"Vulnerable as a small pink mouse": Vulnerability, Affect, and Trauma in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the productive interactions between vulnerability and trauma theory. Vulnerability indexes trauma's infinitude and recursion as something constantly generative of new emotional, social, and legal injuries. In the novel *A Little Life* (2015), Hanya Yanagihara employs narrative fragmentation, multi-perspectivity, and temporal disarray to evoke trauma's patterns of injury and abjection. Vulnerability's double valence creates affective intensities for readers and establishes a sense of intimacy with the protagonist as he is traumatized. Vulnerability in the novel is linked to closeness, thus, in a dual sense. On the one hand, the protagonist closes himself off from the world. On the other hand, he persists impossibly in fostering intimate relationships. In *A Little Life*, it is this precarious closeness precisely through which vulnerability becomes a form of resistance that foregrounds agency.

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“Vulnerable as a small pink mouse”

Vulnerability, Affect, and Trauma in Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*

Gulsin Ciftci

Jude St. James, the protagonist of Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* (2015)—a novel frequently described in reviews as indulgence in voyeurism and trauma porn—raises questions about the forms of intimacies and/or the impossibility of telling one’s story throughout the narrative. “Someday, he thought, somehow, he would find a way to tell some one, one person. And then he had, someone he had trusted, and that person had died, and he didn’t have the fortitude to tell his story ever again. But then, didn’t everyone only tell their lives—truly tell their lives—to one person? How often could he really be expected to repeat himself, when with each telling he was stripping the clothes from his skin and the flesh from his bones, until he was as vulnerable as a small pink mouse?”[1] What does it mean to be “as vulnerable as a small pink mouse,” or to tell one’s story while negotiating the affective dimensions of vulnerability? *A Little Life*, following a character whose story is marked by sexual violence, is a rumination on trauma, vulnerability, and storytelling. Joining elements of many genres, from magical realism to the Bildungsroman, *A Little Life* is a gut-wrenching tour de force: Jude, an orphan raised at a monastery where he was repeatedly abused, was kidnapped by Brother Luke and prostituted to men in hostel rooms. After Brother Luke is arrested, Jude ends up in foster care where he is abused again physically and sexually, and finally abducted by Dr. Traylor, who rapes Jude repeatedly before running him over with a car, leaving him with permanent disabilities.[2] In the novel, this storyline appears intermittently and only when Jude shares fragments of his story, in an attempt to form intimacies with those around him. During and after his time in college, which constitutes the largest part of the narrative, Jude meets people who love and care for him, including Harold, who adopts Jude and assumes a fatherly role. True to dominant trauma narrative form, the novel emphasizes that which comes after the traumatic event.[3] For Jude, this involves self-injuring behavior and struggles with internalized ableism and thoughts of suicide. One of the greatest achievements of Yanagihara's prose is how she uses the affective dimensions of vulnerability to narrate the protagonist's struggles. Vulnerability becomes a crossing point, thus, where desire mingles with fear, and openness invites potential danger.

Vulnerability, wounds, trauma, and care have become some of the central categories in the study of the contemporary subject since the 1990s, and preoccupations for various disciplines ranging from psychiatry to criminal law, philosophy, politics, economics, and literary studies. Roger Kurtz, in the introduction to *Trauma and Literature* (2008), writes in no uncertain terms that "we live in an age of trauma."[4] In 2014, Marianne Hirsch, another pioneering scholar of trauma studies, defined the era as "vulnerable times."[5] While vulnerability and trauma's concurrently marking the era signals the two's intimate entanglement, a study of such entanglement, taking into consideration especially the affective links that congeal both, remains an uncompleted task. This article thus takes up examining this intricate relationship between trauma and vulnerability while arguing for the importance of reading vulnerability's affective dimensions in trauma narratives, which continuously negotiate paradoxes of openness and closeness, desire and disgust, intimacies and loneliness.

Stepping back from vulnerability as an ontological category or a state of weakness to be overcome, I read vulnerability as a valuable poetic category that encapsulates affects, intensities, and intimacies. Vulnerability is not a mere mode of being-in-the-world. Nor is it encapsulated in bodies alone. We might see it, then, through the discourse of affect—and understood best through relations and intensities that compose it. Indeed, vulnerability attaches to other bodies, entities, matter, and phenomena. Beginning from these premises, I investigate the potentiality of vulnerability in *A Little Life*. By mapping the many spaces, shapes, and forms occupied by vulnerability in the novel, I explore vulnerability as an affective force of narrative worldmaking. On a contextual level, vulnerability thus conjoins plot, characters minor and major, and affective encounters; on the formal level, it sets the affective atmosphere and helps relay the intricacies of trauma narrative beyond the conventional modes and through the threading of intimacies.[6]

To expound on the role of intimacies in mapping vulnerability, it is essential to turn to close-reading and trace the unfolding of vulnerability within and in relation to the text. The traumatized body is the battleground for intimacies—a battleground for vulnerability, abjection, and desires. Whereas the traumatized body is characterized by its close(d)ness to the "outside world" and the potential dangers of intimacies, abjection rather evokes both disgust toward and desire for intimacies. This double valence mimics affects'—and hence vulnerability's—double valence and is productive for exploring relational and embodied experiences. Intimacy, therefore, becomes the central category through which the entanglement of trauma and vulnerability becomes visible. I trace these intimacies and explore the narrative worldmaking of *A Little Life* in three stages. First, by considering paradoxes such as hope and fear, abjection and desire, I set a particular focus on the many valences that affects possess, and how these valences are portrayed, or established, within the text's formal and contextual layers. Second, to demonstrate vulnerability's centrality in the narrative, I elaborate on the formal devices that establish *narrative vulnerability* and *narrative intimacy*. Third, I map the intersection of trauma and vulnerability as co-actors of the narrative.

Vulnerability and Hope

Through its exploration of the affective dimensions of trauma, *A Little Life* joins forces with both literary trauma discourse and affect theory, both of which have gained increasing currency since the mid-1990s. In *A Little Life*, vulnerability sits at the heart of the relational, affective body, wherein openness, exposure, risk, resistance, hurt, and healing come harmoniously together. Vulnerability courses through life in dynamic forces—simultaneously positive and negative, enabling and disabling. Jude's vulnerability, for instance, is the very reason for his secretive personality; it prevents him from opening up to people. It is, however, this same vulnerability that motivates his attempts to form intimate relationships and overcome this vulnerability. This double valence of vulnerability stands as a helpful example of the relational functions of affect. The vulnerable body makes implications of susceptibility and thus has long been associated with weakness and lack of protection.[7] At the same time, the body is also the point of crossing, where the openness of the body carries in it a positive valence—the knot where it is possible to unlearn and embrace the vulnerabilities.[8]

Such a double valence has been examined in the scholarship of the last three decades, owing to understanding of vulnerability beyond categories like exposure, openness, weakness, and failure.[9] The valence of vulnerability has gone beyond "an already there-ness," and the subject's weaknesses and passivity have come to be seen as dynamic and transformative forces. In their recent works on vulnerability and precariousness, for example, Judith Butler challenges traditional understandings of vulnerability, particularly in politics.[10] Butler sees "vulnerability as a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time."[11] In Butler's account, the vulnerable is not the mere victim that needs to be rescued, but one that has the capacity to act and be acted upon, as well as to affect and be affected.[12] I argue that such a reading of vulnerability parallels the reading of trauma and helps conceptualize vulnerability as an affect. The body becomes the site of struggle, memory, remembering, and working-through; it is a wounded remainder that reminds of the traumatic event.

Scholars of affect and emotion have similarly highlighted vulnerability's positive valence and creative potentials. Affect theory's attention to the ordinary, ugly, weak, and minor affects make its creative power ever more prominent.[13] Sianne Ngai's study of the cute in "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde" (2005), for example, exemplifies vulnerability's double valence. Ngai argues that cute things might be regarded as vulnerable, for they are assumed to lack agency, while their very vulnerability promises at the same time positive valence through transformation and openness.[14] In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Ngai offers a thorough examination of a set of "minor and generally unprestigious" emotions and draws attention to their particular power, arguing that "literature may in fact be the ideal space to investigate" emotions. While vulnerability is not one of the "ugly feelings" Ngai investigates, her study of "non-cathartic feelings" informs my study of the powerful affective dimensions of vulnerability.[15]

Ugly feelings attached to the narratives of sexual trauma benefit further from Sara Ahmed's suggestion that "when we talk about the displacement between objects of emotion, we also need to consider the circulation of words for emotion." Ahmed underscores the value of openness that is essential to vulnerability: "Vulnerability involves a particular kind of bodily relation to the world in which openness itself is read as a site of potential danger, and as demanding evasive action. Emotions may involve *readings of such openness*, as spaces where bodies and worlds meet and leak into each other."[16] Ahmed's contextualization of openness points at the contacts between bodies, objects, and signs where impressions are made. These contact spaces, the zones of proximity, are filled with potentiality: that is, with openness. Potential danger arrives from the unknowability of this leaking into each other.

This potential danger in openness, as described by Ahmed, is evident in Jude's reflections on his own life. Thinking of his friends' performances of vulnerability through openness, "he could be more like Malcolm, he thinks; he could ask his friends for help, he could be vulnerable around them." When in need of applying cream to his heavily scarred back, he imagines, "he will ask Willem if he could help him with his back." The thought of making himself vulnerable brings his fear to the surface: the fear of arousing disgust. Although Jude knows that "if Willem is disgusted by his appearance, he'll never say anything,"[17] his self-abjection deepens his need to hide his body and remain covered. Jude's imagined openness is made possible only through vulnerability; this openness reduces vulnerability, however, while containing what Sara Ahmed calls "the potential danger."

Hope is central to *A Little Life*'s portrayal of how vulnerability can be a productive force for imagined openness and forming intimate connections. It is multifaceted in the novel: hope for friendships, family, relationships, love, and sex. In *Daring Greatly* (2012), Brené Brown suggests that "we're hardwired for connections"—in *A Little Life*, it is through vulnerability that these connections are motivated.[18] Throughout the novel, the reader witnesses the intensities of hope, traveling through the characters' bodies, places, and times. Hope "open[s] up a point of contingency in the here and now."[19] Desiring the improbable appears as a fantasy of good life.

"[H]ope must be unconditionally disappointable . . . because it is open in a forward direction, in a future-orientated direction; it does not address itself to that which already exists. For this reason, hope—while actually in a state of suspension—is committed to change rather than repetition, and what is more, incorporates the element of chance, without which there can be nothing new."[20] Hope is part of the ordinary, of what Lauren Berlant calls "a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what it means to 'have a life' that adjustment seems like an accomplishment."[21] Jude's story is the story of life-building, in Berlant's terms. It is filled with affective intensities of hope that are so "disappointable" that they motivate suicidal thoughts throughout the novel: Jude hopes to be "normal," to form intimacies with others, to be open, and to be vulnerable. Jude's optimism for—or fantasy of—the existence of normalcy is, perhaps, best described with Berlant's notion of cruel optimism, when they argue that "optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming."[22] Jude's self-awareness, however, convinces him of the impossibility of change, of a desirable self.

Jude's ambiguous attachment to the fantasy of a good life is marked by improbability and hope simultaneously. His encounters with others are vulnerable, and his traumatized body's weariness in forming relationships is enhanced. In *A Little Life*, vulnerable encounters showcase a variety of valences. They are both reparative and destructive. Jude's attempts to form intimate relationships with others demonstrate how the affect of vulnerability operates in and through these relationships. While Jude's relationship with each character offers unique insights, some of these intimacies— namely with Willem, Harold, and Caleb—sit at the intersection of trauma and vulnerability and offer therefore a more productive picture of vulnerability for the purposes of this article.

For Jude, building intimacies means allowing himself to be vulnerable by answering questions, sharing his privacy, and trusting others who threaten the borders of his guarded self: "That process—getting to know someone—was always so much more challenging than he remembered . . . He wished, as he often did, that the entire sequence—the divulging of intimacies, the exploring of pasts—could be sped past, and that he could simply be teleported to the next stage, where the relationship was something soft and pliable and comfortable, where both parties' limits were understood and respected." When being asked questions about himself, "he always felt something cold move across him, as if he were being iced from the inside, his organs and nerves being protected by a sheath of frost." To share is to be "mined" out: "People wanted to know so much, they wanted so many answers," whereas Jude wants to be "left to himself, a blank, faceless prairie under whose yellow surface earthworms and beetles wriggled through the black soil, and chips of bone calcified slowly into stone."[23] Jude uses the image of a prairie to refer to the emptiness and bleakness he sees in himself, and the desire to find oneself in the warm yellow of a prairie is coupled here with the disappointment with what is underneath. His encounters are affective precisely as they portray his vulnerability in the face of the other.[24]

Life-building is a process of learning and unlearning, and Jude's encounters have allowed him to unlearn what his traumatic experiences have taught him in the first place. For Jude, "there was something scary and anxiety-inducing about being in a space where nothing seemed to be forbidden to him, where everything was offered to him and nothing was asked in return." His experiences had shown him that "traditionally, men—adult men, . . . had been interested in him for one reason, and so he had learned to be frightened of them." While "Harold didn't seem to be one of those men," his generous friendship nonetheless "unsettled" Jude.[25] The threatened and shaken borders of his self haunt his consciousness, and "the abject"—that is, intimacies—remains "on the periphery of awareness. The subject finds the abject both repellant and seductive and thus their borders of self are, paradoxically, continuously threatened and maintained."[26] The intimacy Harold offers threatens Jude's borders and makes him vulnerable, while Jude's vulnerabilities, simultaneously, take an active part in life-building.

The paradoxical nature of vulnerability and openness precludes Jude's intimacies and exemplifies the potential danger. Jude's inner world—his thoughts, yearnings, desires, the unspoken—is often narrated in great detail, through which the reader witnesses at once Jude's will for and refrainment from vulnerability. Brené Brown underscores the importance of engaging with one's vulnerabilities and argues that vulnerability is "the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences."[27] Ben Anderson similarly argues that "affects are not the special property of any one domain of life," but rather they cut across "separate domains we inhabit."[28] The power of vulnerability is a "catalyst for courage, compassion and connection."[29] While linking the traumatized body—which is closed, isolated, and thus protected—to an understanding of vulnerability that reasserts the openness of the body might seem contradictory, it in fact affirms the potentiality of affects.

The polysemy of closeness in *A Little Life*'s treatment of vulnerability mimics vulnerability's double valence. To protect himself from the pain that seems so easily inflicted on him, Jude "locked anything that could be: doors, windows, closets. It was reflexive for him." Outside his own locked privacy, Jude has the "habit of, upon entering any new room or space, searching for the nearest exit and then standing close to it," to always be prepared for any potential danger.[30] At first sight, Jude's closeness refers to shutting the world out and closing himself off in the face of potential danger, in order to prevent further harm. Such a reading of Jude's closeness fits neatly with a more classical reading through a trauma studies approach, which might argue that trauma results in the subject's alienation, hyperarousal, and avoidance. When considered closely through the lens of vulnerability, however, a second meaning of closeness becomes more evident: closeness as intimacies, closing up to others. Such intimate closeness, paradoxically, would refer back to an openness inherent in it, which is constitutive of vulnerability. While the protagonist shuts himself off from the world around him to protect himself, he also comes close to others to form the intimacies for which he longs. This double valence of "close" is visible only with attention to reading vulnerabilities in traumatized bodies that show themselves in and through intimacies and affects. Such a reading echoes Butler's polyphonic notion of vulnerability as being expressive of oppression—socially and politically induced vulnerability—as well as of agency. As Butler argues, highlighting the importance of vulnerability's double valence, "Once we understand the way that vulnerability enters into agency, then our understanding of both terms can change, and the binary opposition between them can become undone."[31]

Narrative Vulnerability and Narrative Intimacy

A Little Life's dynamic use of temporality, multifocal narrative, and focalization establishes a narrative structure on which vulnerability performs as a co-actor to trauma. Narrative vulnerability is established through the text's formal and aesthetic dimensions, both of which not only play an important role in affective worldmaking in general, but, in this novel specifically, also contribute to forming a vulnerable atmosphere at the narrative level. Acting as an overarching affect that binds content and form, narrative vulnerability is central to my reading of the novel and becomes the first point of inquiry for this analysis.

A Little Life creates a temporal paradox whereby time is at once limited and yet wide-open. This is exemplified in the novel's structural makeup: the novel is divided into seven parts, each with three chapters. The first and last parts of the novel are both titled "Lispenard Street," the name of the street where Jude and Willem live. Lispenard Street is where the narrative begins and marks a landmark for Jude and Willem's relationship, evolving from friendship to love and partnership. The return to

Lispenard Street at the end of the novel, even if metaphorically,[32] indicates a circular narrative temporality. Within the circularity of the narrative, temporal disarray is visible in various other forms, too. The novel speaks to its readers from the eternal present. The time is now, and the moment is at once ephemeral and eternal, while at the same time the present is filled with fragmentary episodes from the past. Then and now, past and present, are fused. *A Little Life* thus forms an affective assemblage of memory. Its tense shifts between past and present effect a temporal chaos, "one of the pillars of the poetics of vulnerability."[33] Such rupture in time mimics Jude's perception of his own being. When Judge Sullivan asks him to sing a song that reveals something about himself, for example, Jude offers Gustav Mahler's "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen," translating the song's first line as "I have become lost to the world,"[34] rather than its typical, "I am lost to the world."

> *I have become lost to the world*
> *In which I otherwise wasted so much time*
> *It means nothing to me*
> *Whether the world believes me dead*
> *I can hardly say anything to refute it*
> *For truly, I am no longer a part of the world.*

The change from the present tense "am" to the present perfect "have become" exemplifies the coalescence of temporalities in *A Little Life*. Jude's past stretches into his present. This shift highlights that it is about neither now ("I am"), nor the past ("I was") alone.[35] Jude, rather, has become lost to the world. Jude's ontological vulnerability might be seen, through Heidegger's account of human existence as oriented toward making sense, as a breakdown in meaning. This experience of *Angst*, a fundamental mood (*Grundstimmung*) for Heidegger, implies a connection to what he calls "being-towards-death"—the idea that at any point one's existence may cease, and that thus arises its meaninglessness.[36] The paradoxes of existence and non-existence, and being and not-being, consolidate Jude's vulnerability in the face of the world; he fashions himself an apparition wandering through time unknown.

The narrative spans sixty years, with the zeitgeist rendered invisible in the background of a now saturated with emotion. Indeed, the novel is stripped of any references to any historical events that might allow the reader to locate the narrative temporally. This lack of time markers limits the reader in making narrative associations outside of the person of Jude. The focus on Jude in time—or on Jude as time—results in a more intimate reading experience, whereby the reader is engrossed in the emotional state of the protagonist. In *A Little Life*, time is always equal, always present. The temporal focus is one of the structural affective dimensions of the novel, and the narrative intimacy formed through this focus opens up a contact zone for vulnerability.

Multifocal narration amplifies the temporal disarray of the novel. The narrative is fragmented with flashbacks, memories, and flashforwards. Narrative perspectives, focalization, and narrators shift throughout the story. The novel is narrated by the heterodiegetic omniscient narrator, with the exception of passages narrated in the first person by Jude's former teacher and adoptive father, Harold. These "I" perspectives offer the reader a second viewpoint into Jude's life, but one that is in touch with him. Focalization, however, shifts between the characters. These fragmentations, shifts, and alternations in the narrative draw up an extended portrayal of vulnerability and exemplify the relationality of affects.

Shifting the narrative perspective allows the reader to sway perception away from Jude's inner world and further highlights the degree of his vulnerability. His friends, with whom he has managed to form intimacies, take on the responsibility of care, and the narrative shifts lay bare the conflicts, exhaustion, and helplessness of those who perform care work. The narration of how Jude's vulnerability, in response to the ongoing adoption process, alerts his friends, sheds light onto the inured nature of his weakness to take in the "good things" that are happening to him. "He's sitting at home fucking cutting himself to shreds, he's essentially all scar tissue now, he looks like a fucking skeleton," says Andy to Willem, who calls Jude "every single day" to support him. They create an invisible exoskeleton around Jude: a harmonious, entangled, multi-layered assemblage. "You knew this was going to be hard for him," Andy continues. "You knew the adoption was going to make him feel more vulnerable. So why didn't you put any safeguards in place, Willem? Why aren't your other so-called friends doing anything?"[37] Through such narrative shifts, the reader gets a fuller sense of the intricate nature of vulnerability.

The shifts in focalization connect to minor characters' vulnerabilities and their affective lives at large. Willem's vulnerable connections to his parents, to his disabled brother, and their deaths, for instance, are provided in brief accounts earlier in the chapter, and thus offer the reader a lens through which they can see Willem as an individual tangled up in his own affective relationality. Other characters' guilt, shame, anger, and vulnerabilities create various streams that come together in the novel's affective assemblage, where worldmaking through vulnerability becomes possible. A multifocal perspective highlights the sociality of affect and is useful in showing how one's bodily capacities affect and are affected. Only through a multifocal perspective can the reader trace how the affect of vulnerability travels, attaches to people, pasts and presents, and reattaches through other characters. In the final chapter of the novel, Harold narrates Jude's death to Willem, whose death in a car accident two years prior led to Jude's suicide. Affects that emerged from, and came into being through, Jude's traumatic history float around, navigate through different bodies, and remain even after his death. The transmission of affects (Brennan) and their stickiness (Ahmed) are seen clearly in Harold's reflections[38]:

> Can you have a real relationship with someone you are frightened of? Of course you can. But he still scared me, because he was the powerful one and I was not: if he killed himself, if he took himself away from me, I knew I would survive, but I knew as well that survival would be a chore; I knew that forever after I would be hunting for explanations, sifting through the past to examine my mistakes. And of course I knew how badly I would miss him, because although there had been trial runs for his eventual departure, I had never been able to get any better at dealing with them, and I was never able to get used to them.[39]

Affects such as fear, melancholy, grief, love, and anger fill Harold's narration with their intensities. However distanced the narrative is from Jude's focalization, the reader experiences the affectivity of Jude's life even without his presence. The affective qualities of Harold's retrospection demonstrate that affects do not exist in themselves but in relation to others, through circulation. As Brennan observes, "Affects have an energetic dimension" and "there is no secure distinction between the 'individual' and the 'environment.'"[40] This energetic dimension is what allows affects to enhance—through outward projection—or deplete, as in Harold's case, when they are introjected.

Narrative vulnerability, established through formal structures and techniques, works in concert with narrative intimacy. While multi-perspectival focalization and temporal disarray complicate the novel's linearity, the novel closes in on Jude. The narrative's seemingly incongruent and imbricated structure forms an arc over Jude's narrative; the intimacy of the narration intensifies in tandem with Jude's intimacy. As Jude opens up and thus allows himself to be more vulnerable, the narrative's focus concentrates on Jude; it is more detailed and more engaged with his inner world.

The narrative's thickness and affectively charged intensities are established by the narrator's detailed language and attention to affects. The narrator allows access to the memories Jude locked away and testifies to brutal details, even when Jude cannot "find the language" to talk about what happened to him. Jude "literally doesn't have the language . . . His past, his fears, what was done to him, what he has done to himself—they are subjects that can only be discussed in tongues he doesn't speak: Farsi, Urdu, Mandarin, Portuguese."[41] The omniscient narrator becomes Jude's voice and contextualizes Jude's vulnerability. It is through omniscient narration that the reader might go beyond the protective walls around Jude.

Fusing various temporalities, blurring the lines between now and then, increases the affective intensities of the text and the intimacies created. Jude's incapability of sharing his personal life, which at times looks like a stubborn unwillingness, works in tandem with the narrator's generousness and brutal honesty in sharing those moments with the reader. As if to counter Jude's extraordinary diligence in keeping his self-injury a secret, the narrator offers every bit of detail in a clinical, nearly pornographic way. This narrative style increases the affective quality of Jude's flashbacks from his sexually violated past, evoking visceral reactions in the reader.

Following a protagonist whose characterization is formed around his trauma, secrecy, and privacy, the narrative shifts between what Jude feels comfortable sharing and what he does not. Jude is "too worried about what he might do or say if he lost control over himself," and the reader is often reminded of how much of a "daily effort it took [Jude] to appear normal." Jude perpetually performs. His desire to embody a self other than his own is so strong that the reader glimpses his rare non-performing moments through the omniscient narration. The reader is Jude's shadow. The narrator takes the reader along, following Jude, on some mornings of his almost religiously followed Sunday walks. During these times, before his walks, Jude "would sometimes stand, barefoot, in the kitchen, everything quiet around him, and the small, ugly apartment would feel like a sort of marvel. Here, time was his, and space was his, and every door could be shut, every window locked. He would stand before the tiny hallway closet—an alcove, really, over which they had strung a length of burlap—and admire the stores within it." Here, the reader is intruding into one of Jude's most honest moments, as he is no longer pretending, performing, and controlling. He is content with life and embraces the safety of Lispenard Street: "Those moments alone in the kitchen were something akin to meditative, the only times he found himself truly relaxing, his mind ceasing to scrabble forward, planning in advance the thousands of little deflections and smudgings of truth, of fact, that necessitated his every interaction with the world and its inhabitants." The comfort of being at a trusted place and not having to perform allows Jude to let his guard down and to simply be. Harold's house in Cape Cod has become one of these trusted places for him. In Cape Cod, he also feels safe enough to carry out these meditative moments of non-performance: "In the mornings he woke before the others so he could stand on the back porch alone looking over the sea. *What is going to happen to me?* he asked the sea. *What is happening to me?*"[42] Jude's feeling of safety and security is strong enough to keep him from performing in those moments, but these moments open up an equally important aspect of his life—the precarity in which he sees himself. The narrative's attention to these co-existing, yet somewhat opposing, forces is equally visible in Jude's encounters and in the intimate relationships he forms with others. The narrator and the other formal structures of the novel thus permit a sort of personal relationship with the protagonist's inner world, whereas his relationships with others form a broader map of his embodied vulnerability.

Reading Vulnerability in(to) Trauma Narratives

The intricate relationship between narrative intimacy and narrative vulnerability creates a background against which vulnerability's role in trauma narratives becomes ever more visible. How does vulnerability work with, and relate to, trauma narratives, and how does it amplify the narrative's affectivity? To answer these questions, we must look closely at the crossing points of trauma and vulnerability in *A Little Life*. The above close readings of the stylistic elements of the novel's narrative vulnerability make reference to both trauma fiction and classical literary trauma theory. Indeed, the temporal disarray and fragmented narrative of *A Little Life* are prominent stylistic devices across examples of what is called trauma fiction,[43] a genre marker that refers often to a work of literature that represents the emotional and cognitive response to a traumatic event—loss, catastrophe, disasters—experienced on intersecting cultural and individual levels. According to Laurie Vickroy, such narratives "sharpen victims' pain with readers, shifting between what can and cannot be revealed."[44] Jude's constant dilemma over which parts of his past can be shared and which must be locked away, to prevent his becoming vulnerable, points exactly at this shift.

Navigating through this dilemma, language, or its lack, takes on an essential role, and is another common focal point of recent narrative turns toward vulnerability and trauma. Trauma, according to literary trauma theory, is defined as "the breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world" and is defined by its unspeakability.[45] In the lineage of classical trauma theory, "massive trauma precludes all representation" and "only returns belatedly."[46] Dori Laub elaborates on the unspeakable in relation to the testimonies of Holocaust survivors as

> an imperative to tell and thus come to know one's story . . . Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words, or the right words, there is never enough time, or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory and speech . . . Yet the "not telling" of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The event becomes more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively to invade and contaminate the survivor's daily life.[47]

While Jude's experiences are that of insidious sexual trauma, Laub's description of the unspeakable is evident in Yanagihara's use of language. In *A Little Life*, silence, secrecy, and not-telling originate in Jude's trauma, but they are also essential in narrating his vulnerability. They are, in this case, not necessarily only the result of his vulnerability, but they are also the tools to prevent future vulnerabilities, coping mechanisms against the potential danger: "His silence was both necessity and a protection."[48] Such a look positions vulnerability on another end of the spectrum concerning trauma, one more about the life-building practices that gesture toward the future rather than the past and its representations.

The final intersection of trauma and vulnerability that I read in *A Little Life* lies in tropes shared across both fields of study, such as self-injury and abjection, which I briefly consider here. The body is central to Yanagihara's narrative. Although Jude desperately attempts to hide his traumatic past by remaining silent and invisible, his body and relationship to it remain nonetheless at the center of the narrative. Self-injury functions as a leitmotif in *A Little Life*. It is not simply a self-inflicted pain. For Jude, rather, cutting is a form of self-punishment—it is a cleansing, a taking back of agency. Jude begins to perform self-harm during his forced prostitution by throwing himself against the walls and down the stairs of the hotel where he was being sold. "Something about the fall, the freshness of the pain had been *restorative*. It was *honest* pain, *clean* pain, a *pain without shame or filth*," thinks Jude. As he was "tossing himself against the brick wall," he imagined "he was knocking out of himself *every piece of dirt*, *every trace of liquid*, every memory of the past few years. He was *resetting* himself; he was returning himself to something *pure*."[49] Jude's affectively charged memories from his past carry the intensities of shame he felt for what he was being forced to do, and how he had developed self-harm as a coping mechanism, a way of cleansing his body from shame and dirt, of purifying. What became a way to establish a self out of abject being results, however, in other vulnerabilities. The mutilated body shatters any sense of normalcy, this time in brutally material form. As the narrator harbors a past that Jude tries to forget and conceal, self-injury for Jude materializes as a method for coping with vulnerabilities: as if self-injury was the only way of "draining away the poison, the filth, the rage inside" that constitutes his vulnerable existence. Through self-injury, "he felt everything within him slow, felt himself relax, felt his memories dim, and had remembered how it helped him." At his moments of extreme vulnerability, he "cuts and cuts and cuts, until finally his breathing slows and he feels the old, comforting *emptiness* settle inside him."[50] Tracing the body to its most secret crevices, the narrative maps an understanding of vulnerability situated in the tradition of traumatic realism.

While acts of self-injury have often been discussed in a pathologizing discourse, a growing vein of research sees agentic power in these practices.[51] Trauma scholarship, linking the wounded mind to the body, has studied the body as a site of trauma and self-injury as a coping mechanism for trauma.[52] *A Little Life*'s skillful play with paradoxes—such as the polysemy of closeness—is also evident in the novel's display of self-injury in ways that negotiate its multiple layers. Following the double valence in vulnerability—that is, posing the question of whether self-injury can be read as a semiotic activity, rather than a mere symptom or coping mechanism—becomes crucial. Particularly in light of trauma scholarship's treatment of the traumatized body itself as text, practices of self-injury may be seen as the act of writing or rewriting that text.

Jude's self-injury and abjection offer a new semiotic realm with which to read the novel. Self-injury is the pre-epistemological act that treats and shapes the body as text that we read from and into the body. This is evident most when Jude is officially adopted by Julia and Harold, Jude's former employer at law school. This unexpectedly pleasant turn marks a return of his self-doubts about being unworthy, and a fear of abandonment. Jude falls into a state of extreme vulnerability, which intensifies his cutting more than ever. Although largely able to control his self-injuring behavior, which is depicted in an attitude that is highly calculated, he loses that sense of control in times when he is most vulnerable.

At moments of extreme vulnerability—when, for example, the body is violated and exploited—self-injury becomes an attempt to take back the agency over the body. It was always others to decide how Jude's body would be used. In response, Jude establishes his agency through what he does to his body. Cutting "made him feel like his body, his life, was truly his and no one else's." His disabling trauma forms Jude's understanding of bodily agency, and, as "he had such little control of his body anyway," his only way of taking control of it was through injuring it.[53]

Vulnerability studies show us how forming intimacies through vulnerable encounters is an activity of life-building. New practices of care, love, and friendships evolve from these encounters, and new meanings are assigned to them. Can overlooking self-harm practices be a form of care? Can silence around self-injury take on a different meaning when utilized to protect the one practicing it? Is it an expression of love? In *A Little Life*, most of Jude's close circle has an implied awareness of his cutting. "Willem had always been very careful not to express too much interest in exploring the many cupboarded cabinet in which Jude had secreted himself," and the others approach these blind spots only through indirection:

> Malcolm had asked, "Have you ever noticed how Jude always wears long sleeves?"
>
> He'd grunted in response. He had, of course—it was difficult not to, especially on hot days—but he had never let himself wonder why. Much of his friendship with Jude, it often seemed, was not letting himself ask the questions he knew he ought to, because he was afraid of the answers.
>
> There had been a silence then . . .
>
> "Flora had a friend who always wore long sleeves," Malcolm continued. "Her name was Maryam. She used to cut herself."
>
> He let the silence pull between them until he imagined he could hear it come alive.[54]

In these instances, conversation is filled with silence and affective knowledge. Silence is no longer a symptomatic necessity for representing trauma; it becomes an act of care and protection. Most importantly, it is the contact zone where vulnerability is felt, even without Jude's presence. Silence takes on an epistemological non-act, where caring for the other is performed through inactivity.

As with self-injury, vulnerability, too, allows for a new perspective on trauma fiction's trope of abject and abjection. Abjection in trauma fiction is often caused by the traumatic event, but it is also commonly used to highlight the possibility of overcoming abjection: the possibilities of intimacies, futures, and desires. Self-abjection caused by the past is narrativized for the signification of the desired future, of life-building. Despite Yanagihara's intent on creating a character who never heals, some things indeed have healed for Jude. Wounds have been cicatrized. Some, on the other hand, like Jude's relationship to sex and physical intimacy, remain still outside of the possible. In his relationship with Willem, sex becomes an abject intimacy for Jude, a "duty." Sex is "his side of the bargain" to be fulfilled and the way to win himself "more time: of Willem's presence."[55] Life-building, then, is not an assemblage of positive affects and affective practices only, but also of compromises, of adaptations, of performances.

While the narrative frequently reminds the reader of how the body, sexuality, and any form of intimacy are abjected in Jude's life—often by himself—it also details Jude's desire to overcome this impediment. He understands the burning desire to have a relationship, and "he doesn't want a relationship for propriety's sake: he wants it because he has realized he is lonely. He is so lonely that he sometimes feels it physically, a sodden clump of dirty laundry pressing against his chest. He cannot unlearn the feeling."[56] As Kristeva delineates in her theory of the abject, "There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded."[57] Jude's acknowledgment of his "flaws" and "deficits" does not stop him from desiring what is abjected due to his trauma. This affectively charged description of Jude's loneliness and his admittance to wanting to be in a relationship brings to the fore his fear of vulnerability: "People make it sound so easy, as if the decision to want it is the most difficult part of the process. But he knows better: being in a relationship would mean exposing himself to someone, . . . it would mean the confrontation of his own body, which he has not seen unclothed in at least a decade—even in the shower he doesn't look at himself."[58]

This simultaneous awareness and abjection of his body fuel Jude's fear, "mak[ing] his stomach fill with something waxy and cold." At the same time, they motivate his attempt at believing in his capacity to be loved. He meets Caleb, who "seems, in that moment, to have been conjured, djinn-like, the offspring of his worst fears and greatest hopes," a concretized version of his imaginary other, from whom he has been shielding himself. The dilemma, that double valence of vulnerability, is incarnate in this encounter with the embodied other:

> On one side is everything he knows, the patterns of his existence as regular and banal as the steady plink of a dripping faucet, where he is alone but safe, and shielded from everything that could hurt him. On the other side are waves, tumult, rainstorms, excitement: everything he cannot control, everything potentially awful and ecstatic, everything he has lived his adult life trying to avoid, everything whose absence bleeds his life of color. Inside him, the creature hesitates, perching on its hind legs, pawing the air as if feeling for answers.[59]

The narrative lays bare the quotidian negotiations of the subject. Is Jude capable of stepping towards sexual intimacy with Caleb, a corporate lawyer whom he has just met? Does he dare to allow himself to become vulnerable?

> *Don't do it, don't fool yourself, no matter what you tell yourself, you know what you are*, says one voice.
>
> *Take a chance*, says the other voice. *You're lonely. You have to try*. This is the voice he always ignores.
>
> *This may never happen again*, the voice adds, and this stops him.
>
> *It will end badly*, says the first voice, and then both voices fall silent, waiting to see what he will do.
>
> . . . *Be brave*, he tells himself. *Be brave for once*.
>
> And so he looks back at Caleb. "Let's go," he says.[60]

What starts as hope for intimacy adds further injury upon Jude's already shattered being. Unlike any other person Jude has let into his life, Caleb shows no mercy to Jude's vulnerable body. He has an "aversion" to Jude's wheelchair, which he uses when his legs are too weak to carry him: "But—but I can't be around these accessories to weakness, to disease. I just can't. I hate it. It embarrasses me. It makes me feel—not depressed, but furious, like I need to fight against it," Caleb says.[61] He beats, abuses, and rapes Jude when Jude fails to hide his vulnerabilities. Caleb's "aversion" precisely demonstrates what Kristeva theorizes about abjection. Jude's bodily vulnerability becomes abject for Caleb, a reminder of weakness, decomposition, and death.

Fighting back against trauma and abjection, as Yanagihara shows, does not always offer the catharsis. In *A Little Life*, desire and hope are catalysts for overcoming abjection and working through trauma. The protagonist in trauma fiction is "a historical marker to unspeakable experience" as well as "a marker for potential change if healed."[62] This potential is an important aspect that differentiates vulnerability narratives from those of trauma, and precisely where vulnerability studies offers a unique perspective to trauma studies. Going beyond the common temporal spectrum of the trauma novel that emphasizes past and present, a lens through vulnerability gestures rather toward the future—through hope, optimism, and allowing oneself vulnerability, understood each as life-building practices.

Conclusion

Trauma and vulnerability narratives are interconnected through their uses of narrative techniques and tropes, as well as their treatments of language and temporality. While one could argue that these similarities deem vulnerability obsolete, reading through the lens of vulnerability allows the reader to move beyond the limitations of classical trauma fiction. It draws attention to the subject's hopes, desires, and potentiality, without displacing the traumatic event or its reverberations. Attention to vulnerabilities enables trauma fiction to expand through affective reading practices, thereby introducing the richness that affect studies might offer to trauma scholarship at large. *A Little Life* investigates how the body exists not alone but always in relation. The body's relationship to and encounters with other bodies, objects, and places thus influence bodily capacities and potentialities.

Reading vulnerability as an affect opens connections between apparent paradoxes and allows for mapping relations between characters, reader, text, and other things overlooked. In tracing these affective encounters and mapping the affective worldmaking dimensions of the text, vulnerability studies offers a unique point of view. The study of vulnerability demonstrates how a text's affective worldmaking is layered in that text's formal structure and contextual details, as well as within the contact zone of text–reader engagement. The affective nature of the text enhanced with vulnerability's affective dimensions provides a new lens onto the narratives of trauma and the traumatized body. Narrative vulnerability reveals how affects, in contradistinction to their understanding in the Massumian tradition, are neither necessarily unnarratable nor limited to plot and story but are part of the formal structure of narrative. If we understand texts as assemblages, we might bear witness to how affects bind myriad elements, including other affects, that make a narrative.

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Notes

1 Hanya Yanagihara, *A Little Life* (London: Picador, 2016), 669.

2 For a close reading of the novel through the lens of disability studies, see Dorothee Marx, "'But I'm not even in a Wheelchair': Dis/ability, Im/mobility, and Trauma in Hanya

Yanagihara's *A Little Life*," *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* 3, no. 1 (2021), DOI: 10.47060/jaaas.v3i1.47.

3 See Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) for a detailed study of how contemporary literary texts engage with trauma.

4 J. Roger Kurtz, "Introduction," in *Trauma and Literature*, ed. J. Roger Kurtz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.

5 See Marianne Hirsch's presidential address to the 2014 MLA Convention, Vulnerable Times: Marianne Hirsch, "Connective Histories in Vulnerable Times," *PMLA* 129, no. 3 (2014), DOI: 10.1632/pmla.2014.129.3.330. Here, "vulnerable times" refers to accumulated and not amended vulnerability more than an issue of temporality.

6 The term "atmosphere" here refers to Sianne Ngai's reading of atmosphere as literary works "organizing quality of feeling." Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 174. For Ngai's use of atmosphere, see particularly pages 47–48, 69, 87, 174, and 243.

7 See, for example, Robert E. Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

8 See Amanda Russell Beattie and Kate Schick, *The Vulnerable Subject: Beyond Rationalism in International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), also for the importance of relationality in vulnerability. For the notion of vulnerability as a condition for good life, see Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

9 See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso Books, 2004); Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, ed., *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

10 Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii–xxi.

11 Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 24.

12 Butler's account of vulnerability makes references to Baruch Spinoza's early conceptualization of affect, as well as Emmanuel Levinas's concept of the face; see *Precarious Life*, xvii–xx.

13 Feelings, affect, and emotion are used at times interchangeably, and at other times scholars make a clear distinction. See Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 27; Brian Massumi, "Navigating Movements," interview by Mary Zournazi, in *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); and Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth's seminal work *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) for different conceptualizations of affect(s). In addition, for the various streams of affect theory mentioned here, see Lauren Berlant, "The Intimate Public Sphere," in *Emotions: A Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Jennifer Harding and E. Deidre Pribram (New York: Routledge, 2009); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Ann Cvetkovich, "Public Feelings," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007), DOI: 10.1215/00382876-2007-004. Also see Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*.

14 Sianne Ngai. "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (2005): 831, DOI: 10.1086/444516.

15 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 4, 6–9.

16 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 13, 69.

17 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 257.

18 Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 21.

19 Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 1.

20 Ernst Bloch qtd. in Anderson, *Encountering Affect*, 1-2.

21 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

22 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

23 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 121–23.

24 Levinas's work on vulnerability, which highly influenced Butler's theorization of vulnerability, places vulnerability in a more ethical discourse than those of psychology, empathy, and the likes. According to Levinas, "subjectivity is sensibility—an exposure to others—, a vulnerability and a responsibility in the proximity of the others, the-one-for-the-other." Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being; Or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978), 77.

25 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 132, 115.

26 Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 50.

27 Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 21.

28 Anderson, *Encountering Affect*, 6.

29 Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 16.

30 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 78.

31 Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 25.

32 The novel's first and last chapters are titled "Lispenard Street." While the first chapter is mostly set in Lispenard Street and covers the time when Willem and Jude lived together in the small flat they rented on that street, the last chapter covers the time after Willem's death and mainly focuses on Jude's grief. This "return" to Lispenard Street is not so much about the localization of the setting but rather an example of temporal circularity in the novel.

33 Jean-Michel Ganteau, *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2018), 169.

34 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 110.

35 Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of time as an *n*-dimensional, non-chronological concept and its non-metrical manifold that is characterized by chaos is insightful in the discussion of temporality in *A Little Life*. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (London: Verso Books, 1994). Deleuze's philosophy is highly influenced by Henri Bergson's ideas, particularly by the concept of multiplicity, which is fundamental to Deleuze's concept of time and of becomings. Therefore, see also Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (New York: Dover Publications, 1913).

36 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008).

37 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 226.

38 Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

39 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 708.

40 Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 6.

41 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 105, 299.

42 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 96, 87, 88, 128.

43 See Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), particularly 30–32; Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*; Michelle Balaev, *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

44 Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival*, 4.

45 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4; Michelle Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 41, no. 2 (2008): 151.

46 Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 266.

47 Dori Laub, “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 78–79.

48 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 93.

49 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 418; emphasis added.

50 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 475, 469, 510; emphasis added.

51 For a discussion on self-cutting practices among young adults as an agentic act of reconciling a fraught relationship with the world, see Thomas J. Csordas and Janis H. Jenkins, “Living with a Thousand Cuts: Self-Cutting, Agency, and Mental Illness among Adolescents,” *Ethos* 46, no. 2 (2018), DOI: 10.1111/etho.12200.

52 See Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).

53 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 490, 383.

54 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 73, 71.

55 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 486, 485, 489.

56 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 305.

57 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 5.

58 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 305.

59 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 305, 315.

60 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 315.

61 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 320–21.

62 Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival*, xiii.

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Gulsin Ciftci is a doctoral candidate and lecturer in American studies at the University of Münster. Her doctoral dissertation, "Reading Reading: Affect and American Literature in the Twenty-First Century," examines theories of reading, literary criticism, and affect and public feeling in contemporary fiction and poetry. She holds an M.A. in North American Studies and English Philology from the University of Göttingen, where she worked as a research assistant and taught literary and cultural studies. She serves as associate editor at *New American Studies Journal: A Forum* and as co-editor at *Textpraxis: Digital Journal for Philology* and *COPAS (Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies)*.

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