentary present *and* the fixed, thematically coherent past. While the narrator herself laments that "all writing about the portal so far had a strong whiff of old white intellectuals being weird about the blues, with possible boner involvement", Lockwood thus shows that to write about the portal can be done by writing *like* the portal. Short pieces of content stand at times in contrast with each other, yet function as pieces of a larger whole, creating an affective blend of fragmentation and narrative, of the now and the just now.

3.2.2 Between Post- and Reluctant Irony

If format is of crucial importance to the experience of being online, what must also be identified as a valuable aspect of study is the unique tone that digital spaces hold. Worth noting about *No One* then, is that it strikes a similar ironic tone, which it holds throughout the novel. In viewing the book through a lens of its relationship to digital culture and affect, this tone ought to be deconstructed and made sense of. After all, besides the described structure of scrolling and the feed, it is a crucial element which places it firmly within social media

discourse. As Lee Konstantinou notes in his work on postirony, "irony has moved from the margins to the centre of media culture in the United States and Western Europe" (Konstantinou 2017, 87). Of course, this development has long been signaled by postmodern theorists such as Lyotard and Jameson, yet the irony found in online spaces, and in between Lockwood's lines is of a different sensibility. Take the following fragment for instance:

There must have been something in the air, because for the last few years we had all been giving ourselves fascist haircuts, shaving the sides down to a clean honest stubble, combing back the top with a snap of the wrist, it was visually witty because we knew so much better now, after all ideas are not attached *to haircuts, are they? But all at once, and lifting tiki torches, the ideas were back as well, and wearing the same haircut we had thought to rehabilitate.*

We were not partly to blame, were we? Because those haircuts really had looked good.

(Lockwood 2021, 57)

The narrator uses haircuts as an instrument to touch on the return of fascism in public discourse. First, it was the haircuts that came back, which is interesting but not wrong per se, because the haircuts simply look good. Then, with the haircuts, the actual fascists also made their return. The passage has an underlying feel of irony. Placing the haircuts at the forefront, as the main idea of the paragraph, relegates the fascism itself to the place of a subtext, a

sentence on the side. Further, it simply is ironic that fascism returns at the same time as fascist haircuts. "There must have been something in the air" (57).

Lockwood's irony does not embrace despair in the sense that postmodern irony is formulated. To talk about the rise of fascism directly, descriptively, would place the subject too close to the fascism at hand. It would render the fascism too real, too dominant. Further, being of a (generally) accepted unacceptable grade of evil, there is not much useful to say about the fascism in the context of this novel. Rather, the irony used here places the subject outside of what it observes, looking in, but keeping distance as a form of coping. It is a subjectivity that is unwilling to completely give in to its surroundings. Touching on Konstantinou's characterization of the post-ironists, this subject "wish[es] to preserve postmodernism's critical insights (in various domains) while overcoming its disturbing dimensions" (2017, 88). We can read the rise of fascism, and mostly the postmodern nihilism with which this can be treated as such a disturbing dimension, yet the urge to critically approach such a fascist revival at all as its critical insights. This ironic detachment is pervasive throughout the novel. Big problems, whether personal or of a (inter)national scale, are discussed with ironic detachment, so as not to let the narrator be too encompassed by them. To avoid attachment, through an ironic stance Lockwood chooses to simply scrape at these topics. As such, she can be characterized as a post-ironist. However, this does not mean that all instances of irony in the novel are void of any degree of affect. In instances such as the narrator's reaction to the death of a pet bee (as described in my introduction) that elude desperation, knowing too much, being constantly on edge. Other instances include her frustration when arguing over whether she would be able to seduce "the dictator", Donald Trump (Lockwood 2021, 84), and when she reacts to a video of bodies being flung off a carnival ride with a loud "ahahaha", "the new and funnier way to laugh" (9). The term *reluctant ironist* can be applied

in this instance, as proposed by Maria Boletsi (2019). Again, "irony is often associated with the intellectual detachment of the sovereign subject" (Boletsi 2019, 17), yet while the narrator can be seen as an intellectual subject capable of meta-commentary, and still holds an ironic tone, in these cases this does not go hand in hand with detachment. The reluctant ironist is defined by its attachment to the subject of irony, through its own vulnerability (17). Where affect in relation to large problems is eschewed, it pours out in these smaller instances. The reluctant ironist's desire to control language is thwarted (18) as Lockwood breaks tone, and the affective reality of her narrator shines through. The relationship between affect and irony is switched here, "not from irony to affect, but from affect to irony" (19). Consequently, we can observe that the irony in *No One Is Talking About This* sways between detachment and affective entanglement, as both the post- and the reluctant ironic stances in their own ways negotiate between affective proximity and ironic distance. Placing distance between herself and the absurdity of the world around her, yet unable to cling to this distance on the whole places the narrator in an oscillating pathos. Irony manifests on metamodern terms.

3.3   *NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS*' METAMODERN SENSIBILITY

In light of this thesis being an effort to see the discussed affects in a metamodern context, and to subsequently see how affect inherent to being online can add to the scope of metamodern theory, an analysis is subsequently needed of how *No One* is in fact a work of the metamodern zeitgeist. This is visible in Lockwood's musings on the modern discourse, in the emotional oscillation of her narrator, and in the narrator's personal development throughout the novel. To first return to the historiography of metamodernism, I turn to Fredric Jameson. In his seminal work *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992),

Jameson charts key developments in society and art, characteristic of a broader structure of feeling of postmodernism. Among these developments we find what he calls the "waning of affect" (Jameson 1992, 10) in postmodern art. The deconstruction, or even destruction, of the subject had meant that there was no stable subject to do any kind of 'feeling', thus liberating the subject of recognizable feelings. Rather, they are subjected to "intensities" that are "free-floating and impersonal" (15-16). Affect, in the directional, graspable form that it took on in modernist works, was no more. Yet as society developed, affect returned within an economy and a politics grounded in consumerism, consumerism grounded in feeling. As Sharma and Tygstrup state in a recent collection on affectivity in the study of culture, "this affective dimension of politics has come to play a still more dominant role in contemporary societies, mainly due to the ways in which we handle and circulate information" (Sharma and Tygstrup 2015, 3). Faced with new forms of affective manipulation, the self has reappeared from the rubble of the postmodern, manipulated by external affects from an economy formed around affect, yet searching for truer, sincere affect. I contend that Lockwood's narrator is an example of such a subject, and that *No One* is markedly metamodern in its sensibilities.

3.3.1 A Metaphor for the Modern Discourse

This sensibility in part shines through in the few meta-discussions that the narrator conducts about modern discourse, the humor and tone of the current cultural moment. She frames her observations as worries, describing the "new sense of humor" (64) as something that stresses her. "The funniest thing now, it seemed, was a fake ad for a product that couldn't exist, and how we were supposed to laugh at that, when the thought of a product that couldn't exist made us so unhappy?" she laments (Lockwood 2001, 64). Crucial here is the opposition

between the lighthearted, goofy idea of a non-existent product, and the deep displeasure of the idea of such non-existence. In a society where "consumerism has affect as its main operator" (Sharma and Tygstrup 2015, 4), it is logical that Lockwood chooses to place a product as the central object that splits the subject into two starkly different affects. There is the external affect that consumerism confronts her with, the desire that is created within the subject, and the internalization of this desire, which comes to a boil when it cannot be fulfilled. On a surface level, it is funny to laugh about the crazy idea of a non-existent project, yet on a more significant level, in a society where almost every thinkable product has been affectively marketed to the subject, it is indeed terrifying. Another of Lockwood's observations furthers this dynamic. The narrator observes that "the first boy who had ever called her a bitch was now in jail for possession of child pornography, and this felt like a metaphor for the modern discourse" (87). The modern discourse, here, stands for an absurd link between the simple, innocent and the preposterous, grotesque. She furthers her observation, noting that "the modern discourse, too, was [the boy's] mother moaning after a single glass of red wine, "I know that he'll have to go to hell, but still he's my son" and "What did we do? What did we do? What did we do? *What did we do!*" (87). Again, the link between the first quote and what follows, is one of an absurd affect, spoken with a distant tone, to one where a one directional, intense affect predominates. The modern discourse is both the irony of the first boy who had ever called her a bitch ending up in jail, and the despair of his mother. In essence, this can be identified as a metamodern form of affect, one in which irony and absurdity exists side by side with more sincere emotion. In her comments on modern discourse, Lockwood thus, without specifically articulating it, formulates a metamodern picture.

3.3.2 Lockwood's Oscillating Subject

The metamodern picture that Lockwood formulates does not only appear in those moments when the narrator is consciously discussing 'the modern discourse'. Lockwood's subject appears to be constantly in a state of oscillation, at once fragmented and cynical due to all the impulses received from the portal, yet also at once showing a modernist tendency to at the root, formulate its subjectivity as one who truly cares. For one, this appears in moments of political commentary, where she discusses world events that appear to break with the logic of the portal, highlighting the irrelevance of the portal, and the absurdity of the world outside of it. She mentions the Charlottesville car attack, where in 2017 a white supremacist drove a car into a crowd of protestors at a neo-Nazi rally (the Guardian, 2017). "She wasn't there, but her heart beat as though she were, it beat among its pack, racing and red and low to the ground. When the car killed a woman with the period-specific name of Heather, she knew a minute before her own mother did, maybe" (Lockwood 2001, 57-58). A few chapters later, she addresses one of many school shootings in the United States. With a heavy, affective tone, she describes the things the teenagers, hiding in closets, did as they were living what was for many the final minutes of their lives. "The teenagers sounded like adults, because the gunman in the doorway had loomed at them as long as they had been alive" (91). She also describes the protests and actions undertaken by the same students in the wake of the shooting, concluding with the question whether "in the end, would it be because some dumb motherfucker made the mistake of shooting up a performing arts high school?" (91). In both fragments, the one sentence subverts the serious tone of the rest. The woman killed by the terrorist has the "period-specific name" Heather, and the survivors of the shooting, who went on to creatively protest, were from a performing arts high school. While the narrator is clearly emotionally affected by these events, she refuses to completely be engulfed, creating a twang

of distance through these little breaks of affect, as if to safeguard herself from total affect. Her voice reflects what Vermeulen and van den Akker see as the "informed naivety, [..] pragmatic idealism" of the metamodern structure of feeling (2010, 5). There is a willingness to be affected, even though the realization that it is somewhat naive and absurd makes its way through these small subversions. It is a realization of absurdity, yet grounded in a desire to feel and make something of it. The narrator's sister, tapping into the same metamodern sensibility, upon speaking how her child will be a world traveler once born remarks "if the world is still there when she gets here haha" (Lockwood 2021, 108).

The same sensibility eludes from Lockwood's description of a Radiohead concert. Depicting lead singer Thom Yorke as one of those people "born with the internet inside them and suffer[ing] greatly from it" (54), she writes:

Thom Yorke is holding the microphone out to a crowd that is singing the chorus of "Creep" in blunt buffalo unison, never missing a word. He shrugs. The tilt of his wrist says, look at these idiots, and maybe, I am an idiot myself. Then he smiles, one cheek lifting into an apple in the gray fog, and it is a real smile trying to pretend it isn't. He begins to sing the final flight of notes, at first almost parodically, but then halfway through his voice bursts some constraint of bitterness and flowers into the real song, as big and as terrible as a tiger lily, and he has made it new, and it is his again. It defeats even the men calling out his name, on the verge of heckling, trying to steal him from himself, Thom, Thom, Thom. His skin is gone, he is utterly protected, he is the size of the arena and as alone as he was when he first discovered he had that sound inside him. He stands, squeezing the microphone as if it were

the throat of what had hurt him, the rigid systems inside him blown, nothing more than a boy,

wearing the only kind of shirt available at that time.

(Lockwood 2001, 54-55)

To those aware of the path of Radiohead, the song Creep solicits a cringe-like affect. It was the band's breakout-single (Starkey 2021), and echoes a grungy, angsty aesthetic that is seen as somewhat blasé in contrast to the further work of the band later on. In Lockwood's description, Yorke realizes this too, painting the "blunt buffalo unison" (2021, 54) crowd as guileless, himself as well perhaps for continuing to play the song at every concert. In this specific instance, however, he is able to look beyond the cringe, with "a real smile trying to pretend it isn't" (55). He appears to fight the feeling of wholeness and elevation until his voice "bursts some constraint of bitterness and flowers into the real song" (55). From here, he falls into an ethereal experience, rising above the moment and stripped off any form of cynicism. He finds himself consumed with a belief that after irony there is something more pure. "His skin is gone, [yet] he is utterly protected" (55), as he finds strength in a presence where the protective layer of affective distance that is his skin is no longer needed to feel protected. Returning to being "nothing more than a boy", it is his fragility that brings him a new selfhood. Again, we see here a form of pragmatic idealism, as this experience strikes as almost a physical strategy to cope with the cringe of the popularity of *Creep*, yet we also see a more explicit focus on subjectivity and identity. Alison Gibbons states that "contemporary identity is [...] both driven by a desire for meaningful personal emotional experience while being aware of the constructed nature of experiences, particularly in relation to social categories of identity" (Gibbons 2017, 86)**.** Yorke's subjectivity, in this moment, in a perhaps

unintentional sense, echoes this metamodern desire for meaningful, emotional experience.

His "decentred self reasserts itself by grounding its subjectivity in lived experience as well as

in the interactions between our bodies and our environments" (Gibbons 2017, 130). In short,

Yorke's experience stands for the reassertion of the self in contemporary culture at once.

Lockwood, through her interpretation of this scene, places *No One* directly into a

metamodern canon of the return of the self.

3.3.3 From Oscillation to Linear Development

Tellingly, the main aspect of metamodernism in the novel is the personal development of the

narrator herself. This formulates itself clearly in a divide between part one and part two of the

novel. Where the moments of sincerity in part one still stand as outliers in relation to the

ironic tone that dominates, part two finds the narrator further encountering a deeper sense of

affect. "If *all she was was funny,* and *none of this was funny*, where did that leave her?"

(Lockwood 2021, 125). In this rupture, we see not so much (in van den Akker and

Vermeulen's words) an oscillation between the two chapters, but rather a development from

apathy to engagement. At its core this comes from the incident with the narrator's sister's

child being born with and passing away because of its Proteus syndrome. Yet it also points to

metamodernism's interlocking with the digital sphere, and the being with and away from the

portal. "Gap. Gap. Gap. Gap. Great gap in the humming of the news" (119) observes the

narrator as her world is changing. As such, it is key to turn to the concept of withdrawal

(from the internet) and the forms of affect in an online-offline sphere to explore how what

kind of a sensibility formulates in this arena. What remains to be discussed is what makes this

metamodern sensibility inherently digital, and how it uniquely functions along the lines of online (dis)engagement.

3.4 AFFECT AND WITHDRAWAL IN THE POSTDIGITAL ARENA

Returning to the primary observation on page 1 of this thesis, what underlines Lockwood's (and Diaz') work is an affective desire not simply to feel certain things, but to feel at all. Caught in a stream of online impulses, Lockwood's narrator is generally stuck in apathy, longing for a time when her affective reality was not dictated by the rules of the portal. She experiences a constant struggle with being too online, and navigating the space between 'real life' and the portal, at one point even soliciting her partner to lock her phone in a safe (Lockwood 2021, 97). To no avail, however, as two days later she ends up screaming for it to be opened (98). This makes of the narrator a character on edge, longing for a sense of peace and quiet, but also for a sense of authenticity, all the while realizing that these things are out of her reach so long as she remains to be dictated by the portal. Worth asking is then what this means for how affective forces function in this online/offline binary, what the desire to withdraw actually entails, and how this struggle between the portal and the 'real' reflects a broader tussle of feeling in (post)digital, metamodern society.

3.4.1 Affect in the Portal's Between Spaces

One striking form of affect in this binary is the fear of being in the unknown, of being away from the place where everything is happening. Lockwood describes this dynamic as

submissive, as the narrator gives up her agency to submit to the pulling force of the portal. "When she was away from it, it was not just like being away from a body, but a warm body that wanted her. The way, when she was gone from it, she thought so longingly of *My information. Oh, my answers. Oh, my everything I never knew I needed to know.* At least, that was how she saw it in elevated moods. In baser ones, she saw herself bent over, on her knees, spread-eagled, and begging for reality's cum." (94) Strikingly, she sees the constant stream of information as something sexual, beseeching a deeper, primal urge to be satisfied. In doing this, she gives the portal human traits, being a warm body with desires, being something that could fill her void with the cum of information. It is a body that can supply her in her basic life needs, in the same way a partner could. Besides this, she also reverses the conception of what constitutes as reality and what does not. Common conception would be that life outside of the portal is real, and whatever happens on the screen is fake, far away, or at least less tangibly 'real'. However, by "begging for reality's cum", the narrator succumbs to the idea that whatever she encounters online constitutes her reality, not what she actually experiences away from it. She further reinforces this relationship when she later on states that "she would rather die than not look something up" (137). To know things, to be in possession of information, is the life force of the portal.

Another emotion unique to the narrator's relationship to the internet is the feeling or idea of having lost something, of losing a connection to the world around her. She wonders out loud whether she has been wasting her time (120). To connect with the portal causes an urgent worry of whether it means disconnecting with 'actual' reality. To her, tuning into the constant stream of information means a fear of tuning out of what else is there. The anxiety that being extremely online fabricates, namely that one is always missing something and therefore needs to constantly tune in, has traversed the borders of the portal and appears to function with

regard to her own life as well. The void that she describes in the previous passage is also apparent in her experience in the real world. Yet later on in the novel, when she has started to experience extra-portal affect again, she wonders the same in reverse. "Had she lost the ability to laugh at things" in the portal? (163) She ponders what it means to be "gone from it for a little while and then return[ing] and no longer belong[ing]" (164). In essence, whether she is more online or more offline, the anxious affect remains.

3.4.2 Politics of Withdrawal in an Online/Offline dynamic

Moving from the affects I have discussed, it would however be too simple to read her relationship to the portal as one where she completely needs to withdraw from it, or to read her attempts to put distance between herself and the portal purely as existing forcefully, as something she has to do to survive. In their study on the phenomenon of withdrawal from the public or political sphere, Pepita Hesselberth and Joost de Bloois propose a view on withdrawal that "means to renounce in order to reconnect and reconstruct" (2020, 3). They position withdrawal vis-à-vis the public arena in their edited collection *Politics of withdrawal: media, art, theory* (2020), seeing the withdrawing subject as one who reaffirms its relationship to the public arena, as opposed to cutting ties with it (4). Further applicable to Lockwood's narrator is their characterization of withdrawal as "not a retreat from actuality per se, but from certain of its aspects: from our present-day "always-on" culture, from surveillance capitalism, from neo-liberal management, and so on" (5). Reading Lockwood in this sense, withdrawing, in the case of the narrator's relationship to the portal*,* is not simply a survival tactic, it is also a conscious and tactical decision to take a step back from toxic aspects of this environment. It would be easy to stay encumbered by the portal, soothed by its

constant stimuli, and never break with it. It requires a tactical, conscious decision to rebel against this mode of being. While on the one hand, this does not completely go up for the narrator, as her abrupt withdrawal from the portal in the second part of the book is simply a consequence of the intrusive occurrences in her personal life, with the birth and death of her sister's baby. However, on the other hand, it also functions as a manner to (re)gain perspective. It takes shape as "a resistance that aims to recreate the bonds between self and the world" (Hesselberth and de Bloois 2020, 9). We see Lockwood's narrator gradually moving towards such a personal politics of withdrawal. She realizes at one point how away from it all she was in the portal, asking who she was failing to protect, and whether she had been wasting her time (Lockwood 2021, 120). As such, she slowly reclaims agency over her relationship with the portal, questioning the true effects it has (had) on her life. By being "always-on", she had turned off, and she realized she wanted to be "on" in life away from the portal again. She even ends up questioning why she had entered the portal to begin with (205).

Taking a step away from *No One*, a comparable stance protrudes from Lockwood's essay *How Do We Write Now?* (2018). The title reflects a similar interest in discourse-making, notably again in a society dominated by online discourse. However, where the narrator in *No One* tethers between withdrawal by external force and by intention, this essay is more explicitly concerned with the actual intentional tactics of withdrawal. Focusing on the problems that the constant "on-ness" of being online has created with regards to concentration and writing, Lockwood writes an instruction manual of sorts in which she shows to recognize these same issues, yet gives instructions on how to overcome this constant lapse in attention. Again, she turns to experiences that evoke a feeling of realness in contrast to the plasticity of being online. She calls for writers to "claim the morning", "cook

something that takes a long time", "keep a physical notebook", "look out the window", and to even "get [their] penis pierced" (Lockwood 2018). These physical sensations are seen to pin the writer in the now and here. Yet not only do these experiences trigger the physical senses, they are also examples of slow living that embrace patience and waiting instead of instantaneity, suggesting that only beyond the feeling of haste, beautiful things are created. It is not worthwhile if there was no true, authentic effort behind it. To turn to physical senses, to sit with time and your own thoughts, are thus here Lockwood's own tactics of withdrawal. They are conscious efforts that serve to break with the toxic aspects of twenty first-century late capitalism and its pervasion of the digital sphere. It is a form of resistance, found in the microsphere of writing, yet extended towards a broader philosophy on how to live life in this time and place. As such, it provides us with a different view on *No One's* narrator, who runs into the issues that this essay provides solutions for, and who is in a certain sense an addressee of this essay. As such, this resistance oozes gradually into the second part of the novel, where, as previously described, she more consciously questions the influence the portal has on her.

3.4.3 Towards Two Readings

To return to *No One Is Talking About This*, one way to read the narrator's struggle with her being constantly online is one where she indeed, automatically and consciously, moves away from the online sphere, finding solace in experiencing real life, real affect. This is automatically in the reference to the evolution that the narrator goes through, the events that she had little agency in. The birth of her sister's baby, and the traumatic events following, do indeed pull her out of the extremely online existence she was living. She starts to feel real

emotions again, and is on the whole largely checked out of the internet, as described above. The baby, with its disease causing it to lead an existence completely, sensibly void of its environment, can even be read her as a metaphor for the disconnected brain. It is checked out of the world and forces the narrator to check out of the portal. Consciously, her move away from the portal happens through the above-mentioned discussions that she formulates about her relationship to the portal, about wanting to be "on" in real life again. However, a closer read of Hesselberth and de Bloois' theory, keeping in mind Spencer Jordan's theory as well, and a closer reading of the ubiquitous nature of the portal in *No One*, can negate this reading.

3.4.4 Reading Beyond Binary Oppositions

While *No One Is Talking About This* can thus easily be read as concerning a clear binary of inside the portal and outside of it, I propose a different reading in which this binary is more fluid than could be inferred from the above. Far into the novel, we come to learn that the move away from the portal is not easily achieved, nor precisely true for Lockwood's narrator. Turning to theory, both Pepita Hesselberth and Joost de Bloois, and Spencer Jordan, call for a post-binary vision on the online/offline nexus. While Hesselberth and de Bloois argue for withdrawal to be thought of "beyond the dualisms of inside-outside, individual-collective, seclusion-utopia", Jordan identifies a condition beyond postmodernism, called postdigitality, where "the divide between the digital and non-digital is no longer binary and oppositional" (Jordan 2019, 1). Both provide us with a new modality through which to approach Lockwood's narrator's struggle. Thus, where Lockwood's narrator is at once longing for time away from the portal and wondering what she is missing when away from it, she is perhaps also confronted with the idea of it being, in Jordan's words, "ubiquitous and consequently

invisible" (11). When she laughed, in real life, she was still laughing in the new, funnier way to laugh, and when she was dealing with the death of her baby niece, thinking that this had placed her out of the portal's affective influence, "she would [still] be so grateful, now, to have people meet the baby in the broad electric stream of things - to know a picture of her, blurred, in motion, was living its own life far from actual fate, in the place where images dwelled and dwelled" (203). It would clearly still give her solace to have the baby be seen in the portal, the place that matters and where it could remain timelessly. It is not that she is unable to escape from the portal or from its tangles, but rather that the time she lives in is characterized by a condition where there is no such thing as being in or outside of the portal (Jordan 2019, 1). Of course she can feel, at times, more or less connected to the portal, yet it is always in some way present.

We see it as well in the oppositional yet mirrored passages that define much of the key development of the novel, which can perhaps also be read as one of repetition and circularity. Both at the start of the novel, and at the very end, the narrator ponders the idea of 'real life'. At the beginning, she is convinced that "there is still a real life to be lived" as she undertakes the very sensory, gritty, close-to-nature task of washing possum blood off her friend's hands, face and hair (Lockwood 2021, 69). Real life here stands for this feeling of being close to nature, being dirty with possum blood and with the smells and sensations that come with it. It is a bizarre act away from the 'normalcy' of the portal. The possum is "the deep, the wild, the red blood-jet" (69). Yet in the end, when she wants to bury the animal, it had disappeared, and was apparently never dead. This is implied to shatter this 'real life' experience for her. The second time she ruminates on real life is at the end of the novel, after she has given a lecture on the portal at the British Museum. "The audience was silent, and the faces in the front row were shining. This did not feel like real life exactly, but nowadays what did" (206).

Here, the experience that at the start of the novel would be considered 'real', one where she is in touch with the world outside of the portal, with people in flesh and blood, where she is undertaking something meaningful, has become something that suddenly does not feel like real life exactly. Rather, she imagines being in the museum with her baby niece (206), eluding that the past months spent with her sister and the baby have completely dominated her life, that the baby, who has now passed away, is the only thing that matters. In her grief, she refuses to see anything else as real. Her constant longing for 'real' experiences seems to portray that they are always just at the edge of her horizon. She is not only living in a postdigital condition, but also in a form of post-reality, where actual life is there, around her, but just outside of her grasp, suggesting that there is perhaps no true difference between the real or authentic and the plastic or fake. It is a crude takeaway for the narrator, but one that seems instrumental to being able to survive or withdraw in the current postdigital society. To return to Hesselberth and de Bloois, "withdrawal, [again], needs to be thought beyond the dualisms of inside-outside" (2020, 6). The dualisms of the on- and offline, of the real and the unreal. erode.

3.5   A SYNTHESIS OF THE METAMODERN AND THE POSTDIGITAL

If you were to place my last two subchapters side by side, or in Lockwood's work to "see what [you] have read lying sweetly by the side of what [you're] about to read, like a wife" (2018), there is an undeniable parallel that forms the key observation of my analysis of *No One*. The urge to withdraw, and the characteristics of what one withdraws from, fall into the same dynamic of the core tenets of the metamodern sensibility. The affects that I have pointed out (of the irony of being online, the agitation and the lack of intense emotion as a

response to a constant stream of information) reflect the same cynical, ironic, deprecating stance that exists on the postmodern side of the metamodern oscillation. Further, the desire to withdraw from the portal, to experience real emotion, to register affects on a deeper level echo the modernistic tendencies of metamodernism that stand for hope and idealism, as a futile belief that affect is not lost forever even though you may be extremely online in the portal. Besides, this desire can be read as a form of informed naivety, as the narrator comes to face that there is no real 'something' outside of the digital in a postdigital environment, but that it may be still worth chasing. What my analysis also suggests, is that within this metamodern oscillation, taking note of how I identified that the dualism of being on- or offline, engaged or withdrawn, has become increasingly irrelevant, so has the dichotomy between the modern and postmodern aspects of metamodernism. Van den Akker and Vermeulen already suggest that it exists "as a both-neither dynamic" (2017, 10), invoking Plato's concept of *metaxy* to claim that the metamodern sits in and functions through this in-betweenness (10). Yet, having set out to explore what influence the digital sphere has on the metamodern structure of feeling, I add here that in a digital sphere, the idea of *metaxy* and the both-neither dynamic of the metamodern oscillation is not extensive enough. From Lockwood's work, there is not as much an oscillation between aspects of modern and postmodern affect, but a form of dualism within which they exist together. The cynical and the sincere go together in the same way that the on and the offline do, in the same way that the digital is ubiquitous and that real life is not in the portal, nor by the carcass of a possum, nor in the British Museum. On the internet, and the structure of feeling that stems from it and is echoed by it, the synthesis of two opposing ends is furthered.

4   HET IS WARM IN DE HIVEMIND

4.1   INTRODUCTION

the heat of the hive   the contamination thrives here

This place is a message… and part of a system of messages

…pay attention to it![6]

(Diaz 2022, 45)

In *Het is warm in de hivemind*, Maxime Garcia Diaz conjures up a "system of messages", a frenzy of hyperlinks, emojis, pop culture allusions and theoretical references. The hivemind stands symbol for a communal, digital knowledge that internet users tap into and become trapped in. The honey of the hivemind is sticky; it is warm and "the contamination thrives here" (Diaz 45). Just like *No One*, Diaz' *Hivemind* shows interest in the communal thinking of the internet. In Lockwood, the portal serves as the main analogy, here it is the idea of a hivemind, of a place that is at the same time warm in a welcoming, sedating sense, yet also warm in an uncomfortable, sticky sense.

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[6] All poems translated by me. Original: "de hitte van de hive   de besmetting gedijt hier / This place is a message… and part of a system of messages / …pay attention to it!"

Hivemind is Diaz' debut collection. It is a work split into three sections named *origin stories*, *baby-faced simulacrum* and *no wave* respectively, each containing four to five poems of around three to four pages, with a few outliers. It is largely written in Dutch, yet contains a plethora of references and quotations, as well as specific vocabulary, in English, and a foray into French. Having previously made a name in slam poetry circles, winning the 2019 Dutch national poetry slam championship, with *Hivemind* Diaz solidified her career as a poet by winning the C. Buddingh' prize for best poetry debut of the year in the Netherlands (Poetry International 2022). She is also a graduate of cultural analysis, which is reflected in the way her work is in a constant dialogue with theory. *Hivemind* serves as an amalgamation of these interests, where theories of cultural analysis and philosophy are thus alternated with a uniquely digital aesthetic. As such, it is work that transcends rigid boundaries between art and theory, seeing both as constructive in creating the meanings it wants to convey.

This outs itself too in the thematic focuses of the collection. Central to the collection is the internet, and the confusing, distorting mess it is. It asks questions of where real life stops, and the internet begins, whether there is a certain fluidity or fragmentation in how we have become a part of the internet and the internet has become a part of us. Much of this is achieved through a focus on corporeality and the senses, as if the body and the way it can (be made to) feel is the only antidote to becoming completely submerged in the online sphere. It approaches the experience of being a woman, of being stuck in a 'female' body through a similar lens, asking what is real about a real body, and fake about one that has been enhanced or digitalized. How should we see the body in the face of twenty first century consumerism, and in dystopian futures where the corporeal reality that we experience now, of being grounded in a body of flesh and blood, has been drastically altered? The future, in *Hivemind*, is ripe with science-fiction-esque technological promise, yet takes on mostly dystopian forms.

She states: "*list of sci-fi crimes that will become possible by 2040 / moving from extreme life extension to immortality*" (15), framing this future as one where humans "a thousand years old, float in a vacuum / biotopeless   a vacuum white, tight, smooth, uncontaminated / and without opening". "Form, color, and smell" (16) have escaped from the grasp of memory. Diaz' faith in the possibilities of technology is bleak, yet also reflects a tussle between wanting to be encumbered in it, and staying away from all that it can bring.

Hivemind is of importance to this thesis because precisely like Lockwood's work, it speaks like the internet. There is usage of emoji's, of uniquely internet phrasing such as "w/ the most cake" (11), "y2k vintage :)" (12), "✝✝✝SADGIRLS4EVER" (72) and of scattered hyperlinks whose URL's, which link to actual websites, can be found on the last page of the novel, like a classic bibliography. Tensions between the on- and offline, like in *No One Is Talking About This*, play a part here too, as does the metamodern sensibility. The themes described above do however place it in a different direction from Lockwood, and the way that the digital collides with these themes makes for new points of interest that can serve my larger analysis of (post)digital affect in a metamodern structure of feeling. In my analysis, the first subchapter will pay attention to affects that are central to the collection, and that touch on the affects that have been specifically studied under the term of ugly feelings, by Sianne Ngai (2005). These affects, such as irritation, anxiety, paranoia, have, largely due to Ngai, taken up an important place in the canon of affect studies. From Diaz' work speaks a certain sense of uneasiness, conjuring up sticky feelings that are not easily placed into a basic emotional register, but linger under the surface. Her descriptions of bodily sensations come across as icky, and the dystopic futures she taps into evoke feelings of trepidation or dread. The world that Diaz conjures is ugly, and feels as such. Following from this, the second subchapter will delve into the interworkings of corporeality, consumerism and gender in an online/offline context, and

the affects circulated in these relations. What affects are conjured by Diaz' descriptions of the body and the self in the online spaces that her writing occupies? How does the physical body relate to its digital representations? To what effects do her allusions to cyborg- and xenofeminism work within this focus on the body?

Stemming from both subchapters will again be the question of how these affects are specific to a time and sensibility marked by tension between the online and the offline, and how this fits into a metamodern structure of feeling.

4.2   UGLY FEELINGS IN *HIVEMIND*

As mentioned above, reading *Hivemind* conjures up an affective experience of being engulfed in icky affects, "ugly feelings" (Ngai 2005). Its evocations of far-reaching technological mediation of the self and its descriptions of the body rooted in plasticity and fragmentation serve to create a world, or hivemind, where it is warm and brooding, a place you are engulfed in, sedated by its climate to a point where leaving becomes impossible. Sianne Ngai's seminal work *Ugly Feelings* is the logical discursive piece to turn to in an affective reading of such an environment. In her proposal of the term ugly feelings, Ngai interweaves the affective with a struggle for power, the aesthetic with the political (1). She posits ugly feelings as negative affects that "read the predicaments posed by a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social as such" (3). These feelings thus notably spring forth from works made by, or from the perspective of, subjects that are in some way disempowered or have lesser forms of agency. Departing from Williams' notion of feelings being "as fundamentally "social" as the institutions and collective practices that have been the most traditional objects of historicist criticism" (25), Ngai characterizes these ugly

feelings as "noncathartic" (6), their release having been obstructed politically precisely by this lack of agency. In this we find the subdued nature of these feelings as opposed to more historically emphasized feelings such as anger or joy. As such, Ngai foregrounds an entire "noncathartic aesthetic" (9).

In light of the subdued nature of affect in *Hivemind,* and Diaz' place as a woman in a male-dominated, late capitalist, digitized world, making her a Ngai'an subject in her lack of agency, I explicitly place *Hivemind* within this noncathartic aesthetic. This subchapter will twice link two of Ngai's ugly feelings, first anxiety and paranoia and subsequently irritation and stuplimity. I will subsequently analyze how these come to the fore in *Hivemind*, and towards what kind of affective whole they add, contending that these affects help further solidify *Hivemind*'s statements on our relation to the digital world and to the metamodern structure of feeling.

4.2.1 Anxiety and Paranoia

Dystopian futures run through the veins of the *Hivemind* that Diaz creates. She sees herself as a "girl of the geist" (12), and as such sees the problems of her zeitgeist continuing their ways into catastrophic, mutated futures. In *Superhumanmoon* she describes such a future, one where technological mediation of human life has reached new forms, as I already mentioned, and one where humans float senselessly in vacuums, subjected to medical regimes and stripped from any form of real feeling (15-16). The poem is three pages long and through three moments in time, each around ten years apart, tells the story of the fictive girl Floor Wolkenveldt. Floor is the stereotypical Dutch girl from an upper-class background, born with

"big blue baby-eyes in which the university library, the "gooische r"[7], the blonde bun & adhd are already visible" (14). Being a "document of a millennium" (15), she lives a life in which the world around her changes rapidly, in which technology reaches far into her own bodily autonomy and her way of perceiving the world. The poem echoes an uneasy fear of the what is coming, or in Ngai's terms, the ugly affect of anxiety. Informed by the past and feeling disenchanted by technological progress in the now, the future is anxiety-inducing for Diaz. Key to Ngai is this temporal aspect of anxiety. Anxiety is characterized, along Ernst Bloch's theory, as an "expectant emotion" (Ngai 2005, 210), which aims "less at some specific object as the fetish of their desire than at the configuration of the world in general, or (what amounts to the same thing) at the future disposition of the self" (210). It is this future disposition of the self that hangs over *Hivemind*'s subject, in *Superhumanmoon* embodied by Floor Wolkenveldt. Floor serves here as the figure of Diaz' anxiety, as the body onto which her dystopian fears are projected. Ngai, in line with her constant relating of ugly feelings to disagenced subjects, points out that anxiety also has a notably gendered aspect. Anxiety "has a history of being gendered in Western culture" (213) as the distinctive male "feeling-tone" of intellectual inquiry itself" (215) found in, for example, existential philosophy. It has historically been the "agitated male subject" that has wrestled with existence and dystopian, future-oriented anxieties. Henceforth, Diaz, by emphasizing uniquely female dystopian visions of "ectogenesis [...] transforming reproductive rights" (Diaz 2022, 14) and thinking back to a time when "together we were girly" (16), puts forth a form of gendered anxiety that departs from the canon, and that is Ngai'an in the way it comes from a place of a lack of agency. It comes from a place of feeling anxious about technological 'progress', and uniquely feeling anxious about what this will mean to the already troubled female body and experience.

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[7] An accent signifier of a typical Dutch, white, upper class background.

Here, we can also turn to the poem *Original Innocence*, for where there is a disturbing future, there can also be a shadow of a problematic past that hangs over it, or that even fosters the mental formulation of this disturbing future. *Original Innocence* is another short poem, one which details history as a being that struggles with the passing of time and all the changes around itself. Diaz speaks of how history "devoured a twin sister in the womb", "dreams that its teeth fall out", "picks at its scabs" and will "one day wake up / soft and frightened / and no longer alone in its body" (2022, 21-23). History is given a body, one that seems to fight against the future, that "gets sadder with every passing second" (22) and is a stillborn before waking up (23). Again, it echoes a dystopian view that is in this instance at once past and present. Much of the affective undertone here can be linked to Ngai's paranoia, a feeling that is rooted in conspiracy, "an epistemology underpinned by the affective category of fear" (Ngai 2005, 299), a grappling with some form of an omnipotent system. It is fear directed at a totality, whether that is global capitalism, or in this case the idea of a toxic future. The idea of history here is installed with a paranoia directed at the passing of time, at the future. Ngai notes that "paranoia can be denied the *status* of epistemology when claimed by some subjects, while valorized for precisely that status when claimed by others" (2005, 302). Diaz' paranoia can be read as the former, as coming from a subject that can be seen as deluded by fears of technology and what the passing of time does to a (female) body, a passing which can only be survived when "[she] has become a ghost and so / has survived history / parchmentlike" (Diaz 2022, 21). The "history" that she describes as the main subject in the poem seems to formulate its own epistemology of what history is and has been, yet comes across as paranoid precisely because it does not have the agency to make claims over epistemology, its paranoia is "denied the *status* of epistemology" (Ngai 2005, 302). As such,

it remains a paranoiac foreboding of dystopian futures, as opposed to being valorized as episteme.

Hivemind thus finds itself creating an affective combination of anxiety and paranoia, of a disenfranchised history that wrestles itself into a dystopian future. It is marked by the figure of a young girl that stands inert in the face of technology and gendered bodily dependence on said technology, and as such becomes the bearer of anxiety and paranoia towards the reader: anxiety and paranoia seen here as affects ensuing from her political position as lacking agency over her self and body.

4.2.2 Irritation and Stuplimity

I would like to here return to the opening stanza of this thesis, specifically the last line of the poem *A sim child has to go to school*, about a narrator being stuck in an infinite game. This line was positioned as distinctive for Diaz' (and Lockwood's) desire to not simply feel certain things, but to feel at all. The stanza appears at the end of the poem and concludes its narrator's relationship with the infinite game world of the sims, or any game that is infinite, and sucks up a young girl's life, to a point where her life is more the one on-screen than the one off of it. "When the screen goes black i do not see myself or at least i do not / see a girl i do not see the thing i drag outside each morning" (49) she remarks. Returning to the final stanza, she notes that she is "not a digital thing" (51) and when spring finally came she "rode [her] bike to school and [her] eyes hurt / at the green green bodies of the trees" (51). She moves from a place of detachment to one of overt, irritant sensibility, as her eyes hurt. Ngai identifies a similar dynamic in her analysis of irritation in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, which

"paradoxically conjoin[s] an image of distance or emotional detachment with an image of physical contact or friction" (2005, 175). As such, it puts us off, irritates us. Diaz' work is similarly irritating, also in its broader emotional register. Much in the same way that I observed in Lockwood, the way in which the narrator emotionally registers and makes sense of the events happening around her also strikes the reader as 'off'. Throughout *Hivemind*, Diaz describes dystopian futures, bodily mutations and deathly scenarios with a tone that is extremely matter-of-fact, that suggests everything but true emotional involvement. "Our bodies are battered" she writes, "but still y2k vintage :)" (2022, 12), the emoji and the cutesy, hipster fashion reference here subverting the vehemence of the battered bodies. In *w@vy* she writes: "i am drinking too much almond milk / & have become something my father does not recognize // do you think i will die" (73), again uniting the mildly sarcastic with the extreme. Even the way that Diaz delivers her poetry is intentionally severely monotone[8]. These aspects work to suggest that the grand statements and changes she describes are somewhat tedious, that they evoke the same emotional register as any other fleeting statement on the internet, that they are at most irritating. In this irritation, emotional detachment is conjoined with a discomforting level of physicality. Ngai writes that "irritation is a mood, distinct from emotion in that it lacks an explicit occasion or object" (179), and notes that in *Quicksand*, the main character Helga responds identically, with the same level of irritation, to small and weighty situations (180). Where Lockwood's irritation turned to despair in several small situations, Diaz does indeed retain this same level of irritation that Helga deals with. It is an irritation stemming from a sense of being small and at the mercy of the larger (digital and capitalist) forces around her, suggesting that the lack of agency that is to Ngai a key part of irritation can be found in the disenfranchisement over one's emotional register in the face of

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[8] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIewa4RXZIg&t=307s&ab_channel=RadioVoorwaarts

the online world. It is effectively and affectively irritating to have your life dictated by the throes of what is happening on the internet.

This also links to another of Ngai's registers, that of "stuplimity" (2005, 3). Derived from an analysis of works of Homer and Leo Stein, Ngai sees stuplimity as being somewhere between stupor and the sublime, as "a tension that holds opposing affects together" (271), where boredom and astonishment meet (271). It contains aspects of the sublime, yet "could be said to belong more properly to the dirtier environments of what Stein calls "bottom humor"" (271) as if to say that it is the ugly negative, reverse image of the sublime. This can be linked to the desensitizing force of the online which we saw in *No One* and see (although in a lesser sense) in *Hivemind*. The omnipresence of the internet and information works in a numbing way, creating boredom which at times comes out through a sense of astonishment at the absurdity of it. The sublimity of how amazing being online feels goes hand in hand with the stupor that it fosters. Most notably in Lockwood's work, the subject is not in control of her speech, "language "leaps out" with its own force and stupefies the listener" (254). As such, Lockwood and Diaz' works create an affective relationship with the reader based in stupor and desensitization which goes hand in hand with astonishment over how bizarre the online world is that Lockwood pictures, or how dystopian Diaz sees this world becoming.

As such, irritation and stuplimity, like anxiety and paranoia, form an important basis of the affective reality of *Hivemind*. Moving from this, reading *Hivemind* as a document of the digital age, they can also be read as important affective forces in our relation to the online sphere. These affective forces will be used in my picturing of how the digital formulates itself

vis-a-vis the metamodern sensibility. However, first my analysis will delve further into

Hivemind's figure of the (female) body and its digital representation.

4.3   THE BODY AND ITS DIGITAL REPRESENTATIONS

Late capitalism and consumerism have achieved the ultimate feat of commodification, that of

the body itself. The body has become a product, malleable and open to modification, a signal

of status and a mirror of desire. Elias, Gill and Scharff place this "continuing focus on

appearance within a distinctive cultural moment, characterised by neoliberalism, with its

relentless exhortation to be active, entrepreneurial, self-optimising subjects" (2017, 5). Under

neoliberal, late capitalism, a body, especially a female body, is forced into being a product

that requires labor, and through labor becomes cultural capital. *Hivemind* shows Diaz'

awareness of this, and shows the struggle of having this awareness of commodification while

still running into its ramifications. The poetry is laced with comments on a body as not

enough, or too much, as taking up (too much) physical space or stuck in digital space. While

bodies in digital space are on the one hand positioned as archetypes for what is under this

consumerist pressure as desirable, they are also problematized as unreal, and captured in

screens. The affective desire for physical perfection is felt, yet also 'fake', as they are marked

by what they are missing; actual sensations and bodily affects. *Hivemind* therefore places the

body as central in the overarching question of this thesis, namely how affect and the self

manifest in an online-offline dynamic.

The poem *brb no scars* is exemplary in this sense. It is a five-page piece that details a vision of a "a new figure of authority" (Diaz 2022, 55), a digital representation of a body that is perfect in every sense, but also markedly artificial, and that comes to face that artificiality. Personified by at first "Miquela" (55), and then "Annlee" (56), she is a figure who "outclasses them all" (55), who has "full lips, light eyes, [...] straight hair, [a] thin waist, [a] round ass" (55); all markers of a desirable, marketable body under late capitalism. The commodifiability of such a body is quickly underlined with the *Mean Girls* (2004) reference "get in loser / we're going shopping" (56). Yet the body is clearly missing something, it is pictured as an "immaterial girl" (56), nodding to Madonna's material girl, yet immaterial in the sense that it is not real, it is a digital representation. Miquela and Annlee are personifications of the perfect body, aesthetically immaculate yet also digitally fabricated, like thin layers of fabric covering identities stuck in the confines of screens and URLs. "Will she make it out of this image alive?", Diaz asks. She further describes the physical body and the digital body side by side. The physical body is marked by a sense of being too much, put in words through "the places where the colour is leaking outside of the lines / where the flesh tauts against the net" (56). Her body is marked by "dander" (55) instead of glitter. She evokes an affective notion of physical burden, where flesh needs to be contained inside lines or a net, bordered in by the constraining ideals of perfection, and where artificial glitter makes its way for dirty dander. The same is done in *slijm winter water (Lichaamssappen, Vol. 1)*, where she describes that "the fat of [her] body cuts in my skin" (39) and that her cheek is "a fleshy body part that expands**,** bulges and protrudes" (40). The physical body faces its own abundance, seeing as "the self produced within neoliberalism is laced with moral undertones about certain bodies as good and other bodies as morally repulsive (e.g. thin bodies as morally good versus fat bodies as morally corrupt, lazy, or bad)" (Fahs 2017, 85). This is also emphasized in *live through this w/ me*, where Diaz writes: "slowness is a sin gluttony is a sin" (2022, 11).

As such, where the body is too much, the self does too little. "Inside every fat girl / is a ghost" (57), states Diaz. At the core of a disproportionate physical presence is thus a more fundamental absence, an absence created by these neoliberal moral undertones.

There is, however, an underlying sense of value in these notions of physical turmoil, as in opposition to the digital bodies it means to say that "at least, I *have* flesh". Annlee "was never designed to survive" (56) and Miquela "could understandably be mistaken for a living, breathing person" (55), but only at "first glance, or swipe". The digital body is also inherently sexualized, being in this case predominantly male-created. Bodies are given breasts, even when they are placental mammals (55), and Annlee's body is so real that it solicits the question of whether "they went all out and you know… / added a [cat emoji]" (56), a vulva. In essence, Miquela and Annlee are also bodies marked by an absence, yet much in reverse to the physical body described above. Instead, there is wholeness in the image that they embody, but absence in the physical groundedness of this image. Padmini Murray writes of online subjectivity as "always destined to be disembodied, mediated by technology rather than the flesh" (2018, 185), and of the appeal of the web being in "the euphoric possibilities of escaping "meatspace", that is, the physical world, as well as transcending embodiment" (189). Miquela and Annlee's experience however thus prove that this transcendence will always leave behind the flesh and the autonomy to mediate oneself through the body instead of through digital technology. It is on such a note that Diaz concludes *brb no scars* as well, noting that "what does not have veins can also not bleed / but full lips can shrivel / bright eyes dangle out of their sockets" (Diaz 2022, 57). Miquela ends up being "removed / from the kingdom of representation" (57), in the end thus never making it out of her image alive, as was foreshadowed in the first stanza. Sara Ahmed states that "feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation" (2014, 8). Mike Featherstone

expands that "in contrast to the body image, the affective body is a body without a clearly defined image. It lacks articulation and is more processual" (2010, 199). Both of these quotes further align that the liveness of a body is instrumental in it being open to true affect. Where the digital image is static, the physical body that Diaz describes is affective in its ability to move and transform, to not be clearly defined in a frame. As such, while the physical and offline may be too much, may feel affectively dirty and as such be marked by the ghost inside the fat girl, there is still a sense of truth and authenticity behind such affects. The undesirable body becomes the desired.

4.3.1 Skins, Membranes, and Border Politics

However, what *Hivemind* also shows, and in a sense also mirrors in relation to my conclusions from *No One*, is that the distinction between the online and the offline is again open to discussion. In *Hivemind*, the distinction itself is a point of focus, not only between the on- and offline but also in the distinction between self and surroundings in a broader sense. The skin, or the idea of a membrane or border, is a recurring figure, with mentions such as "the public space scratches its nails into my skin" (Diaz 2022, 39), the "myth of endometrium" (40), "the wafer-thin membrane of video game graphics" (29), "a milky membrane" (38), a "pelt wet with sweat" (73) and vibrating "earth-flesh" (74). The types of membranes here take on multiple functions, as covers that keep things together, as skins open to impact and external affects, as borders between inner and outer worlds. In essence, they open a window into an affective negotiation between the self and its surroundings and thus in the context of the themes of *Hivemind* and this thesis, also between the self and its digital representations. Affectivity and the skin are deeply interwoven, as touch is a deeply physical

way in which the self is affected by its surroundings. As Crawford notes, the skin can be seen "as a horizon that both separates us from and puts us in touch with the world" (2010, 177). It is what delineates a body, but also what places the body in contact with what it is being delineated from.

In *slijm winter water (Lichaamssappen, Vol. 1)*, Diaz writes: "this is border politics ♡ / I appear in the public space" (2022, 39) and later, "border politics, convulsive forgetting / a body learns how to strike / a body learns border politics" (40). Border politics is presented as a troubled negotiation of where a body can appear and how much space it is allowed to take up. The outer edges of the body are its borders, and the external politics decide over where these may appear. It echoes again a sentiment of feeling slothy or guilty of being too present. In common (political) discourse, border politics are commonly framed around who or what borders keep out, soliciting the idea that the described body feels kept out, and/or wants to keep out whatever else it encounters in the "public space" (39). She expands that "the public space scratches its nails / into [her] skin into the fat of [her] body" (39). Following Crawford's characterization of the skin as creating a sensitivity in which the subject, through its exposed nervous system in contact with its surroundings, is subject to "an open-ness, a lack of enclosure" (Crawford 2010, 180), essentially inviting the public space to make an impact on the skin, and also on the subject's inner world. Again, the skin creates what is outside and inside of the subject, but also functions as a way through which the outside can break in. The affective connotations called up here are those of vulnerability and susceptibility. The border politics decide where and how a body can be, as well as how it is to be affected and impacted. Through a reference to Foucauldian thought, envisioning how "biopower is available in cream, pill, and vaporizer form" (39), the border politics of public space become biopolitics, regulatory powers over how a body is bordered and affected.

However, as Diaz states, "a body learns how to strike" and parts of the body, in this case a cheek, "expands, bulges, protrudes" (40). The border of the body, or the skin, shows resilience in putting border politics up for contestation. While the affective notion of being cased in is stubborn, Diaz does thus point to a more fluid vision of skin and borders, a vision of them being in movement, non-static. My following analysis will look into the unstable borders created, and the question of where, in relation to technology, borders are moved or even erased, foraying into cyborg theory by Donna Haraway and the contemporary movement of xenofeminism.

4.3.2 Between Woman and Hivemind: A New Cyborg Figure

floor wolkenveldt gets to know malice,

passes her exams: the mirror test, the Turing test

floor wolkenveldt learns where her body ends:

every month opens an envelope from the pharmacy

unfolds the individually packed pills,

the fluttering string of small plastic bags

with her name on them.   Prosthesis

on every bag an exact timestamp: 8:00, 13:00

shining regiment   a housing

for the fire body

of floor wolkenveldt

(Diaz 2022, 15)[9]

I return here to the poem *Superhumanmoon*, and its central character Floor Wolkenveldt,

which I already discussed in my section on anxiety and paranoia. This stanza, from roughly

halfway into the poem, is however also of key importance towards my analysis of (unstable)

borders between the physical and the digital. As we read above, Floor's body becomes a body

mediated by the pills she has to take, becomes immortal, sustained in a biotopeless vacuum.

She "learns where her body ends" (15). This last sentence is of crucial importance, as

Hivemind throughout questions where the self ends in the face of technological mediation and

the omnipresence of the online. This is a question of ontology, but also one of affect and

feeling, as Sara Ahmed notes that "emotions [...] produce the very surfaces and boundaries

that allow the individual and the social to be delineated" (2014, 10). The individual is not just

a physical entity, but mostly also one that is given form by how and what they feel to be.

Floor Wolkenveldt is "learning where her body ends" when confronted with "shining

regiments" (Diaz 2022, 15) of medication, again furthering the Foucauldian biopower motive,

and confronted with the edges of the vacuum that she floats in. As she moves through time,

these boundaries are continuously blurred. It is a dystopian future, yet one that the text

suggests is not far from the present. Rather, it is positioned as a future that has seen the

continuation of similar blurrings that Diaz is already confronted with. The continuous

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[9] Original: "floor wolkenveldt leert kwaadaardigheid kennen, / slaagt voor haar examens: de spiegelproef, de Turingtest/ floor wolkenveldt leert waar haar lichaam eindigt: / opent elke maand een envelop van de apotheek, / ontvouwt de individueel verpakte pilletjes, / de wapperende slinger kleine plastic zakjes / met haar naam erop.   prothese / op elk zakje een exact tijdstip: 8:00, 13:00 / glanzend regiment een behuizing / voor het brandlichaam / van floor wolkenveldt"

alternations between affective musings of her inner life and references to the digital world around her work to evoke a reading reminiscent of reading Lockwood; one where there is no oscillation between the two schema's but where they permeate and penetrate each other. The membrane of the body, the skin, and the membrane of sight are continually permeated by technology. "Breaching the bio-techno boundary forces an engagement with 'new and complex understandings of "life," consciousness, and the distinction (or lack of distinction) between the biological and the technological" (Smith-Windsor 2013, 349). Floor Wolkenveldt serves as the embodiment of this lack of distinction, and pushed *Hivemind* in a direction where such distinctions are thus explicitly questioned, and implicitly destroyed, creating an affective reality that I identified in Lockwood where opposing ends of online and offline come together.

Going a step further, the breaking of boundaries (between the subject and technology) bring me to two seminal works within the field of post humanist feminism, both also mentioned in *Hivemind* itself: Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) and the anonymous collective Laboria Cuboniks' *Xenofeminist Manifesto* (2018). Both find joy in the playing with and blurring of boundaries between (wo)man and machine. Haraway writes in her introduction that "this essay is an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction" (2016, 7). She finds pleasure in erasing multiple dichotomies, or "leaky distinctions" (11), between human and animal, organism and machine, and expanding from that between the physical and the nonphysical. Consequently, she inserts the myth of the cyborg as a figure standing for the experience of subjectivity and most notably being a woman in the twentieth century. The cyborg stands right in the middle of a world in turmoil and confusion as a response to technological progress. Drawing inspiration from Haraway, Laboria Cuboniks claim that their "lot is cast with technoscience, where

nothing is so sacred that it cannot be reengineered and transformed so as to widen our aperture of freedom, extending to gender and the human" (Cuboniks 2018, 0x11). Xenofeminism, too, sees this turmoil and embraces it, as technology can be used in an emancipatory way. If we embrace the alienation that technological mediation has fostered in society, it is "through, and not despite, our alienated condition that we can free ourselves from the muck of immediacy" (0x01). To Cuboniks, we must be rationalist in the face of natural essentialism, and explore how we can open up our bodies to technology (0x01).

Diaz refers to both of these works, placing her work in the same canon. In *Sunshine Cybernetics*, she quotes both Haraway and Cuboniks. The poem is one of her most explicit engagements with theory, as she draws from Haraway, Cuboniks, Theodor Adorno and also Nancy Katherine Hayles about the relationship between information and the body, about how "information lost its body" (42) and how information seeps into her own animal body. Haraway is quoted here in writing that "our best machines are made of sunshine; / they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals [...] People are nowhere near / so fluid, being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, / quintessence" (42). She then turns to Cuboniks, writing that "the reality crosshatched with fibre- / optic cables, radio and microwaves, oil and gas pipelines, aerial and / shipping routes, and the unrelenting, simultaneous execution of / millions of communication protocols with every passing millisecond" (43) and further on alludes to them again when writing "and I do not want clean hands / but superior forms / of corruption" (44), a phrase which is echoed at other moments in *Hivemind*. The references to these theories suggest an intention of placing *Hivemind* in line with these philosophies, and *Sunshine Cybernetics* can indeed be read as a fundamentally cyborg-/xenofeminist text. Diaz writes that "information nestles in my nooks / in the backs of my knees, between the roots of my armpithairs, / a shy membrane curled around the spongy

curvature / of my eye, sticking to the amphibian tissue / between my fingers I find hair" (44).
As we saw in my earlier analysis, again the digital permeates the physical, yet here we read a
not so much dystopian stance, but one that simply ascertains this happening, like an
acceptance of the cyborg future that we are already living. It is a stance that appears
throughout the poem, as the machines are described in terms of what they have over what
human bodies lack. They are the "prettiest machines" (42), and we should let them seep into
our weak and "susceptible" bodies. Like Haraway and Cuboniks, the body that Diaz puts
forth willingly opens itself to the possibilities of technology, and puts forth its own version of
the cyborg, defined by the notion of (digital) information. She ends up finding "flickering
signifiers" and "communication protocols, quicksilvery / in the sunlight" (44) in her body, a
body found deep within the system memory of "our prettiest machines" (44), envisioning a
cyborg of the twenty first century, born between woman and hivemind.

4.3.3 Cyborgs, Xenofeminism, and the Metamodern Sensibility

Diaz thus aligns her work with cyborg- and xenofeminism, rooted in post-dualism, and puts
forth her own version of the cyborg. In light of this thesis, I argue that this embrace of
alienation, of bringing together opposite poles and of playfulness in dealing with the
boundaries between them constitutes something akin to a structure of feeling, and something
complementary to the metamodern structure of feeling. It is a broad way of looking at society
and the subject that goes beyond simply cyborg-like physical bodies mediated by technology.
In my introduction I characterized such an idea along the lines of Sontag's idea of the
sensibility that is "almost, but not quite, ineffable" (Sontag 1999, 54), and thus also Williams'
structure of feeling as an attempt to chart the amalgamation of the lived between spaces of

culture, a totality of sensibilities as they are lived and felt. The sensibility of the cyborg- and xenofeminists constitutes such a structure. As such, this structure also touches acutely on the structure of feeling identified by metamodernists. Haraway writes that cyborgs are "wary of holism, but needy for connection" (2016, 9) and are "resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity" (9). Swaying between being wary for holism but needy for connection, and between being committed to irony as well as intimacy echoes the metamodern oscillation between irony and sincerity. The cyborg is allowed to desire true, deep and perhaps naïve affect while still being informed and critical. The way in which the cyborg and the xenofeminists bring together opposite poles, and break through dichotomies, is much akin to how within metamodernism the poles of modernism and postmodernism are brought together. Much similar to my conclusion of my analysis of Lockwood's work, this reading also suggests that in relation to digitality, the metamodern sensibility extends beyond the oscillation dynamic between aspects of modern and postmodern affect, but that they exist together in a cyborg-like dualism. As such, Diaz' *Hivemind*, in its focus on the border between the digital and the physical, in its engagement with playing with the porosity of this border and in its usage of cyborg- and xenofeminist theory, brings forth a uniquely (post)digital sensibility that aligns with the metamodern structure of feeling. Just like in my analysis of Lockwood, we see again that engagement with the digital sphere, coming from the assumption that to chart a twenty first century sensibility, engagement with the digital cannot be overlooked, significantly adds to what metamodernism is and can be.

5   CONCLUSION

Where this thesis has forayed into significant discussions of two separate works, what remains is for these two works to be united in a discussion of broader relevance of digital affect in contemporary society. Thematically, *No One* and *Hivemind* reach into various different directions, yet find themselves united in the attention they pay to the omnipresence of the internet, and the specific sensibility that they reflect. In this chapter, I return to the main conclusions of my body chapters before creating a broader conclusion of the central forms postdigital affect takes on, before proposing the concept of a new affective whole: the postdigital, metamodern sensibility that both works share.

I started this thesis wanting to identify how affect manifests in an online-offline dynamic, and how this fits with a metamodern structure of feeling. My analysis of *No One* started with a discussion of the formal, textual aspects and (post)ironic tone employed. Regarding textuality, I observed how through a feed-like structure, Lockwood created a fusion of a format inherent to the internet with that of a printed novel. The fleeting affects of the online sphere meeting the wholeness of a novel was seen to create an affective blend of fragmentation and narrative. Regarding tone, the irony Lockwood employs takes on metamodern forms. It appears to oscillate between a form of postirony, in which distance between the object of irony is kept, and reluctant irony, where this distance is transgressed. I then turned to other iterations of the metamodern sensibility, such as through the narrator's comments on modern discourse, her own emotional oscillation, and the way she gives room for a notion of the return of the subject from its absence under postmodernism. Within a postdigital dynamic, I observed that while the narrator shows moments of tactical withdrawal

from the portal, we can also read the novel as proposing that in the end the portal is
ubiquitous, and that we should look beyond a dichotomy of the online and offline.

My analysis of Diaz' *Het Is Warm in de Hivemind* commenced with a turn to Sianne Ngai's
ugly feelings, how these stem from a lack of (political) agency and how these come to the
fore in *Hivemind*. I identified anxiety manifesting itself as a gendered fear of the future and of
what a technological dystopia can mean for the already troubled female body and experience.
This affect doubles with that of paranoia, in which a disenfranchised subject of 'history' also
finds itself in dystopian futures. Further, I saw how irritation in *Hivemind* manifests itself as
emotional detachment conjoined with a discomforting level of physicality, coming from a
sense of being small and at the mercy of digital and consumerist forces. This irritation
combined with the stuplimity of being numbed by the omnipresence of these forces and the
internet, but also somewhat astonished by the absurdity of it. These analyzed feelings
together form a solid basis of the affective nature of *Hivemind*.

From here I moved towards a discussion of physicality in *Hivemind*, as Diaz positions the
body as central in discussions of the self in relation to the online-offline dynamic. Here, in
her discussions on the physical body and its digital, aesthetically desirable representations,
the digital body was seen to be marked by an affective absence, by the true affect that the
physical body *is* capable of experiencing. However, my analysis also shows that the border or
distinction as a phenomenon, through multiple references to skin and membranes, is
problematized in *Hivemind*. Diaz provides a more fluid vision of skin and borders, as
permeable and open to being penetrated by the digital sphere. Through an engagement with
cyborg- and xenofeminism, *Hivemind* questions where the self ends and technology starts. I
proposed that the boundary between machine and subject are blurred, and that *Diaz*

formulates a vision of a twenty first century cyborg, between woman and hivemind. As such, returning to my postdigital metamodern sensibility, we see a cyborg-like dualism beyond the proposed oscillation inherent to metamodernism.

5.1   THEORIZING POSTDIGITAL AFFECT

It thus becomes possible to realize a broader picture of what postdigital affect entails. Firstly, we see that it goes hand in hand with a form of affective dissonance. Emotional regulation takes on a somewhat odd form when lives are lived largely online. Lockwood's narrator experiences emotional oscillation throughout *No One*, being largely numbed when stuck in the portal (even in her emotional reaction to being encountered with rather severe events), yet tends to pour out in emotion when confronted with smaller encounters outside of the portal. This dissonance is further shaken up by the storyline of her sick nephew, after which she is even further scrambling for how to make sense of her postdigital state emotionally. In *Hivemind*, this dissonance takes form through feelings of irritation, stuplimity, paranoia and anxiety: affects that take place when deeper, more cathartic emotions are hindered, in this case by her own lack of agency. She feels disenfranchised in the face of digital and consumerist forces and technological bio powers that are pictured to dictate her life and the way her body is able to assert itself in public space. As such, she is subject to affects that bubble under the surface of her skin, but do not come out unequivocally.

Secondly, looking at both Lockwood and Diaz' works, the relationship to the digital sphere is marked by a sense of aversion towards this sphere. Most explicitly in *No One*, the narrator is

plagued by being extremely online, but desiring to break away from it. This desire is largely characterized by the idea of wishing to 'return' to true affect, real feeling. Online affects are seen as fabricated, unable to be, in terms of Ngai's ugly feelings, cathartic. In *Hivemind*, this sentiment is also seen in the way Annlee and Miquela are pictured in *brb no scars*, where they are perfect bodies but at the same time characterized by an absence of real affect. Corporeality is used here as a figure for this 'realness', as the physical body is able to be touched, scratched, penetrated, as well as to take up (too much) space. Further, this aversion towards the digital sphere penetrates the dystopian futures that Diaz conjures. In both works, it leads to the desire of wanting to withdraw, wanting to break from the portal, or break from the game to see "green green trees" (Diaz 2022, 51).

As such, postdigital affect is marked by emotional dissonance, and by an aversion to the digital, combined with a reluctant being online and a tactical effort to withdraw.

Thirdly, however, both works also show a realization that stealthily protrudes from their discourses, which is that this dichotomy is perhaps not as real or relevant as is originally felt to be. The conclusion of my analysis of *No One* showed that while the narrator experienced the dynamic of being on- and offline as a dichotomy, efforts to break from the portal ended in the suggestion that it remains ubiquitous, and that one can manage one's relationship to it but it is futile to try to escape from it. Its modus operandi, ways of communicating and emotional regulation will remain to be present, and in moments where one does 'break' from it, its absence will still mark the presence of being online. *Hivemind* comes to a similar conclusion in introducing its postdigital cyborg figure, in which the body is placed as an example of the blurring of boundaries between the online and the offline. The porosity of the membrane

surrounding the body, the skin, the way it opens up to technological meddling, hand in hand with Diaz' theoretical engagement with cyborg- and xenofeminist theory solidify the idea that through the body the online-offline dichotomy turns into a fluid dualism. As such, postdigital affect also sides with a metamodern sensibility defined by such a dualism.

5.2   TOWARDS A POSTDIGITAL, METAMODERN SENSIBILITY

It is here that I propose my concept of the postdigital, metamodern sensibility. This is a sensibility in the sense that it describes a fleeting form of affect, or in this case an affective negotiation. Further, it is postdigital in that it draws from Jordan's characterization of the postdigital condition, which describes society as one where the digital is ubiquitous and the distinction between online and offline has become largely obsolete (2019, 11). The postdigital, metamodern sensibility is thus a sensibility marked by the oscillation inherent to metamodernism. Where within metamodernism there is an oscillation between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony, it functions in a postdigital environment between offline enthusiasm, or 'true' affect, and online irony, or 'hindered' affect. Yet, as my analysis has shown, and as is inherent to Jordan's postdigitality, the offline and online, and thus the enthusiasm or naivety and irony or cynicism, do not stand in opposition to each other in the postdigital, metamodern sensibility. The digital in Lockwood and Diaz is omnipresent, and affect and emotions are dissonant and hindered, thus more entangled with each other. The modern and postmodern sensibilities are in this case thus also more entwined. We see here a form of metamodernism in which the oscillation between two poles is replaced by a more fluid dualism.

This is not to say that this sensibility comes to replace the already charted metamodern structure of feeling, or that the oscillation metaphor is wrong or falls short. Rather, I characterize it as a separate strand within the metamodern structure of feeling. I started this thesis with the notion that metamodernism as a theory was constructed largely with the omittance of engagement with digital media. With this concept I wish to fill this omittance. It is not a negation of key tenets of metamodernism, but an expansion of this still growing theory. It is a strand of metamodernism applied to our relationship to the digital sphere. As such, it is a beginning that can prove to become more relevant in the future, yet time and the development of this discourse can only tell whether this will be the case. Perhaps the metamodern structure of feeling will expand in this direction, perhaps not. Either way, engagement with digital sensibilities remain at the forefront of culture in the twenty first century, and the postdigital, metamodern sensibility, as it springs forth from *No One Is Talking About This* and *Het Is Warm in de Hivemind*, is a step in charting this engagement.

5.3   FUTURE PERSPECTIVES ON POSTDIGITALITY WITHIN METAMODERNISM

While I charted this sensibility in these two works, this is not to say that it cannot be found in other fields or media. Turning to music, there are the works of hyperpop artists such as SOPHIE and Charli XCX that echo similar sentiments. Their works embrace a strongly digital aesthetic and are largely created through very digitized processes, creating forms of dissonance between the harsh, digitally processed sounds and the politically engaged subject matter around identity and gendered forms of self-assertion (Williams 2021, ii). Hyperpop artists create art from the struggle of being overloaded with consumerism and late capitalism, the ubiquitousness of the internet, and normative gender politics, yet find some form of true

affect within this. SOPHIE's album *Oil of Every Pearl's Un-insides*, for example, addresses consumerism and digital corporeality in *Faceshopping*, yet also finds beauty in this sphere in *It's Okay To Cry*. Recent post-punk bands, such as Dry Cleaning or Yard Act, also touch on a metamodern sensibility, within which dry, cynical and matter-of-fact lyrical delivery is balanced with cathartic instrumentals[10]. Unique to an analysis of these works, which I was unable to touch on in my thesis, could be on the aesthetics of (digital) sound. As the digital sphere is multimedia by definition, the sonic characteristics of being extremely online carry with them their own forms of affect that may play a part in a postdigital sensibility. Looking at *SOPHIE*'s work, for example, the usage of digital production methods and harsh instruments and samples work towards a sonic experience that I would categorize as industrial and technological, yet in a very digital-age way. An expansion into musical analysis, being a medium that is so reliant on affect, may thus further support a theory of the metamodern structure of feeling in a postdigital context. A turn to cinema is also possible, where films such as Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) or Charlie Brooker's series *Black Mirror* (2011-present), evoke a similar sensibility. Both, like *Hivemind*, conjure op dystopian futures within which technology has further tampered with the sense of self, and where the subject fruitlessly longs for an escape from this dystopia in search of authentic affect and emotion. Of course, these are rather fleeting observations of works that deserve more analysis, and of works that are selected from a much larger scala of contemporary art, music and cinema, yet they are each in their own indicators of broader evolutions in our affective relationship to digital technology and the online sphere that further solidify my analysis and the concept that I propose.

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[10] See Dry Cleaning's *New Long Leg* and Yard Act's *The Overload*.

As a concluding remark, it is up to writers and artists to continue to question our affective relationship to the online sphere, and up to cultural analysts and other members of academia to further theorize it. With the contemporary (metamodern) structure of theory unfolding before our eyes, we must, as Raymond Williams advocated, turn our attention to this unfolding in the moment that it is happening, and continue to chart the between-spaces of culture (2015, 20), so that we are at once constructing and analyzing our affective present. As Lockwood's narrator exclaims at one point, overcome by the desire to share something: "I'll write an article! [...] I'll blow the whole thing wide open! I'll… I'll… I'll *post* about it!" (2021, 132).

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