Review of International American Studies
RIAS Vol. 15, Spring–Summer №1 /2022
ISSN 1991–2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.12453

FEMINIST CONSPIRACIES, SECURITY AUNTIES, AND OTHER SURVEILLANCE STATE FICTIONS

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Early in Laura Poitras's documentary film *Risk* (2017), the viewer witnesses a terrible scene in which Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, spars with his lawyer over the accusations of sexual assault levelled at him by women in Sweden, charges that leave him vulnerable to extradition to the United States. The lawyer tactfully recommends that he unequivocally denounce men who rape, but declare himself not to be one of them. Assange prevaricates, suggesting that while he might say such a thing in public, the truth is different: he is being targeted by a "feminist conspiracy" consisting of a "police woman running a tag team" with a "radical feminist" lesbian nightclub owner in league with "the social democratic party" under the "general influence from the government," a web of collusion that amounts to what one of his supporters calls "a malicious prosecution" by the Swedish state working at the behest of US empire. *Risk* is a film that styles itself as a study in such, per Poitras's narration of her production journal, "contradictions": it is a painful portrait of the 2010s leftist scene of anti-surveillance activism. The film tracks prominent activists persecuted by the surveillance states whose violence they seek to expose, even as it chronicles how anti-surveillance state organizing is haunted by those same activists' sexism and alleged sexual violence. In *Risk,* the threat of the US surveillance state and its proxies is everywhere:

Poitras's narration returns continually to the FBI's search and seizure of her documentary equipment; one plot thread follows the military trial and imprisonment of Chelsea Manning for leaking documents and footage exposing the slaughter of Iraqi and Afghan civilians by US drone strikes; Assange clumsily disguises himself as he seeks asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in order to avoid extradition; Jacob Appelbaum, the Tor founder and hacker similarly accused of sexual assault, confronts the corporate bigwigs who shut down and surveilled internet traffic in collaboration with Egyptian President Mubarak during Arab Spring. But Assange's paranoid commentary—his vision of a female "police officer" colluding with a "radical feminist" lesbian nightclub owner in league with the Swedish government in a "feminist conspiracy" against him—lays bare how the violent persistent presence of surveillance can and does take a particularly gendered form even (perhaps especially) in the radical leftist imagination. State surveillance is imagined as both feminized and feminist: it is the gaze of a state weaponized by and on behalf of women, the gaze of a state that weaponizes feminist critiques of sexual violence against male radicals, the gaze of a state whose intimacy with women—those empowered and employed by the state, those who organize women's queer communal spaces within capitalism—enables it to target those, perhaps especially men, who seek to expose the violent reach of US state power.

That certain voices on the left might characterize the surveillance state this way is perhaps unsurprising. Assange's conspiratorial obstinacy intersects with the US's deployment of the rhetoric of women's empowerment and a feminized gaze: its repeated racist use since the nation's inception of, per Gayatri Spivak, "saving brown women from brown men" as a justification for invasion and occupation (1983: 92); its ability to capitalize on white women's "domestic vision" and undomestic pursuits—both often wielded in service of their efforts at personal emancipation and financial independence within patriarchal racial settler colonial capitalism—as both cover and rationale for military violence (Wexler 2000; Kaplan 2005). Scholars of the most recent iterations of US imperial power have demonstrated the continuation

Patricia Stuelke
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and evolution of these gendered dynamics. As Inderpal Grewal has argued, during the War on Terror, the US neoliberal security state employed "security feminists," whose expertise in "security" drew from their supposed power and status as women (2017: 124), while supplementing its Patriot Act-sanctioned domestic spying by outsourcing surveillance to "security moms," who "construct[ed] the family as threatened and surveillance technologies as tools for the empowerment of the mother" (127).[1] Meanwhile, as Michelle Murphy and Molly Geidel explain, as the War on Terror progressed, the US military, private contractors, and development organizations have increasingly, in the name of feminism, subcontracted the labor of security to Afghan, Pakistani, and Iraqi girls, imagining that their performances of resilient femininity might keep militancy in their communities in check.

The possible end of the War of Terror—signified by the withdrawal of US military troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban's swift seizure of power—has revived the conflation of the US surveillance state with feminism in the US popular imagination, even as the US military has openly admitted to killing civilians, including children, with recent drone strikes, and even as reporting has demonstrated how Afghan women experienced the devastation of US military force exercised throughout War on Terror as anything but a vehicle for empowerment (Gopal 2021). "This is not 'women's rights' when you are killing us, killing our brothers, killing our fathers," Anand Gopal quotes Khalida, a woman who lives in a village in the Helmand Province, "The Americans did not bring us any rights. They just came, fought, killed, and left." The violent hypocrisy of the imperialist feminism of the US surveillance state is clear. Moreover, as J.D. Schnepf has outlined, some privileged US women's enjoyment of domestic surveillance technology absolutely abets the US imperial state's exercise of drone warfare abroad (2017: 272). And yet, Assange's reflexive (and self-interested) reading of his accusers as private extensions and pawns of the surveillance state, is also inadequate, not least because it cannot imagine a vision of the social in which women

1. On the War on Terror's weaponization of feminism and multiculturalism, see also Melamed (2011) and Edwards (2021).

do not have to choose between being free from rape and being on the side of anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism.

This article investigates how two recent literary representations of the feminized US surveillance state, its "security feminists," and its "security moms" (Grewal 2017), further elaborate the contemporary contours of this familiar impasse, in which the feminized figurations of state surveillance, alongside the state's superficial incorporation of notions of women's empowerment and agency, seem to foreclose particular visions of social transformation and political life. It first examines Gish Jen's 2020 novel *The Resisters,* considering how its characterization of the US surveillance state as a snoopy suspicious Aunt shores up enduring liberal American fantasies about the value of productive work and institutionally-sanctioned responses to state violence. Unfolding as if written in response to critics' anxieties that automated "luxury surveillance" (Gilliard and Golombia 2021) might "undermine feminist efforts to revalue and elevate the status of care in capitalist labour markets" (Sandowski et al. 2021: 11), Jen's novel depicts state surveillance and countersurveillance as "Aunty Work" that threatens the reinvigoration of the commons, but ultimately imagines forms of resistance that foreclose an anticapitalist antiwork imaginary.[2] Jeff Vandermeer's novel *Hummingbird Salamander* (2021), in contrast, undoes and remakes the privatized figure of the "security mom." Suspicious of democratic visions of the social—"Democracy is not enough because it is never really Democracy," writes the anarchist eco-activist whose environmentalist vision drives the plot of the novel (Vandemeer 2021: 244)—the novel experiments with unraveling its protagonist's social ties and investments in security (as a profit-making enterprise, as a 'generic' state of being) in pursuit of a queer antisocial vision that might confront environmental and institutional collapse.

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Gish Jen's novel *The Resisters* literalizes the idea of the 'nanny state.' In a future world, plagued by climate disaster and warmed-over Cold War rivalries, the United States has recodified segregation

2. I borrow the phrase "Aunty Work" from the Critical Aunty Studies symposium program; it is the heading under which Mannur's essay appears.

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by dividing the population among the Netted and the Surplus. The Netted, mostly white ("angelfair," in the book's vernacular) are schooled into lives of 24/7 productivity; the Surplus, largely people of color, as well as those automated out of a job or apt to be suspicious of autocracy, are paid a universal basic income by the state and expected to earn "Living Points" through constant consumption. This biopolitical division is maintained by a robust feminized state surveillance infrastructure—AutoNet, or Aunt Nettie, as she is referred to by the novel's protagonists, or sometimes, less fondly, *1984* reference intact, "Big Mother" (Jen 2020: 135). For the Netted, their constant production and work maintaining Aunt Nettie—"Do you get Aunt Nettie and can you work with Aunt Nettie. Can you make nice to Aunt Nettie. Can you troubleshoot Aunt Nettie?" (Jen 2020: 138)—is the tradeoff for their relative security and freedom from straightforwardly punitive surveillance. While some Netted speculate that elections have become automated to the degree that Aunt Nettie is basically voting for herself, most still believe their anxious drive to produce is a personal choice: their freedom lies in their ability to choose to turn on or off Aunt Nettie's virtual assistants, who contact parents immediately when their children express a wish for something so that they might purchase it (Jen 2020: 134). For the Surplus, in contrast, Aunt Nettie's surveillance is unrelenting: she "track[s] changes in […] [Surplus people's] heart rate and breathing" in order to "read emotions" (Jen 2020: 135); distinguishes people "by [their] gait and [their] mannerisms" (135); chips the Surplus at birth and sends "DroneMinders" to track their movements; provides free "mall-truck food" treated with pacifying chemicals; and requires them to live in "AutoHouses" and "AutoHouseboats." These Smart Houses speak the mantra of personal responsibility—"you have a choice. You always have a choice […] Your choice is on the record" (Jen 2020: 5)—while policing Surplus people's behavior. Ignoring the so-called suggestions of the house surveillance costs residents precious "Living Points." While the Surplus cannot work, if they do not consume enough, if they do not maintain sufficient "Living Points," they can be "Cast Off," released on the water to fend for themselves with nothing.

The Resisters thus makes available a central question: what are the implications of imagining the intertwined caretaking and violent practices of the surveillance state as "Aunty work"? As Anita Mannur argues about the figure of the "Aunty" in South Asian culture, the Aunty is a queer or "queer-adjacent" figure who "broker[s] non-normative intimacies," who enables new "networks of intimacy beyond the familial, the heteronormative, the couple, the nation," especially in the wake of the failed promise of heteronormativity. "She is always there and never not there," Mannur writes, "she is both loved and reviled. She offers her opinion whether solicited or not. She judges, she watches; but she is also in your corner—at least, you hope most of the time that she is." As K'eguro Macharia explains, the Aunty is also a consummate reader: "Aunties observe changes of mood and body, movement and stillness. They know how to read [...] the smallest signs of the atmospheres we carry [...] Aunties read the atmosphere. Aunties change the atmosphere. Aunties create the atmosphere. Aunties are the atmosphere." These double-edged aspects of "aunty-ness"—the solicitous surveillance, unobtrusive ubiquity, intimate knowledge that can seed cruelty as well as essential kindness—perhaps makes her an apt figuration of the contemporary US surveillance state. The Surplus narrator Grant, a Black ex-ESL teacher automated out of his job, deemed "Unretrainable," recalls, when his baseball prodigy daughter Gwen was a baby, taking Aunt Nettie's robotic counsel to heart, finding "solace" in her "consoling voice" and "surprisingly useful advice,"—"Of course you feel that way, Grant, how could you not? You're only human" (Jen 2020: 6)—when his wife, Asian American civil rights lawyer and martyr-heroine Eleanor, was too busy working (for free, given their family's Surplus status) to offer him parenting suggestions. As time goes on, however, Grant and Eleanor resort to "deflectors, [a] white noisemaker, and [a] voice scrambler" to keep out Aunt Nettie's nosy intrusions (Jen 2020: 32). They are not quite successful, as Eleanor's relentless pursuit of legal action against the state eventually leads to her arrest and brain modification. The state fits her with a Bionet that both downloads her thoughts and uploads Aunt Nettie's, a stepping stone on the way to MindMeld, the linking of everyone's minds to Aunt Nettie's

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network (Jen 2020: 238), a nefarious version of the Aunty power of "broker[ing] non-normative intimacy" (Mannur).

Yet as apt a trope as the Aunty might seem for figuring the entanglements, present and future, of the US surveillance state and surveillance capitalism, and particularly their ornamental co-optation and weaponization of queer, feminist, and anti-racist politics, ultimately the novel's theorization of surveillance state violence as "Aunty Work" produces an inability to articulate an anti-work anticapitalist imaginary. The dystopian world of the novel is loosely recognizable as an outgrowth of our own: it grew, the novel's narrator reflects, out of the technological magic of "thermostats that sent to Aunt Nettie first data, then videos […] Then came DroneDeliverers and FridgeStockers, KidTrackers and RoboSitters, ElderHelpers and YardBots, all of which reported to Aunt Nettie as dutifully as any spy network—recording our steps, our pictures, our relationships" (Jen 2020: 6). The situation of the Netted and the Surplus is thus framed as the inevitable extension of the present: consumers accept without question how advances in automating domestic labor "enroll people in new markets and techniques of surveillance" (Sadowski et al. 2021: 11); rich people consensually adopt domestic surveillance technologies—Smart Houses, Amazon Ring cameras, cellphone location trackers, FitBits—even as such data is used more and more to monitor and criminalize the poor (Gilliard and Golumbia 2021). However, the novel's vision of the dystopian future is also, bizarrely, kinder and gentler than the present, as the brutal surveillance the underclass endures is uncoupled from the body-breaking never-ending work they are compelled to undertake now. Terrorized as they are by the smothering gaze of the state and ongoing climate disaster, they are also provided, by that same smothering state, the basic infrastructure for Surplus life: food (though laced with rebellion-numbing drugs) is free; everyone gets paid (a "Basic Income"); everyone is housed (though often near polluted land giving off body-disabling emanations). Because the privileged Netted are more benignly surveilled but compelled to anxiously pursue never-ending productivity, they feel errantly jealous of these aspects of Surplus life—"People said that the Netted looked at our lives with envy," Grant narrates, "To be state-supported! To draw

a Basic Income for doing nothing!" (Jen 2020: 38). While Gwen scoffs at this disdainfully, Grant notes their "air of exhaustion": "They walked as if they had enormous boulders to roll up a hill and no RockBots to help" (Jen 2020: 38).

It's through this division between Netted and Surplus that the novel structures its central liberal fantasy, which separates out state violence, particular the violence of state surveillance, from the violence of capitalist exploitation. The novel is not subtle on this point: when Eleanor, offers Gwen a history of the present, she explains that while capitalism "had some serious drawbacks," "it worked better than anything else people tried" at solving what she identifies as humanity's central concern throughout history: "how we could produce enough to feed people, to house people, to clothe people" (Jen 2020: 94). Exploitation is, in her account, not central to capitalism's workings, but an ancillary and an unfortunate byproduct; things only really went wrong when corporations were recognized as people and forgot their responsibility to the public good. Such errors could have been controlled for and corrected, she suggests, through reformist solutions—the adoption of job-sharing programs, 4-day work weeks, redefining "real work" to include reproductive and emotional labor (caring for children and the elderly) and "cleaning up the environment"—had Aunt Nettie not risen to power (Jen 2020: 94). When her daughter poses the counterfactual, "But could we really have used Automation and AI to rethink capitalism?," invoking the novel's warmed over Cold War conflict with ChinRussia's even more powerful surveillance state, her dad assures her that "You don't have to have unfettered access to everything about everyone to get good data," that it would be possible to remediate capitalism and compete with ChinRussia without adopting a surveillance state (Jen 2020: 95).

The corollary to the novel's targeting of the surveillance state's Aunty work as a symptom of capitalism-gone-wrong is that work is good. Hyper-productivity in service of perpetuating the control of the surveillance state is a problem—the division between the Surplus and the Netted presses on what Berlant identifies as work's "contradictory status" in the present as both "perpetual and impossible" (2016: 409)—but *The Resisters* imagines work

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in general, even and maybe especially in capitalism, as a source of purpose and pleasurable productivity, rather than intrinsically a form of exploitation. Life without work, for the Surplus, consists of tedious violence: "Surplus dealt with the boredom of our lot by beating one another up," our narrator explains, "—such beating having become so accepted a part of Surplus life that girls especially clucked over pretend injuries the way they had once played house, as if simply rehearsing for adult life" (Jen 2020: 12). Indeed, one main source of Gwen's best frenemy Ondi's trauma in the novel is her father's recourse to cruel play in the absence of productive work: a "big-deal radiologist" made redundant by Aunt Nettie, he drunkenly plays basketball with his friends on their AutoHouseBoat, forcing his daughter to "to dive in and retrieve" from the icy water the balls that slip overboard (Jen 2020: 48–9). Our protagonists, in contrast, are productive by choice: they knit, they grow their own food, they pursue lawsuits against the government for the condition of Surplus land and food, they build devices to test pollution levels and hack their microchips. Most importantly for the plot, they organize an amateur youth baseball league, in order to give Gwen an opportunity to develop her prodigious pitching talent, her "utterly useless aptitude" that her father imagines as imaginatively productive nonetheless, in that it defies human comprehension as well as that of Aunt Nettie, in that it proves the infinite capacity of humans over machines (Jen 2020: 10).

Baseball in the novel is the playful exception that proves the rule. It is at once the vehicle for making an "undercommons" (Moten and Harney 2013)—parents and kids assent to Grant hacking their microchips in order to gather for games; they assemble, in defiance of Aunt Nettie's prohibition on assembly, carting equipment to ever-changing fields, the location communicated through secret signs and signals; they arrive by water, swimming or paddling in kayaks or paddleboats, so as not to attract attention from Aunt Nettie's drones (Jen 2020: 25–26)—and the occasion for experiments in democracy and restorative justice untethered from the state form. After Ondi plays in one of the underground baseball games unhacked, purposefully leading Aunt Nettie's drones to surveille the underground baseball league, the league

holds a meeting; there Ondi confesses her culpability to the group (a betrayal entangled with her horrific experience being briefly Cast Off by Aunt Nettie as a child). The reception to her revelation is mixed—some yell "You've fucked us all," while others acknowledge, "You're not the first one to seek to appease her captors" (Jen 2020: 81)—but the community unanimously decides not to disband the league in the name of security, but rather to keep playing, shouting, "To hell with Aunt Nettie! Let's play ball!" (Jen 2020: 83). In this way, baseball might seem to offer a potential infrastructure for, as Berlant writes, "terms in which trust would become more robust," ones that "involve a massive recasting of the relation of economy to modes of intimacy, which is to say to obligations and practices of worlding and care, and in such a way that debunks the productivist ideology that collapses the citizen with the worker" (2016: 409).

Yet baseball is an inadequate infrastructure to hang this hope on. This is not, as might seem most obvious, because of the novel's faithful rendering of baseball as a form of popular culture, popular in Stuart Hall's sense, a site of "struggle for and against a culture of the powerful" (1998: 453): even in the early days of the underground league, Aunt Nettie moves to claim baseball as her own, co-opting Gwen to train at Net University and eventually, drafting her and her fellow underground baseball teammates to serve on the Olympics team, so that they might compete in a nationalist face-off with ChinRussia, a battle of surveillance states reminiscent of Cold War-era United States and Soviet Union or China sports match-ups.[3] It is, rather, because baseball is ultimately cast as the occasion through which the novel stages a rival form of "Aunty work" to that performed by Aunt Nettie. The team, in the wake of Eleanor's successful lawsuit that ended the "enfeebling emanations" from the "Surplus Fields" (Jen 2020: 150), names itself "Aunt Nellie's Resisters" (Jen 2020: 214); later in the novel, after Eleanor's arrest and torture by brain net implantation—Eleanor calls this episode, "Aunt Nettie versus Aunt Nellie" (Jen 2020: 256)—Eleanor emerges as a "cult legend" among the baseball players, fans, and general public; they hold signs at the Olympic tryouts

3. On sports and US Cold War anti-communist diplomacy, see Blaschke (2016).

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reading "FUCK AUNT NETTIE, FREE AUNT NELLIE" (Jen 2020: 268–69). Eleanor's death at the hands of Aunt Nettie's agents during the final game in the Olympics series between AutoAmerica and ChinRussia sparks riots among the Surplus, as Grant narrates in the aftermath of her state-sanctioned murder:

> And slowly, then not so slowly, the work began moving forward again. Countrywide, the riots went on and on. Day after day, week after week, people rioted. *Workless, not worthless*, they shouted while we marshalled our evidence and prepared to file our suit. Aunt Nellie vs. AutoAmerica, this was. The Mall Truck case (Jen 2020: 299).

Here the potential for a baseball undercommons (and the unwaged labor of a baseball aunty) to inspire that "recasting" of the relation between work and value is both made visible and also foreclosed, as the novel asserts the necessity of "the work […]moving forward again." The work that the novel and its characters value, that they imagine as the stuff of dignity and valor, is the work of confronting Aunt Nettie through the proper channels—"I don't. Like riots," Eleanor says just before she dies" (Jen 2020: 295)—the work of marshalling data, filing lawsuits, and imagining that the state, capital, and their shared algorithm, if confronted, can be made to police and reform themselves. In this way, the novel co-opts for capital queer Aunty labor—her "dark sousveillance," to borrow Simone Browne's term, her "brokering of nonnormative intimacies" that disorganize and reorganize the commons (Mannur)—as much as the surveillance state it villainizes, elaborating a vision of social change that, as Kathi Weeks argues about some feminisms's "productivist tendencies" and "sometimes explicit, sometimes tacit pro-work suppositions and commitments" (2011: 5), "fails to contest the basic terms of the work society's social contract" (2011: 69). For Weeks, universal basic income, one of the bedrocks of Aunt Nettie's biopolitics, is a radical feminist demand that activists could make to contest the material conditions of the present, one that might permit people to "gain some measure of distance and separation from the wage relation, and that distance might in turn create the possibility of a life no longer so thoroughly and relentlessly dependent upon work for its qualities" (2011: 144). *The Resisters*, in folding UBI into the Aunty work of the surveil-

lance state, forecloses any queer radical feminist imaginary in an attempt to recast American liberal pantsuit feminism, and its investments in reforming capitalism and celebrating the dignity of work, as the most radical of horizons.

The Resisters thus offers up foils for the figure of the "security mom" in the form of the security and anti-security aunt, the latter of whose power to evade and confront the Aunty surveillance state ends up reifying the dignity of work in racial capitalism and arguing for capitalism's reform rather than its abolition. Jeff Vandermeer's 2021 novel *Hummingbird Salamander,* in contrast, offers up a different queer rewriting of the "security mom." In Vandermeer's novel, Jane Smith is a self-described "middle-aged mother" with "centrist politics" and a "suburban life" (2021: 160) who "lived in a generic version of reality" (26) amidst a dying world: world catastrophic events—refugee crises, extreme weather events, life-endangering pollution, a pandemic, the collapse of states, "the decay of things" (327)—haunt the margins of the novel. But by her own account, Jane plays the role of "a reasonable person, a normal person," referring to her shoes, for example, as "decoys, just worn to preserve some ritual about what women should wear" (2021: 9). This sense that her identity as a suburban mom is a self-conscious performance of generic womanhood is heightened by Jane's work as a security analyst in a private firm, where her job is "a kind of scam, but also like detective work—figuring out how companies worked instead of how they said they worked. Found the security gaps. Sold the fear of security gaps. There would always be security gaps" (2021: 24). The fiction of security, she knows, is both a sham and a reliable source of profit and employment: "the truth we never uttered," she reflects at a conference, is "that the Republic could become a husk and our borders a quagmire of death and discomfort […] but this only strengthened our job security" (2021: 70). Such security through surveillance technology is, she comes to realize, dependent upon finding consolation in consumerism and a purely extractive relationship to the planet: before the events of the novel, she confesses, she "loved drones": "I loved how I could order something and it would be there immediately. I would toss the plastic in the recycling bin and never questioned the magic of how I had received yet another gift" (58).

Patricia Stuelke
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The occasion for the novel is the moment when the watcher becomes the watched: Jane receives a mysterious message from Silvina Vilcapampa, the disinherited heir to an international Argentinian conglomerate, "an animal rights activist who fought against wildlife trafficking," was tried (though acquitted) for eco-terrorism, and founded an organization devoted to the "Liberation of the Earth at any cost" (2021: 48). The novel stages Jane's receipt of this message through the literary animation of a film noir voice-over: "Assume I'm dead by the time you read this. Assume you're being told all of this by a flicker, a wisp, a thing you can't quite get out of your head […]" (2021: 3). This cinematic second person interpellates the reader as well as Jane into what Theodore Martin describes as film noir's characteristic staging of "disorientation": "being in too deep, in over your head, immersed in a predicament that is both out of your hands and beyond your grasp" (2017: 59). At the same time, Jane's retrospective narration from the position of a "flicker" of the dead speaking marks the novel's affiliation with what Martin deems contemporary noir's central conceit: "revival" (2017: 83). For Martin, the noir voiceover "from beyond the grave" is a meta-device, "an inscription of the temporal problems that come with bringing a genre back to life" (2017: 83, 87). But Vandermeer's novel appropriates noir's simultaneous facets of "disorientation" and "revival" for different ends. Jane's inexorable transformation into a noir detective, her convoluted quest to uncover Silvina's secrets, unravels her relation to the figure of the "security mom," a disorienting, defamiliarizing process that allows the novel to reimagine security altogether, tying it to a vision of preservation and regeneration of the planet amidst and beyond climate apocalypse.

Silvina's message leads Jane to a storage locker, where she finds a taxidermied hummingbird and another mysterious note that reads "Hummingbird, salamander." As she begins to investigate, Jane realizes that she has been the target of Silvina's surveillance for a year, and that her pursuit of the details of Silvina's life, death, and the meaning of the bird has provoked more surveillance still; her husband shows her a "flattened patch of earth" in the woods beside their house, littered with cigarette butts, evidence that there is "someone watching us" (2021: 102–3). "What would you

learn about me while I wasn't home?," she wonders: "I struggled to visualize what he had been doing. What information was being pushed toward? Why was it important to have eyes on my house in this age of electronic surveillance? Visual verification? Of what? (2021: 107)." The gaze Jane runs over her own house, as she attempts "to see it like an intruder might," reveals again her acute sense of her "generic" life:

> A generic, usual house for an upper-middle-class family. A comfortable swing my daughter had used when she was younger, hanging off a far branch of the oak [...] Ah, Silvina, it was everything and it was nothing. How the swing and the old tire in the yard became reduced to the stilted, broken shapes of skeletal animals as the dark leaked in. How the lights of the house made mockery of the curtains, so silhouettes came clear, like a shadow puppet play. (2021: 107)

The effect of becoming the object of surveillance, for Jane, is to further defamiliarize her domestic life, to make visible the contours of the construct of her familial role, a construct she eventually abandons in pursuit of Silvina's mystery.

Jane's work of defamiliarization is, consistently, the novel's too. In scenes like this one, and in its commitment to Jane's detective work as an engine of the plot (indeed, in its commitment to having a plot), the novel pushes back against what Brandon Taylor identifies as the "recent spate of novels about white women's existential malaise in the face of social ills," that seem to suggest that "the pinnacle of moral rigor in the novel form is an overwhelmed white woman in a major urban center sighing and having a thought about the warming planet or the existence of refugees" ("Sally Rooney" 2021). As Taylor describes, such novels invest in an "ethic [...]of reproduction" in service of the idea "that it is morally and aesthetically sufficient to merely recreate the alienating torpor of having one's life organized ruthlessly and brutally by capitalism" ("bobos" 2021). These novels function by constantly observing the "inert tableaux of contemporary life": "A character sits at a desk doing some mundane, specific task. Then the character is in a kitchen doing some other mundane, specific task. They turn their heads this way and that and catch others engaged in mundane, specific tasks that alert the reader to the mores of the moment" ("bobos" 2021). Jane's acts of domestic self-surveillance—her attempts

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to understand what information can be gleaned from observing members of her "generic" family "engaged in mundane specific tasks"—call up and reject what Taylor names "this idea that the most harrowing thing one can do is simply recreate the effect of the brutal force shaping one's life" ("bobos"). Jane is not content to be an "overwhelmed" observer of her own complicity; she chooses, instead, "to think like a detective, to be a detective. Trusted my first thought inhabiting that: everything I'm seeing has been staged" (Vandermeer 2021: 112).

In her obsessive hunt for Silvina's final vision for saving the dying world, Jane peels back layers of institutional and individual malfeasance, including the wild-life trafficking practices of Silvinia's father's multinational corporation and Silvina's own complicity therein: she herself "steal[s] wildlife contraband and resell[s] it to fund her own secret project" (230) after her family disinherits her, actions that lead to Jane's brother's death. Her quest places Jane in the path of violent gun-wielding goons run by Silvina's father; she goes on the run, abandoning her family, suffused still by her desire to find the truth so that she might "spread Silvina's gospel, to overturn the comfort of the everyday with the knowledge of what would come tomorrow" (255). In this single-minded pursuit of Silvina's mystery, in her decision to choose the role of detective over the role of "security mom" and the role of liberal-left overwhelmed white woman paralyzed by her own complicity, Jane emerges as a different kind of generic figure, a variation on what Lee Edelman names the "sinthhomosexual," the queer figure who performs "the act of repudiating the social, of stepping […]beyond compulsory compassion, beyond the future and the snare of images keeping us always in its thrall" (2004: 101). Jane is not a fully realized version of the figure Edelman theorizes: she cannot completely reject the premise of reproductive futurism, her attachment to the idea that solving the mystery might save the world "for her daughter," though she sometimes identifies this supposition as a pretense: "Somehow, in the midst of this, I sorted myself out. Lied to myself that I had to find a purpose for my daughter, for whatever in Silvina had been good" (Vandermeer 2021: 329). But Jane's arc in the novel is nonetheless an experiment in imagining a paranoid form of "repudiating the social"—particularly

the "social" for white women as contemporary fiction and culture have come to imagine it, in which they are either reproductive figures of public and private surveillance and security or paralyzed complicit figures—as an alternate ethical response to a dying world of climate collapse, failing states, and enduring capital accumulation. In the end, Jane finds Silvina's life work—it is not, as some of her pursuers imagined, a biological weapon designed to blow up capitalist infrastructure. Rather, it is "an ecosystem," "an ark," an "artificially-created" habitat that "would be there if the world destroyed itself, to help," offering the possibility for renewal (2021: 347). It is, Jane imagines, "a fail-safe" (2021: 347). At the end of the novel, she imagines herself—as the retrospective narrator of the novel, as the protector and executor of Silvina's final vision for the earth's intertwined endurance and revival—as a fail-safe as well; she becomes a different kind of security figure, untethered from motherhood, nation, and capital in favor of the faint possibility of a world transformed.

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