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RELATIONAL IDENTITY: THEORIZATION AND STORYTELLING IN RACHEL CUSK’S *OUTLINE*

by

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Preface

As a child, I was drawn to people with strong opinions. They appeared to me silhouetted in vibrancy, brought forcefully into focus by their words. I studied other girls in my grade, noting the steadfast and assured cadence that characterized their expression, and veiled my fascination as best I could. This great deference stemmed from my assumption that maybe they knew something I didn’t. I saw how they navigated and molded our tiny social world, selecting something to bring out of relative obscurity and abandoning it once the luster had worn off. The world was shaped by their persons, their persons shaped through opinion.

It seemed to me that opinion was a matter of choice, that it logically followed from thought, rumination, consideration. It also seemed instinctively true that something was lost in the moment of expression, the consideration decidedly over, relegated to the ghost footprints of a newly constituted self. There was a power exerted through choice, a justification of existence born through the moment of conscious decision.

Choice presumes knowledge, or so I thought, and I wondered how everyone around me seemed to know what they liked, what they thought, who they were. I imagined maybe there was a vacancy where my decision-making apparatus was meant to be. At some point, I began to perform opinion. Being was predicated on this knowing: of the self, of tastes, of stances clearcut and constitutive. So I chose, I opined, declared gauchely that I hated bananas, and felt something solidify. What I shied away from sharing was that when bananas were sliced, especially by my grandmother’s thumb against her old knife, I found them enjoyable. I ritualized opinion and displaced the murky waters of nuance to some uninvoked and unconsidered place. I wanted to know myself, and more than that I wanted to be knowable. This was my earliest experience of understanding myself as a contingent, socially produced being.
In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler articulates the subject as constructed through “socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (23). Butler illustrates how the subject comes into being through the social institutions and juridical power that “inevitably produces what it claims merely to represent”. The text problematizes representation: seeking universal language to represent experience universalizes that experience and reproduces identity through the normative and intelligible structure of language, which is constrained by the discourse that creates it. “The domains of political and linguistic “representation” set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as subject.”(2). These limitations ultimately render certain identities as non-beings, or non-subjects–unrepresented by a system of power that can not situate them within the discursive frameworks of language and identity. On page 22, Butler asks “what can be meant by ‘identity’ then”.

I wonder too.

Does writing about identity presuppose that it is legitimate? Does selfhood, as personal identity, as an object of cultural obsession, have room to exist when the political consequences of the fiction of subjectivity are so grave? Is ego an obstacle to understanding the social constructions of subjectivity? Or is it only when we presume that the subject is universal that we fail to move on to a generative point, trapped by our own inescapable need to know? To find an answer? These structures, which allege to represent “truths”, trap us in a society convinced of its own merit by the prevailing narrative of a social lineage that treats representation as an extension of natural values and inevitable organizations. Even knowing this, is it really possible to escape
the desire/need to know ourselves? It’s the question that frames my entire existence. Does the desperation to know suggest that there is something true or real to know, something to uncover?

My professor once described Rousseau as trapped in the discourse. His desire to understand the social mechanisms of inequality is limited by his own subjectivity—he is produced and informed by the very discourse he hopes to transcend through theory. His obsession with uncovering the true nature of man through pre-discursive fantasy is the result of the same social ideology he criticizes. He fails to realize that in his attempt to eclipse the discourse of his contemporaries, he secures his place in that very discourse. Hearing my professor’s diagnosis of Rousseau, I felt the familiar lurch of identification in my stomach. The phrase “trapped in discourse” lined the walls of my mind. Here was someone who, despite great efforts to free himself from the ills of the social world, was inescapably bound to its conditions by his need to understand it, to understand himself. There is something tender about the Discourse on Inequality: Rousseau the person spills out from the margins of the pages filled by Rousseau the theorist. He is hopelessly contradictory, vexingly hypocritical, woefully limited, trapped.

In my sophomore year of college, I developed the habit of thinking about Claremont as a snow globe. I would sit in the grass, dusk falling around me, and stretch my fingers towards the sky, only to find that the glass dome resided somewhere just out of reach of my fingertips. I’d contemplate a dead spot on the otherwise perfect lawn, a scar on the beautiful illusion, and imagine that it might all come apart at the seams, that it might reveal itself to me. An answer.
In *The Order of Things*, Foucault is concerned with the human sciences and how its rise in relevance reveals a shift in the discursive values that define and produce knowledge in modernity. He establishes man as contingent through his discussion of finitude: man comes into being through various disciplines (science, culture, convention, etc.), and argues that man is a recent invention that is nearing its end. He insists that no self can possibly exist without the context which creates its possibility. I find myself echoing Butler’s question, what, then, can be meant by “identity”? In class discussing the text, my mind wanders. I imagine all the things I could do to disrupt the quiet order. I want out and that means isolation. I want to scream on the table, to gently brush my hair against my classmates’ faces, to sing loudly and brokenly. I want to be wise, to bring light into the cavern of my body, to leave my thoughts out to dry, hanging on the line three stories up. I want to cease to want. I try to channel all this wanting somewhere productive but it spurts out of me and onto the floor, my clothes. I find myself apologizing for breathing, that’s what wanting to know feels like on a day like this.

On the day of my high school graduation, my favorite teacher sent me an email, closed with a quote from Rilke she hoped might help me: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” I could not foresee at that moment how much the quote would resonate, even now, four years later. Nor did I understand how she was able to see right through me, all of my purported interest in philosophy merely a guise for my own self-interested search for meaning. Trying to love the questions, for me, manifested in the study of theory. Reading theory for the
first time recontextualized my surroundings, like the curious feeling you get deboarding a plane in a rainstorm, convinced that you possess some hidden chestnut of wisdom, some sturdy secret: “don’t worry, it’s blue up there”. I felt that I had discovered troves of insight, years of scholarship dedicated to trying to understand the human condition, to living in the questions themselves. Rachel Cusk perfectly describes this feeling in an interview for The White Review: “Growing up I was internally chaotic and here was this absolutely rigid outside world that I couldn’t translate myself into, and fell foul of, and was judged by, and disapproved of in. The first real liberation came with reading Freud and becoming interested in psychoanalytical writing. That was a whole new way of understanding living.” My understanding of living, which had always been expressed in the form of questioning, was now filtered through the texts I was reading, in the new vocabulary which allowed me to speak about ideas I once thought were ineffable.

Rousseau writes about the inevitable dissolution of the state as precipitated by an individual hunger for power, he urges the reader to not pursue impossible goals… but what then is the sort of social dreaming he does? The Discourse on Inequality is contradictory, theorizing an end to inequality while ultimately positioning the demise of such a society as an inevitability. He says, in so many words, that to be free of inequality, we must rise above our nature, but nature is so central as to be inescapable. It feels hopeless, bleak. His obsession with nature is so obviously not just a desire to understand inequality, but rather an inescapable desire to understand the role of the individual or the self in society. He is, in my view, completely wrong about nature. We are not victims of our nature but of our society (if we are victims at all). This is something Foucault understands. He embodies the self-awareness that Rousseau lacks, which makes him much harder to critique. What is compelling about Rousseau is that he seems to
recognize the desire for self-understanding as a force that mobilizes people into social theorization. Foucault treats this instinct as irrelevant and possibly even small-minded. The impulse to understand the individual is one produced by the conditions of modernity, and there seems to be no way out of it; for in his view, to understand yourself, you must first grasp the entire history of discourse. Foucault looms so large and impenetrable. My advisor tells me I do not have to take his word as truth if I don’t feel so inclined, but what if I do? What then can be meant by identity? I can’t help but take everything personally.

“To all those who still wish to talk about man, about his reign or his liberation, to all those who still ask themselves questions about what man is in his essence, to all those who wish to take him as their starting-point in their attempts to reach the truth, to all those who, on the other hand, refer all knowledge back to the truths of man himself, to all those who refuse to formalize without anthropologizing, who refuse to mythologize without demystifying, who refuse to think without immediately thinking that it is man who is thinking, to all these warped and twisted forms of reflection we can answer only with a philosophical laugh – which means, to a certain extent, a silent one.” (373). Foucault writes this at the end of *The Order of Things*. Reading it, I imagine him looming over the pit of despair he has left me in, laughing, noiselessly. I can’t seem to understand why any of this matters if it isn’t personal. Are these theorists not searching for the same thing I am? Searching to shed the prescribed conditions of a discourse that fails them? The questions are like locked rooms. I can’t find it in myself to love them right now.

In a moment when the questions began to feel unbearable, when every book appeared to be written in a foreign tongue, I read *Outline* for the first time. I was deeply moved by the treatment of life I saw in the pages. The text holds a reverence for the ordinary, for significance
found spontaneously and ambiguously, and most importantly, for vitality expressed through disillusionment. Many readers and critics regard Outline’s protagonist Faye as bleak, utterly jaded in her worldview, someone who has given up. I would strongly disagree. She finds, in futility, some profoundly human magic. The stories that fill the book come to Faye across a chasm of belief. She sees, in other people’s lives, the very mode of being she has broken with. But it is through the stories of others that she accesses something worthwhile in living, in moments of connection both intimate and random. That year, in writing my final paper on the novel (a paper that was the first iteration of this thesis), I found myself continually getting sucked back into the words and images of the characters. I would skim quickly for a quote, only to realize that I had reread the entire chapter. Since reading Outline, no other text has provided me with a framework for existence that reconciles the limitations of the discursively produced subject and the possibilities and wonders abundant in human life. Outline positions existential uncertainty as a lens through which to see the world and treats storytelling as something urgent, a testament to meaning and experience.

Where Foucault tells me: “you who have been so intent, for so many pages, on answering a question in which you felt yourself personally concerned and who are going to sign this text with your name - in every sentence their reigns the nameless law, the blank indifference: 'What matter who is speaking; someone has said: what matter who is speaking.’” (Politics and the Study of Discourse, 72).

Cusk says: “I'm not interested in the group, only in the individual. My message enters the conflicted person reading it who is half self, half society but does not know where one begins and the other ends.” (Cusk via Kellaway).
Relational Identity: Theorization and Storytelling in Rachel Cusk's *Outline*

Rachel Cusk’s *Outline*, the first installment in a trilogy by the same name, is constructed through a loosely sustained narrative and a series of vignettes. The plot follows Faye, a recently divorced author teaching a writing course in Athens for a week. Through her various interactions (in the classroom, with other instructors, with a stranger she meets on the plane, etc.) the reader is introduced to several characters who offer up profound and personal stories of their lives. Each new story represents a distinct, nuanced position on experience and self, contributing to the gradual formation of the novel's perspective and theoretical stance. From these accounts, Cusk’s thesis is extracted, though her position does not fully take shape until the novel is over, and even then, it abounds with ambiguities and uncertainties. Faye’s opinions and reactions are markedly absent throughout the novel, yet all of the novel’s storytelling is delivered through her firsthand interactions. She serves as the human vessel through which stories are delivered to the reader. At times, her perspective feels nearly completely removed, but it invariably comes back into focus as the stories invoke the relationality of identity, slowly elucidating both the storyteller’s and the narrator’s reflections on self. Faye’s identity is a part of how the reader knows and understands the other characters of the novel. Through the duality of Faye’s aloof but maintained point of view and the quick-moving chain of stories and characters, *Outline* explores the interrelated nature of subjectivity and the way that story molds identity and knowability.

*Outline* follows a sequence of introspective interactions, wherein the reader gleans brief windows of insight into the characters and their perspectives through the stories they recount to the narrator. These stories evoke selfhood in a broader reflection on subjectivity. The characters speak about themselves, and in doing so, demonstrate how the prescribed notions of the subject are internalized to the point that they are inseparable from the character’s understanding of self.
and existence. This relationship is implicit, making it difficult to pinpoint; the testimonials act as a sort of kaleidoscope, they are detailed, but also distorted by the character's reliance on social metrics to illuminate and comprehend their experiences. *Outline* throws the reader into the narrator’s first-person perspective, offering minimal introduction to her life or position. Faye first appears as a passive agent in the world, participating cynically in the social exchanges that form the book. She engages, though dispassionately, conducting herself with ambivalence towards others while still seeming to attract an array of deeply personal confessions from those around her. The novel does not deny the subtleties of implicit characterization that arise indirectly from organization, that is, what Cusk has chosen to include and how she introduces certain ideas. However, at its core, it revolves around the notion that moving through the world with a limited perspective means that a great deal of what we understand about others comes directly from what they tell us about themselves, and consequently, is filtered through their own sense of self. This structure formally mirrors what Cusk sees as a way of living; it exposes the reader to encounters that may feel unfamiliar in the literary context, but that resonate with an experience of knowing that is simultaneously restricted and expressed through interpersonal interaction: “What you have is people, strangers in the street, and the only way you can know them is by what they say. I became attuned to these encounters because I had no frame or context any more. I could hear a purity of narrative in the way people described their lives. The intense experience of hearing this became the framework of the novel.” (Cusk via Kellaway). Here, Cusk ascribes her interest in the stories of others as arising from her departure from stable selfhood, a way of listening made possible by distance. This perspective is very clearly reflected in Faye’s character, her disillusionment comes from breaking with established forms of living. In an interview with Brooker Warner, Cusk describes Faye’s predicament: “What has happened to this person is that she doesn’t believe in the story of life anymore, she doesn’t believe in the narrative. She sees that
what she thought was reality was in fact a belief state.” In the novel, Faye experiences moments of acute self-awareness regarding her distance from narrative structure. In these moments, she is her most reflective, neither self-satisfied nor convinced she has erred. Her reflections inhabit a space of ambiguity, characterizing her as someone who is still grappling to understand how to navigate the world after abandoning the recognized forms of living that once gave her life meaning: “When I looked at the family on the boat, I saw a vision of what I no longer had: I saw something, in other words, that wasn’t there. Those people were living in their moment, and though I could see it I could no more return to that moment than I could walk across the water that separated us. And of those two ways of living–living in the moment and living outside of it–which was more real?” (Outline, 75).

As distant as Faye initially appears, as the novel’s exploration of identity progresses, it becomes clear that the reader’s vision is again limited on another level: the narrator’s subjectivity. Despite Faye’s notable reticence to react personally to the stories people tell her, her presence becomes gradually more pronounced as the novel unfolds, and her characterizations of those she speaks to become more apparent. Her ambivalence is challenged by the stories of people around her, and her own identity is implicated in their struggles to make sense of existence. Everything we learn about the various characters is colored by several layers of subjectivity: our own, the narrator’s, and then that of the actual character as they speak about themselves. In this sense, the reader’s experience is bound to Faye’s; there is no characterization outside of her, no other narrative voice or character’s perspective followed. Some of the characters are recurring (like the students in her one-week writing course and the neighbor she meets on her flight to Athens). Their stories go more in-depth into their own lives, even introducing new characters and layers of subjectivity within their stories. Nearly every characterization happens on a level of external communication, invoking a level of
consciousness of what a character chooses to share with an obvious stake in what it reveals about them. The stories they see as interesting or revealing may not be the same stories that an external perspective would choose to represent them. This is precisely the point: the images that characters resonate with appear arbitrary from the outside, yet they are rooted in a specificity of experience, and surface through the personal associations that imbue them with significance. The power of representation is designated to the characters, although of course, Cusk is behind the scenes building and structuring these narratives. In the world of the novel, however, this “power” demonstrates the central idea that this mode of self-presentation is the self.

This theme is most directly explored in chapter six, which follows Faye to her first day of instruction in the week-long writing course—a setting ripe for interrogating and contemplating stories and how they take form. The entire hour-long class (and the entire 26-page chapter) revolves around the question “What did you notice on your way here today?” The stories shared by the students in response to Faye’s prompt span from superficial observations to candid confessions, drawing a connection first between observation and story, and then between story and self. One student, Penelope, shares a story that epitomizes the novel's focus on uncovering meaning in unexpected places and the relationality of self-understanding. The events of Penelope’s story are relayed to her by her sister, who heard them from a friend, who was told the story by the person to whom it originally happened. There are three degrees of removal between the character speaking and the events she speaks about, and yet she perceives the anecdote as bearing relevance to her own life. The story in question involves a skylight crashing down during a dinner party in a rainstorm. A small crack in the glass weakens the structural integrity of the entire window, an effect which turns the skylight from an object of Penelope’s jealousy into “an instrument of evil.”(Outline, 157). The story reflects her desires back to her—both her material envy of the social class her sister inhabits and the interesting anecdotes it generates, and a more
personal desire to escape the responsibilities that govern her life. The story intimately mixes both the “truth” of her experience and the conditions of her social role. This anecdote, and the reflections it inspires, prompts the reader to consider where story comes from. At first glance, the events that transpire have little to do with Penelope, yet it is the distinctive significance attributed to them that shapes the narrative for the reader. In this sense, the story comprises external events intertwined with emotional reflections that derive from her individual circumstances and experience. It becomes a story, in this context, because of the narrative significance she sees in the image of the shattered glass: “…the symbolism of this arrangement of facts has a certain significance for me. I would like to see the world more innocently again, more impersonally, but I have no idea how to achieve this, other than by going somewhere completely unknown where I have no identity and no associations” (Outline, 157). Penelope sees, in the symbolism of the shattered glass, the weight of her own experience, her fear that the boundaries between herself and the outside world are crumbling until “she [is] no longer certain what had happened to her and what had happened to other people she knew, or sometimes even what was or was not real.” (Outline, 154). This third-hand story reveals to Penelope her longing for meaning, to understand herself outside of the normative structures that decide her life. She attributes her tendency to see reflections of herself in the stories of others to a loss of innocence, born from years of forging her own existence against the backdrop of other people and their experiences. She views this habit as a limitation, yet this experience precisely represents that which Cusk pays testament to in Outline: the relationality of identity understood through the refraction of lived experience against the social interface.

Chapter six features the novel’s most overt discussion of what a story is. This unfolds in a debate between two students, Georgeou and Clio. Georgeou serves as a personification of a potential opposing viewpoint to that presented in Outline, one which Cusk appears to anticipate
in her writing. He rejects the basis of story as subjective, and sees the “tendency to fictionalise our own experiences [as] positively dangerous, because it convinced us that human life had some kind of design and that we were more significant than we actually were.” (Outline, 137). Georgeou’s perspective embodies an extreme position within the novel’s exploration of the interplay between story and identity, which are at the same time socially constructed and understood through personal associations. He conceptualizes story as materializing only from its external sequence of events, and heeds no importance to the emotional reflections that imbue a story with certain narrative significance, such as in Penelope’s story. In response to his claim, another student Clio, begins to tell the story of what she noticed on her way to class. She recounts how, in hearing the sound of classical music spilling out onto the street as she walked past, she was struck by a visceral sense of loss. The music bears particular significance for her as she has recently abandoned her lifelong dreams of becoming a professional musician. The experience of hearing something that once belonged so intimately to her, now in the possession of another musician, evokes her conflict over that decision. She insists that this story is specific to her: “Certainly another person passing that window and hearing the D minor fugue, would have felt something completely different. In itself the music coming out of the window meant nothing at all… even a person observing those events from across the road could not have guessed, simply by seeing and hearing, what the story really was.” (Outline, 138). Clio’s perspective represents the opposite end of the spectrum from Georgeou’s. She sees stories as deriving from subjective experience and personal association, and attributes the “real” story to her reaction, not the events. In the dialogue of the chapter, neither perspective wins out. Ultimately it is up to the reader to decide which perspective they align with. In this way, the reader is implicated in the ongoing exchange of ideas. Perhaps this debate suggests that story is not finite, that it manifests in a variety of ways and is composed of the external and the internal
world. After all, the chapter centers on observation and the idea that through observation, a narrative or story can be found. The reader is brought into the ideological exploration as they are led to consider what story subjectively means to them and what they observe in the stories of others.

The meta, social interrogations of story and identity found throughout the novel characterize Cusk’s formal approach as distinctive from her contemporaries. In an article written for “Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction”, Ella Ophir puts Cusk in conversation with modernist authors, characterizing the Outline trilogy as a “neomodernist” project. Cusk takes on the modernist tradition of “the social novel”, a literary undertaking in which theoretical and narrative considerations are investigated through social interaction and the questions that arise from it. There is an emphasis on the relationality between private self and public identity, and most centrally, the question of knowability (is it possible to know and be known by other people?) as it relates to identity formation. Like many modernist writers before her, Cusk breaks with typical plot structure to explore identity and relationships through intense but acontextual vignettes with minimal continuity between them. The innovation Cusk brings to the modernist practice is in her treatment of character. Cusk radically disposes of the criteria that normally situate characters within a novel: “I’m not interested in character because I don’t think character exists anymore.” (Cusk via Schwarts). The convention of character is broken in the form of the novel, little focus is given to the narrative arcs or composite identities of the characters. Instead, characterization in Outline is confined to the point of interaction. This takes the impetus of the social novel to an even more extreme place as the text’s discussion of interiority vs presentation is restricted to a purely social realm. Cusk formally rejects the separation between private and public self, and in doing so, grounds her novel in the very idea that identity is contingent and socially constituted: “The trilogy elucidates the conditions and limitations, as well as the
enduring appeal and unexhausted possibilities, of the social novel. It renews that tradition by regrounding storytelling in its native habitat of social life and resituating the figure of the writer as observer, listener, and conveyor of tales. Fundamentally, the trilogy affirms the possibility of connection through the exchange of stories and locates itself in that field of possibility by approaching narrative, including the novel, not as mimesis but as, always, a relational, situated act.” (Ophir).

The title of the novel itself is perhaps an allusion to the modernist writers who inspire and inform Cusk’s inquiry. In Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse (a novel Cusk has publicly claimed as one of her favorites), the artist Lily Briscoe muses: “This was one way of knowing people: to know the outline, not the detail.” (195). Cusk takes the impressionistic ethos of this sentiment and complicates it, deconstructing the “outline” in favor of the “detail”. In To the Lighthouse, this idea of knowing the outline follows from the novel’s concern with the disparity between the public representation of its characters and their interiority. In this application of the dichotomy, the outline is the social self which can only be understood impressionistically, whereas the detail seems to constitute the “true self” that resides within. Detail is regarded as revealing, yet ultimately inaccessible, as demonstrated by Lily’s imagination of the depths contained within Mrs. Ramsay: “...she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public.” (To the Lighthouse, 51). In contrast with Outline, To the Lighthouse contains little external communication and an abundance of internal reflection. The exploration of identity in the text relies on an omniscient authority that can reach directly into the minds and hearts of its characters, and therefore can only exist in the context of fiction. The author’s power gives the reader insights that the characters themselves do not have
about each other; in this way, Woolf asks whether or not it is possible to know another person unless we have the power to see directly into their mind; the exploration begins at the level of character (how does a reader get to know a character?) and extends to life: can one person know another? Outline—concerned with the same questions of knowability and the forces that constitute selfhood—completely inverts this structure. Rather than organizing her inquiry on the principle that story follows from character, Cusk asserts that story creates character. The narrative voice of the book holds no more power than any other character, and people in the text are represented by their own words. Stories fill the pages and bring the world to life. The explicit markers that usually define characters are disregarded. Their reactions and thoughts, which might serve to indirectly characterize, are not on the page either; this steeps every characterization in the context of self-performance and representation. In effect, all we get is detail, and these details are filtered through the social subject and thus imbued with uncertainties. Cusk refrains from direct intervention in her characters' opinions, never explicitly rewarding one perspective with more credibility than another. At times, characters in the space of the novel express despairing views on the possibility of being known, statements that seem to echo the sentiments portrayed in To the Lighthouse: “I was suddenly filled with the most extraordinary sense of existence as a secret pain, an inner torment it was impossible to share with others.” insists Penelope, the student, on page 218. Ultimately, the novel does validate certain stances, not through direct intervention, but through the intensity of attention paid to the character’s self-expression. If, as Penelope puts it, it is truly impossible to share, then the entire project is rendered meaningless. However, allowing characters the space to express their disillusionment is one way in which the formal structure of the book justifies its claims and enables Cusk to maintain ambiguity and variety in the perspectives and experiences. As the narrator and arbiter of the reader's experience, Faye continually avoids making a personal connection with even the details of characters' stories that
appear relevant to her life. She is a mother of two, recently divorced, a writer, and a teacher. These aspects of her identity, which might typically be considered necessary to knowing her, are contemplated from a distance. The reader does not know if Faye enjoys teaching, why she writes, what she writes, what her process is, or hardly anything about her marriage or divorce. The few interactions with her children (over the phone) are mundane and not very illuminating, they serve to show that although Faye feels like she has abandoned the stability of her former life through the dissolution of her marriage, the responsibilities of her “role” still demand something from her. These scenes are brief and do not illustrate much about her relationship with her children or her identity as a parent. There is no stable authority to turn to, characters rely on narrativization selectively, when it benefits them to make sense of their own identity or to convince Faye of the identity they want her to see. As readers, we see the characters being open, supposedly transparent, and vulnerable about their experiences, but these moments are at best snapshots into an entirely unencompassable, non-essential subjective experience. The reader only knows the character in the space of their story, in the manner they choose to represent themselves.

Characters come and go with the momentum of their stories, and identity and knowability are realized through the expression of selfhood, not merely through the discursive world that informs their ideas of subjectivity: “...the speakers of the trilogy, having said their piece, pass back into their lives beyond Faye, free to revise or recast their accounts of themselves for other occasions, audiences, and purposes. As Faye inhabits no interiors, she decides no outcomes. It is about as far as a novelist can step outside the world of her conjuring.” (Ophir).

By diminishing the importance of character, relinquishing narrative/authorial power, and centering confessional storytelling, Outline challenges the idea of the self as a destination, and instead suggests that we can only try to know people through the details they share with us. In Outline, the outline is employed as the composite self, the narrative arc that instills a character
with a sense of identity and purpose, whereas the “detail” in this framework seems to denote the material (stories, images, memories) that provides the contours of its shape. Perhaps both Outline and To the Lighthouse would agree that detail is the more accurate mechanism of identity, however, Outline asserts that the self is constituted by the sharing of those details. Cusk problematizes the idea of the “true self”, instead characterizing identity as transient and contingent: “I wasn’t sure it was possible, in marriage, to know what you actually were, or indeed to separate what you were from what you had become through the other person. I thought the whole idea of the ‘real’ self might be illusory: you might feel, in other words, as though there were some separate, autonomous self within you, but perhaps that self didn’t actually exist.” (Outline, 105). This quote seems to respond directly to To the Lighthouse in an attempt to further ground Cusk’s argument that we know people—albeit limitedly—through detail. In her exploration of interiority, Woolf does not claim that selfhood is not socially influenced and produced, but rather that it is impossible to express the self without limiting it to a representation contingent upon the parameters of language and understanding. To the Lighthouse’s Mrs. Ramsay is "the wedge-shaped core of darkness" (the image she uses to represent herself on page 51), and the beautiful maternal figure that others know her as. In To the Lighthouse, the characters are constituted both by their inaccessible inner world and by “enacting social roles that pre-exist” (Cusk via Wade). Outline adopts the limitations of self-representation as its principal mode of storytelling and theorization, and pushes its reader to consider that this form of self-presentation, rather than impeding identity formation, makes it.

Cusk’s reticence to delve into the interior of her characters stems from a formal and moral problem she sees with the novel in that it presumes that you can inhabit another person (Shakespeare and Company). Cusk critiques this mode of fictional embodiment, suggesting that the fabrication of characters is “embarrassing” and inauthentic (Cusk via Kellaway). The
pretense of fiction, in her view, not only imposes artificial constraints on storytelling but also reproduces a normative understanding of the social world in its reliance on certain conventions and expectations. She traces the identity of the contemporary novel back to the Victorian novel, contending that the disruptive experimentation of modernism failed to embed itself in literature as it did in visual art. She suggests that the discipline appears to have collectively forgotten the subversion of certain literary limitations undertaken by modernist writers like Woolf or Lawrence (another prominent influence for Cusk and the only extratextual author referenced in Outline) (Cusk via Warner). The boundaries of fiction, as well as the prescriptive relationship between reader and author that accompanies the genre, failed to yield the same possibilities for storytelling that she was interested in: “the contemporary novel had moved away from reality…it could not even begin to represent the kinds of truths that I was interested in exploring and formulating” (Cusk via Warner). Cusk’s desire to create something that “shared the terrain of life” (Heti) led her to engage in more explicitly autobiographical writing. She published a series of memoirs about early motherhood (A Life’s Work) and her divorce from the father of her children (Aftermath). These books were met with a barrage of criticism and were characterized as “unflinchingly honest” and “self-obsessed” (Beattie; Cusk). Cusk discusses the immense criticism she received in an article for The Guardian titled “I was only being honest”, in which she defends her book A Life’s Work. She discusses how her autobiographical writing gave readers license to critique not only the content and form of her work, but also the character and decisions of the author. She was surprised to find that the response to her books manifested in very personal and direct attacks; readers began to conflate her work with her person, began to think that they knew her. She was called a neglectful and selfish mother, accused of regretting her children, for caring more about her artform than the comfort of their experience. Cusk’s approach in her memoirs aimed to use the individual as a “template” to explore feminist discourse and the
disparity between embodied experience and social identity. Where critics regarded these books as narcissistic enterprises, she conceived of them as repurposing the emotional reality of her life as a framework for broadly considered discourse: “I mean that there is, for me, a defensible principle of autobiography where female experience is concerned; defensible in the sense that I personally would defend my decision to write about my own life, against the accusation that it is merely so much self-obsession or is the product of a self-obsessed culture. If there is a disjuncture between how women live and how they actually feel – which to me there is, in motherhood and marriage – I will feel entitled to attempt to articulate it. And given that this disjuncture is usually deeply personal, and relates to a personalised problem with a generalised image, autobiography becomes the best possible form for this articulation to take.” (Cusk via Viner). In addition to criticism, Cusk received letters from women who had read and connected with the work, but this seemed only to reinforce her understanding that there was a disconnect between the “truth” of life and the prescriptive obligations of womanhood and identity at large. Both the novel and the memoir were limited by the discourse that surrounded and produced them. Ella Ophir pinpoints this frustration as a formal limitation of autobiography as well as a social one: “The ‘I’ that speaks in memoir is subject to the same constraints as the invented character; it undergoes simplification and hypostatization, while at the same time acquiring, by its salient individuation, an exemplary status and therefore a normative force.” For Cusk, the forage into autobiography resulted in a “creative death” (Kellaway).

In the aftermath of this creative death, Outline emerges as a formal experiment that reconciles the limitations of fiction and the “malfunction” of Cusk’s memoirs in a methodology that enables her to write truthfully without exposing her personal life to the same level of public scrutiny. This form emerges from a deeply intimate struggle, one in which Cusk’s identity as a writer and person is implicated. What she achieves is a sort of distance and control alongside an
expression that grounds storytelling in life and experience. This blending of life and narrative is what many critics call autofiction, and *the Outline Trilogy* is often regarded as an exemplar within this increasingly popular genre. Cusk herself does not claim the genre, although many of the principles that inform her process are certainly aligned with autofictional and autotheoretical practice. In an article entitled “Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory” Arianne Zwartjes defines autotheory as: “work that engages in thinking about the self, the body, and the particularities and peculiarities of one’s lived experiences, as processed through or juxtaposed against theory—or as the basis for theoretical thinking. It strips the pretension of neutrality, of objectivity, away from the theorizing voice.” Autofiction relies on similar principles, although it permits more distance between author and character. It does not necessitate that the author use autobiographical experience for a generative theoretical intervention in the same way that autotheory does. Although these genres are only recently beginning to garner credibility within the academy, the tradition can be traced back to authors like Audre Lorde, Bell Hooks, even Virginia Woolf. Auto-writing conclusively responds to the presumption in scholarship that theorization must be objective and also universally applicable. This is what Zwartjes means when she says autotheory rejects neutrality—the work is rooted in the subjective experience of the author, thereby achieving a depth of authenticity and personal resonance beyond the reach of traditional theorization. This practice centers identity in theorization rather than suppressing individual biases, and radically resituates theory in “the real world”.

Teresa Carmody’s concept of “theory with stakes” resonates here. In her article “On Autotheory and Autofiction: Staking Genre”, Carmody considers art not only as a medium for expressing theory but the form as theorization itself. She argues that the stakes of theorizing from experience invoke theory in a way that is “true to life” and can exist outside of the realm of the academic institution. In the genres of autotheory and autofiction, personal experience informs
theorization, and theorization gives form to personal experience. By centering the individual, this formal approach confronts head-on the assumption that life and theory exist in different realms and shows that acknowledging the subjective/discursively produced identity of the writer yields an analysis that is often more impactful for readers. Theory with stakes, as Carmody discusses it, shows that theory can not be relegated to some faraway space free from human experience and bias, and that those things, rather than limiting the scope of theory, find a way to express theoretical ideas more honestly. Whether or not Cusk manages to write with stakes is a point of contention. Critics, Carmody included, argue that Outline fails to explicitly recognize the political conditions that inform the lives of its characters, and instead merely hints at political disillusionment happening somewhere off the page. Carmody (citing Tope Folarin) says that this failure to acknowledge the political realities of race, class, gender, etc. reinstates a normative world through the guise of a novel that claims to reimagine. In the context of a literary world that congratulates white authors of autofiction as subversive, while failing to recognize the tradition in which the practice was formed (by black feminist writers), this criticism is warranted. However, the act of questioning the self is inherently political. Rather than taking an apolitical standpoint, Cusk explores identity as both a social, political construct and as personal experience. Through her narrative lens, she presents the inherent political nature of storytelling, illustrating how it arises from the tension between the social interface and the emotional reality. Her text does not theorize on the basis of one specific identity, instead, it positions sociality as the context through which stories happens. Many of the stories are concern a character’s reflection on certain social structures: marriage, career, class, motherhood, but these stories are interested in the character’s experience of their own narrative, whether they find it legitimate and convincing, or whether they will join the narrator in her disillusionment. By foregrounding the act of storytelling, she highlights the inherently political nature of narrative representation and of
identity itself. This criticism from Carmody, however, seems to pinpoint the reason that Outline might not actually be a true work of autofiction, and perhaps why Cusk herself doesn’t identify with the descriptor.

The main differentiating aspect between Outline and autofiction/autotheory is that Cusk does not construct her analysis from her own identity. Her identity is, of course, present, but her insistence to write something that feels real manifests through the absence of the narrator character: “I suppose Outline was true to myself: I don’t want to exist as an exterior person in the world.” (Cusk via Heti). Cusk's initial aim in her autobiographical writings, to use her experiences as a proxy for engaging in discursive criticism, was misunderstood. Rather than prompting reflection about what she saw as the discrepancy between discourse and life, readers became hyperfixated on what the book revealed about her personally. Thus, in Outline, she makes every effort to diminish her own presence in order to more effectively steer focus towards her theoretical inquiry: “what I learned from the memoirs was that "me" saying things interfered with the things that I was trying to say” (Heti). The story does not build from Cusk’s life in terms of offering a fictionalization of actual events and facts, rather it is autobiographical in the sense that the form itself expresses Cusk’s frustrations with life and literature. She is principally interested in storytelling, not necessarily in telling her own story. Outline achieves a form of creative theorization that both straddles and subverts autobiographical writing and fiction. The efficacy of the project is in the actual stories, stories that on the surface have little to do with Cusk. It is a limitation to the project to characterize it as purely autobiographical theorization; Cusk goes to great lengths in the text to downplay the role of the author and narrator even as she insists that identity still implicitly informs her theory. It is less relevant whether the novel actually mirrors Cusk’s life, and more important to consider the way in which storytelling, the images invoked, ground theory in experience. That being said, many of the people that Faye
encounters throughout the course of the novel tell stories about marriage/divorce or parenting, which are topics that relate to both Faye and Cusk. This represents one sense in which the text employs autobiography and also drives one of the main criticisms of *Outline*. The stories Cusk includes to express her ideas on identity are stories seem related to her own life, but this also creates a homogenizing force in which the majority of the characters seem plagued by similar middle-class issues of representation and status.

Cusk employs subjectivity in such a way that it becomes obviously inextricable from theorization. She conceptualizes storytelling as a therapeutic undertaking that allows people the ability to constitute themselves through the act of expression. So while some readers may see *Outline* as a retreat from the cutting honesty of her memoirs, this approach is most honest to her curiosities and struggles. It expresses reverence for the art of observation and roots storytelling in vivid, subjective experience: "For me, writing and living are the same thing, or they ought to be. It is only by paying great attention to ordinary living that I actually learn anything about writing." (Cusk via Kellaway). Storytelling itself is the mode of theorization in *Outline*. In this way, the novel functions incredibly differently from traditional theoretical texts that ground the reader in the context of a discourse in order to explicitly show the limitations of the prevailing perspective. Cusk’s questions about knowability and its relationship to identity formation are investigated via the accounts of her interlocutors. The emphasis on momentary identification and reflection that can only be understood in the context of the storyteller’s own conscious performance of being underscores the idea that experience and memory are what compose and sustain that which we call identity. The story is the self, an image captured for a moment and brought into clarity for another to see, but ultimately fleeting. Cusk is interested in exploring what she sees as the “completely native human grasp of narrative form” as it elucidates identity (Warner). She explores the instinct to narrativize through the stories characters tell themselves in
an attempt to construct a stable identity. Without expressly condemning this habit, she shows that the characters, despite their desire to make sense of their life in broad, sweeping arcs, really come alive through specific stories. These moments of specific observations and anecdotes seem to connect the characters with themselves, allowing them to see these narrative structures of their life represented through an image. “The people that I tend to have speaking in my books have a momentary emergence, like someone getting out of the sea and standing on a rock for a minute and sort of looking around, and for whatever reason they can see where they are. They can see themselves and they can see what's around them and say what it is.” (Cusk via Heti). This specificity represents the “detail” of the outline vs detail dichotomy. She sees people as comprised of these particular details, connections that derive from a person’s particular associations and experience.

The stories in Outline, comprised of these moments of imagination and random insight, are rooted in what Lynda Barry calls an image. Lynda Barry, acclaimed cartoonist and scholar, shares Cusk’s view that story is an innate part of humanity. In a talk given at the University of Michigan in 2013 called “Accessing the Imaginary,” she discusses her work in understanding what an image is. She gives a variety of loose definitions: an image is “given life through memory”, “feels different than a thought”, is “alive somehow”. The concept seems best represented by the definition she gives in her book What It Is: “the formless thing which gives things form”. Through a series of anecdotes and stories, some personal and some from other people, she demonstrates the impact of storytelling that is grounded in specific imagery. The experiences that create images give form to expression in a way that makes it feel alive, a way that is experienced in the body and heart, as well as the mind. “[images] can’t transform your actual situation but they can transform your experience of it. We use images to stand and understand what would otherwise be intolerable.”(Barry, What It Is). This is in effect what
happens to Faye the narrator, her disillusionment, which by the end of the novel has manifested itself as something more hopeful, is not tested through pure thought, but through storytelling. It is story that allows her to begin to understand a way of life on the other side of stable selfhood.

Cusk and Barry both articulate what can be achieved when theorization is expressed through story and image, a relational understanding of identity that conceives of it both as represented by something outside of you and as something that is inextricably a part of you, a sense of self which can be realized through representation, rather than apprehended as a “secret pain” (to use Penelope’s words). Storytelling is a lifeline, intertwining images, memories, and experiences in a way that necessitates interaction. In Outline, people know themselves through knowing others; story gives meaning and shape to an otherwise painful experience. The images and stories that these two theorists analyze are subjective, they are formed through personal association, but the subject is known and signified through their memories and experiences. Barry’s analysis positions image, memory, and experience as constitutive of identity, supporting Outline’s view that story is part of what creates and informs identity. Memory is ritualized, storytelling is treated as commonplace, these things are the devices that allow characters and ideas to come into clarity. Cusk and Barry both understand the importance of delivery, that storytelling itself gives way to the theoretical position—there is no position without the story. Part of Outline’s impact is its subtle ability to bring the reader down to the subject level of the characters and immerse them in the interpersonal communication of the book. Cusk’s theoretical investigation seeks to understand what is meant by “identity” when it is socially produced and constructed. This question is addressed, in effect, by the approach itself. Relegating theory to an abstract realm distanced from its material implications, while also indicting identity as inescapably produced through discourse, creates an incongruency between theory and application, at times, resulting in the work evading true engagement with the theoretical
problems it investigates. It avoids, as Carmody would say, the stakes of the questions it raises. By grounding the reader in Faye’s subjectivity and allowing readers to know the characters in a purely social context, Cusk shows that theory can not feasibly evade the limitations and virtues of the subject who produces it. Constructing the message through storytelling says that the story must be told that way, and that in these details and images, we get the closest approximation of self-understanding. In both Lynda Barry’s work and Outline, the reader is subtly but persistently led to consider their own identity. The act of story, of expression, evokes identity in such a way that makes it clear that identity can not possibly be separated from the consideration of discourse and subjectivity. Perhaps this does not negate the way the subject form is unraveled from afar. However, the representational mode of storytelling reveals and explores the fragments of the subject form, its prescriptive norms, as well as its moments of poignant beauty. In the stories she hears, Faye’s identity is delineated: “I was beginning to see my own fears and desires manifested outside myself, was beginning to see in other people’s lives a commentary on my own.” (Outline, 75). Identity can not be known—not in the sense of the whole or the outline– but instead emerges as a mosaic of images and memories and the ritual performance of expressing these experiences to other people.

This idea, which is essentially the thesis of Outline, is best expressed by Anne, a character who appears only in the last chapter. Anne’s character is a distorted reflection of Faye’s: she arrives in Athens to teach the next session of the writing course Faye has just finished, moves into the apartment Faye is vacating, and tells of a chance encounter with a stranger she meets on her plane ride over. Anne is more forthcoming than Faye, however, and as she speaks, the novel’s perspective takes begins to take its final form. Anne eagerly recounts to Faye a problem she has been unable to escape everywhere she turns, a problem which she calls “summing up”. This problem originally manifests as a form of writer’s block, wherein every new
work she attempted to start is halted in its tracks by her ability to represent its theme in only one word, and then begins to infiltrate her view of people and events, until she feels that everything she encounters is limited by her ability to represent it in finitude. The mode of representation that was once generative for her—writing—has begun to feel pointless, and she even sees her own existence as effectively summed up by the words “Anne’s Life” (Outline, 233). This problem arises from a traumatic mugging (which she refers to as “the incident”) that she experienced in the recent aftermath of her divorce. The two events, in her mind, have become inextricably linked, and represent to her the dissolution of her former life, something she only notices in the wake of loss. Anne moves into telling Faye about the man seated next to her on her flight to Athens, creating a parallel with the first chapter of the book in which Faye begins talking to “her neighbor” on the plane, who reappears a handful of times in the rest of the novel. “The longer she listened to his answers, the more she felt that something fundamental was being delineated, something not about him but about her…While he talked she began to see herself as a shape; an outline, with all detail filled in around it while the shape itself remained blank. This shape, even while its content remained unknown, gave her for the first time since the incident, a sense of who she now was.” (Outline, 240). In the life story of the man seated next to her on the plane, Anne begins to see what she is not. Occupying this negative space allows her to understand something about her own identity, forged in opposition to her neighbor. A sense of self that is, paradoxically, revealed through absence. In rejecting the narrative constraints that informed her neighbor’s identity, Anne conceives of her own identity outside of the structured modes of living that she has lost. This experience on the plane allows her to break through the problem of “summing up”; representation, rather than foreclosing the possibility of expression, is renewed as a way of understanding: “If people were silent about the things that had happened to them, was something not betrayed, even if only the version of themselves that had experienced them?”
This quote, more than any other, best conveys the urgency of storytelling that Outline aims to express.

The book ends with Faye and Anne agreeing to go sightseeing in Athens together, a seemingly mundane conclusion, but one that decidedly encapsulates a certain optimism. The conclusion positions both Anne and Faye’s break from “established forms of living”, not as leading to “ever-expanding wastes of anonymity” as Faye puts it on page 74, but as yielding new ways of living and interacting with other people. Instead of continuing to fade into the background as the novel progresses, Faye appears increasingly substantial, and ends the novel with a moment of decision. She chooses, despite the undeniable fallibilities of representation and the social framework of identity, to engage nonetheless. She challenges the idea of the subject by refusing to speak as a stable self, without shirking the frustrations that come with navigating existence and knowing others. Readers who walk away from this novel convinced of its hopelessness are woefully mistaken. Cusk says it herself in an interview in The White Review: “This isn’t necessarily a bleak book, it’s about what life becomes when you move beyond its established or recognisable forms for living, and, I suppose, what it might become.” (Cusk via Wade). Outline challenges its own passive narrator to embrace the futility of existence and to try to know herself and others anyway. It achieves in practice what it explores through fiction–prompting the reader to consider their own subjectivity and the extent that it is formed by the stories and images around them, to ask themselves what details compose the ebbing and flowing shape of their existence.
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