(NET)WORKING: LABOR AND THE INTERNET IN MURAKAMI RYŪ'S *EXODUS OF THE LAND OF HOPE* AND WATAYA RISA'S *INSTALL*

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This thesis is about two works of Japanese literature: Murakami Ryū's *Kibō no kuni no ekusodasu* (*Exodus of the Land of Hope*, 2000. Hereafter, *Exodus*), and Wataya Risa's *Insutōru* (*Install,* 2001). *Exodus* is narrated by freelance journalist, Sekiguchi who follows the story of approximately eight-hundred thousand middle school students who drop out of school, form their own online community, Namamugi News (*Namamugi Tsūshin*), and start a wide variety of businesses under the ASUNARO umbrella. The middle school dropouts use the capital they accumulate to buy a vast stretch of land in Hokkaido and start their own semi-independent city-state called Nohoro. Sekiguchi details the developments of ASUNARO and his interactions with the Blue Gang (one of the leading groups of middle schoolers who play a key role in organizing the student rebellion), while also keeping his reporter's eye trained on other major news items, especially the seemingly interminable decline of the Japanese economy.

Install is narrated by seventeen-year-old Asako, who decides one day to stop going to school. In a fit, she throws out everything she owns, including a rundown computer she's convinced is broken. After emptying her room of all her possessions, she runs into twelve-year-old Kazuyoshi who takes and "fixes" her computer (it was never really broken). They bump into each other again and Kazuyoshi invites Asako to join him imitating his "email friend," Miyabi, a young mother and sex worker. Asako agrees, and they begin their job impersonating Miyabi on her brothel's homepage. Asako sneaks into Kazuyoshi's apartment while he's at school and his parents are working, and then Kazuyoshi takes over when he gets home. They spend their working hours in front of a computer hidden in Kazuyoshi's closet, and chat with whoever shows up to Miyabi's dedicated chatroom. This continues for about a month, and then Miyabi quits her job as a sex worker, and Asako gets found out by both her mother and Kazuyoshi's step-mother. The text ends with Asako claiming she'll go back to school and resume her normal life.

We could point out countless differences between these two texts. However, I have chosen to bring these texts together because of their similarities. Both stories are about young people (a mass of middle schoolers in *Exodus*, and a single high schooler in *Install*) who stop going to school and use the internet to work. Both stories thus portray young people and their use of technology as economically productive, while also putting that productivity into conflict with the normative assumption that young people must go to school to become contributing members of society. By refusing to go to school Asako and the many members of ASUNARO reject a modern narrative of what the young person is supposed to do, and by succeeding at least temporarily in their very different business ventures, they also contest the value of that narrative.

From this perspective, I believe, the differences in the texts themselves can make reading these works together productive. *Exodus* is a text explicitly about global flows of information and capital, and the way an event in Japan (or Pakistan) can mobilize people elsewhere. *Install*, on the other hand, is quite intimate. The physical action almost all takes place in one building, and the chatroom that occupies much of the story is a non-place that permits only one interlocutor at a time. *Exodus* is narrated by a journalist, an outsider literally given special permission to lurk on the teens' message boards (his password is "otona" or adult). Still, he's so out of the loop he's always left saying that everything the members of ASUNARO do has "no sense of reality." In *Install*, narration, too, is quite intimate. Asako is funny and charming, and seems to promise us a window into everything she does and thinks. My wager here is that these differences do not hinder reading these texts together. In fact, I want to contend that it's these differences that make reading these texts together productive in the first place.

Choosing two very different works, with very different reception histories will also help us outline the historical vicissitudes surrounding youth, labor, and technology. It is important to

note here that both works are from right around the turn of the 21st century, a time when the relation between technology and the Japanese economy was thrown dramatically into question by seemingly endless economic slowdown.[1] And, at the same time, "the child" becomes a "problem," something that no one seemed to know how to handle.[2] This is no coincidence. As Andrea Gevurtz Arai argues in her thorough ethnography of the changing education system in the late 1990s, *The Strange Child*, the child served as a site onto which anxieties over changing economic conditions could be displaced.[3] I would add to this that similar anxieties were raised over the child's relation to information technology,[4] and on occasion these technological and economic anxieties were even conflated in complex ways.[5]

My readings of these texts will focus on labor, specifically "immaterial labor," or labor that does not produce a material commodity. I believe labor serves as a useful analytical tool here because it is primarily work that defines the characters' relations to technology in these

[1] See Ito Takatoshi's "Retrospective on the Bubble Period and its Relationship to Developments in the 1990s" for a thorough discussion of Japan's economic slowdown.
[2] Andrea Gevurtz Arai, *The Strange Child: Education and the Psychology of Patriotism in Recessionary Japan*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 14.
[3] Ibid.
[4] In their discussions of *Exodus*, Aoki Keishi and Shimizu Yoshinori both suggest that information technology is a purely negative force that pulls individuals out of reality (Aoki, 85; Shimizu, 242). Shimizu goes on to suggest that adolescents are particularly susceptible to this pull (255). Kosawa Ken's discussion of *Install* is bookended by discussions of actual violent crimes: one case wherein the victim and perpetrator knew each other through online communities, and two others where the perpetrators announced their crimes online (120, 122). The juxtaposition between actual violent crimes and *Install*, which depicts no serious acts of violence, is jarring, and seems to be little more than a superficial and unnecessary way to provide moral urgency to his reading of the text, which is quite convincing in its own right.
[5] See my discussion of Matsumoto Yoshio's review of *Install* below for one example of this conflation. See also the *Yomiuri Shinbun* column, "*Nenrei gyakuten, netto shakai*," for a similar discussion that also touches on *Install*. Interestingly, similar discussions of *Exodus* take an optimistic, rather than moralizing tone when they discuss the child's perturnatural technological skills. See the letter to the editor "*Hee, yaru janai kodomo no hi*" published in *Asahi Shinbun*, or Kita Renichi's tongue-in-cheek editorial in *Yomiuri Shinbun,* "*Shōmetsu shita toshi no kō.*"

texts. My reading of *Exodus* will attempt to demonstrate the way a collective identity, a "we," is produced through the creation of a network. It will also attempt to show the ways the "we" created through digital networks can respond to and resist capital on both a national and a global level. My reading of *Install*, on the other hand, will focus on the way capital structures individual identity, and how the creative construction of an individual identity can also be a means of resistance to that power. It's through the differences of these two texts that we can see capital and its power manifest as both global and local, the way control functions on both the molar and the molecular. And it's through these differences that we can see the myriad shapes digitally mediated labor can take on.

But before we get there, we must first address the various ways labor has been touched on (though seldom analyzed) in previous discussions of these works. Labor in *Exodus* is generally described in abstract and objectified terms such as business and capital. The ex-students in *Exodus* "make money through online businesses,"[6] "break into the market and get their hands on massive wealth,"[7] or even start several "illegal businesses"[8] to borrow the words of various critics. What this focus on the children's business elides is the horizontal network structure that defines ASUNARO. As the members of ASUNARO repeat throughout the text, they have no leader, and to imagine them as any sort of hierarchically structured organization

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[6] Minami Yūta, "*Kyōsei no hō e—kyūjūnendai kōhan kara genzai ni kakete no tenkai,"* in *Murakami Ryū sakka sakuhin kenkyū: Murakami Ryū no sekai chizu*, (Tokyo: Senshū daigaku shuppan kyoku, 2007): 225.

[7] Kuroko Kazuo, "*Murakami Ryū, Inoue Hisashi, Ōe Kenzaburo ni okeru han nashonaru aidentiti—kōsō sareta 'mō hitotsu no kuni = yūtopia'—*," *Kanagawa Daigaku Hyōron* 59, 8 (2008): 124.

[8] Kato Norihiro, "*Monogatari no ōkisa, shōsetsu no chiisasa*" in *Shōsetsu no Mirai*, (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 2004): 44.

would be a mistake. Furthermore, this horizontal structure is supposedly enabled through the use of the internet.

Meguro Tsutomu emphasizes this fact in his essay, "*Kibou kakusa shakai ni okeru gendai jidou bungaku no akuchuariti*" (The Actuality of Contemporary Children's Literature in the Hope Disparity Society). Meguro begins by arguing that seeing children as "economic beings" has been a taboo in children's literature because "If children become economically independent, they will no longer require the economic protection of their guardians. Further, if they can succeed economically without school, it too will become unnecessary."[9] He argues that with the expansion of the internet, communication norms will change, causing many "intermediaries" such as schools, companies, and unions to become useless. He suggests that ASUNARO provides a powerful example of the new sort of network made up of "weak ties" that will come to define most of our social life.[10] Meguro effectively makes the connection between digital communication and new organizations of labor, and explicitly points out that this is a challenge to "the modern [*kindaiteki*] view of children as beings that must be protected and monitored."[11]

In the case of *Install*, critics tend to describe what Kazuyoshi and Asako do as a "part-time job" or "work," but no analysis has described how their labor is shaped by digital media. Kosawa Ken and Jinno Toshifumi mention Asako and Kazuyoshi's "part-time job," but then immediately move to discussions of the internet more generally.[12] But these broad takes on the

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[9] Meguro Tsutomu, "*Kodomo to okane Kibō kakusa shakai ni okeru gendai jidō bungaku no akucharititi*," *Nihon Jidō Bungaku* 54, 2 (2008): 16.
[10] Ibid., 21-2.
[11] Ibid., 16-7.
[12] Kosawa Ken, "*Oshieru kodomo—Wataya Risa 'Insutōru' saidoku*," *Kanagawa Daigaku Kōhō Iinkai: Kanagawa Daigaku hyōron*, 48 (2004): 120.
Jinno Toshifumi. "*Seishinteki ōzoku ni tsuite – Kurahashi Yumiko no shoki sakuhin to Wataya Risa*." *Bungei Kenkyū: Meiji Daigaku Bungakubu Kiyō*, 102 (2007): 46.

internet never touch on the fact that the medium also has the potential to change labor practices. Nakazawa Kei and Kōyama Shūichi actually stress that what Asako and Kazuyoshi do is work by emphasizing the fact that they do in fact get paid, but, unfortunately, they too quickly move on.[13]

The most detailed description of Asako and Kazuyoshi's job comes from Matsumoto Yoshio's review of *Install.* The review appeared in a journal called *Seishōnen mondai* (Youth Problems) that publishes research on young people (generally teenagers), and what could broadly be described as non-normative behavior such as suicide, drug-use, and truancy. Matsumoto's review is part of a regular column in the journal that examines representations of teens in literature and films. Matsumoto's overall tone is condescending, and his critique rests solely on the assumption that children need the guidance of adults, or else something (what is never specified) will go wrong. Interestingly, though, Matsumoto does acknowledge that Asako and Kazuyoshi work, and he rolls out a whole vocabulary of contracted labor to do so:

> Asako agrees to a contract [*keiyaku*] to begin work [*shukkin*] at 10:00 A.M. and work four hours a day [*yojikan kinmu*]. After getting a basic lesson [on how to use the computer], she begins her job. Her responsibilities [*gyōmu naiyō*] consist of impersonating a housewife and net prostitute that the boy met online, and talking dirty to whoever shows up [to the chat room].[14]

If we take Matsumoto's language at face value, it's undeniable that Asako and Kazuyoshi do in fact work.

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[13] Nakazawa Kei, "*Kyomu to kyori—hachi jū nen dai umare no sakka tachi,"* Shinchō 101, 12 (2004): 191.
Kōyama Shūichi, "*Jibun wo shōhin ni suru to iu koto—bishōjo sakka no nijūnen*," *Yurīka* 36, 8 (2004): 172.
[14] Matsumoto Yoshio, "*IT jidai no okosama tachi—Wataya Risa 'Insutōru'," Seishōnen Mondai,* 52, 12, (2005): 36.

That said, the technical specificity of what Asako and Kazuyoshi do is rather muted in this review. This seems to be for two reasons. First, one of Matsumoto's running jokes is that he is an old man who doesn't understand technology, and thus he can't articulate what's unique about it. Second, because Matsumoto's argument rests on the assumption that it's up the adults to teach children "how to live," [15] he needs technological changes to be merely superficial.[16] If technological change were dramatic enough to make his own knowledge completely obsolete, his argument would no longer obtain. Thus his insistence that "young people have been good with new things since the *bunmei kaika.*"[17] The irony here is that Matsumoto invokes a moment of dramatic cultural upheaval and epistemic rupture to suggest the immutability of the relation between adult and child. But given Matsumoto's self-professed limited knowledge of IT, maybe it would be more productive to consider what exactly Asako and Kazuyoshi do, how their work is structured by capital, and how they respond to that structuring before assuming the position of knowledgeable elder.

It is also important to note the way these analyses are structured in relation to the very divergent images of these two authors. Murakami debuted in 1976 with the novel *Kagirinaku tōmei ni chikai burū* (*Almost Transparent Blue*), which won two major literary awards (the Akutagawa Prize and the Gunzō Prize), and became a smash hit. By the time *Exodus* was published almost twenty-five years later, Murakami was a well-established author known to pen works about social issues. This comes through quite clearly in commentaries about *Exodus*.

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[15] Ibid., 37.

[16] This line of argument is not unique to Matsumoto, and can also be seen in Kosawa's essay on *Install*. Aoki, Minami, and Meguro's critiques of *Exodus* take the opposite tack, suggesting that adults can no longer serve as proper models for children because technological and cultural change has progressed too far.

[17] Matsumoto, "*IT jidai no okosama tachi—Wataya Risa 'Insutōru',"* 37.

Several commentators mention Murakami's "prescience" (*yokenryoku*), suggesting that he rightly predicted the emergence of several cultural phenomena with his work.[18] Others suggest that *Exodus* (as well as his other works) are "messages"[19] to society, "warnings"[20] of problems to come, or even his "answer"[21] to these deeply-rooted cultural problems. *Exodus* even attracted commentary from a variety of specialists such as Takenaka Heizō, a neoliberal economist and educator who served in the cabinet of Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi; Kaneko Masaru, a Marxist economist and professor; social psychologist Myōki Hiroyuki; and Ministry of Education bureaucrat, Terawaki Ken. *Exodus* is often positioned in discourse not only as a novel, but also a sort of commentary in its own right, or even a social-scientific experiment.

Wataya, on the other hand, debuted with *Install*. The novel won the Bungei Prize, but the work and author also garnered media attention because of Wataya's age. She was seventeen and still in high school when *Install* was published. Commentaries on *Install* tend to essentialize Wataya's identity and deploy the category of "young woman" as a highly problematic rubric through which to interpret the text.[22] Further, unlike Murakami whose work is so often

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[18] Aoki Keishi, "*Matorikkusu no tatakaikata*," *Nihon Daigaku geijutsu gakubu kiyō* 40, 7 (2004), 87.
Kuroko Kazuo, *Kiki ni kō suru sōzōryoku*, (Tokyo: Bensei shuppan, 2009), 246.
Shimizu Yoshinori, "*Jūyonsai no kyōkai*," in *MURAKAMI—Ryū to Haruki no Jidai,* (Tokyo: Gentōsha, 2008), 237.
[19] Kuroko, "*Murakami Ryū, Inoue Hisashi, Ōe Kenzaburo ni okeru han nashonaru aidentiti,*" 123.
Myōki Hiroyuki. "*Kyoiku no paradokkusu—'Kibō no kuni no ekusodasu' ni yosete,*" *Kokubungaku* 46, 9 (2001): 58.
Takenaka, "*Murakami Ryū wa totetsumonai seitōha ekonomisuto de aru*," 47.
[20] Kaneko Masaru, "*Gensō no Keizai to iu genjitsu—makkishōjō no keizai shakai wo egaku gihō*," 43.
Takenaka, "*Murakami Ryū wa totetsumonai seitōha ekonomisuto de aru*,"49.
[21] Shimizu, "*Jūyonsai no kyōkai*," 254.
[22] Takahashi Gen'ichiro claims that a man couldn't have written *Install* (46). Watabe Akio reinstates the old category of "women's literature" suggesting that works by women as a whole must be understood as somehow different from those of men (120). Kōyama explicitly positions

positioned as a sort of cultural commentary, Wataya's work is interpreted as a creative reflection of her own personal experience.[23] I believe it is this image of Wataya as a young, female author—and thus an authentic voice of the youth—along with the fact that *Install* is about a kind of sex work, that inspired so many critics to use it as evidence for moral decline and the dangers of information technology. Murakami's supposed critical distance guards his work—and thus also the labor of ASUNARO's members—from being moralized over in the same way.

The Work we do Online

I would like to contend that by analyzing the labor in these two texts—labor, which I believe is quite similar despite many textual differences, further compounded by highly divergent analyses of the texts—we can hopefully draw some connections across *Exodus* and *Install*. It is, after all, labor that activates the networks of information technology and gives them meaning. Furthermore, labor is never a unidirectional process. The individual does not simply work on or through the network; the network also works on and over the individual. Thus, by analyzing work within these texts, I believe we can begin to elucidate the ways the personal becomes global, and the global transforms the personal.

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the female author in a privileged position because of her limited access to language. Only women can understand themselves as "the 'object,' the commodity" for "When a 'woman' writes a novel, when she places herself in the position of narrator, whether that first-person narrator is a man or a woman, she becomes a man and a 'subject.' Simply put, one cannot write a novel as a 'woman'" (170-1). Because women exist somewhere outside of language (defined here as masculine), but can enter it through writing as a man, only the female author can understand both the subject and object positions of commodification. Such a reading problematically reintroduces the idea that the female subject is always passive, and to become an active subject or an agent, requires the woman to take a masculine position. This sort of analysis naturalizes the position of woman not only as lacking in agency, but also as other, outside, and less than man.

[23] While Wataya is certainly understood to have a certain degree of agency in crafting her works, the language of artistic production tends to figure her as passive (especially when contrasted with Murakami). The most obvious example of this is Takahashi who compares Wataya to Kunikida Doppo and Higuchi Ichiyō, claiming that like both of these prominent Meiji writers she is "guided by language" and simply portrays what language takes her to (46).

If we choose to see these texts as representing the same type of problem, the problem of shifting formations of labor in the world of global, networked capitalism, we can also see within them related forms of resistance. Resistance in *Exodus* is networked and collective. It involves the creation of a constantly changing arrangement of labor that works tirelessly to assure for itself a space within global capitalism. *Install*, on the other hand, explores the vicissitudes of individual identity plugged into global capital. But within this text, too, we can see that the willful construction of an opaque individual identity guards one from being know, interpreted, and thus forcefully interpellated by global capital.

Labor and work in this thesis refer primarily to what Maurizio Lazzarato has called "immaterial labor." Lazzarato coined this term in an attempt to expand Marxist critiques beyond those of industrial production. He defines immaterial labor as "the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity." It is modeled on industries such as "audiovisual production, advertising, fashion, the production of software, photography, cultural activities, and so forth."[24] What differentiates these industries from work in the factory is the way they require the coordination of a variety of technical skills to produce a complete commodity. Whereas labor in the factory involves breaking the process of production down to its most rote parts and distributing them, immaterial forms of production require not only complex skills that involve manipulating information, but also flexible coordination and collaboration between everyone involved in the process.

The shift to immaterial labor also transforms the relation between labor and capital. Workers are no longer expected to simply obey commands from above, as in the industrial age,

[24] Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," trans. Paul Colilli and Ed Emory, in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics,* ed. Paulo Virino and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 132, 137.

but are instead ideally independent and self-managing. They “are expected to become ‘active subjects’ in the coordination of the various functions of production.”[25] This shift does not necessary entail liberation from the confines of capitalism. In fact, Lazzarato claims that immaterial work “threatens to be even more totalitarian than the earlier rigid division between mental and manual labor (ideas and execution), because capitalism seeks to involve even the worker’s personality and subjectivity within the production of value.”[26] Thus the worker is moved from the top-down control of factory life to a world of constant horizontal and vertical engagement wherein one’s very subjectivity becomes essentially part of capital. The worker is no longer imagined as a cog in the industrial machine, but rather “an entrepreneur, inserted within a market that is constantly shifting and within networks that are changeable in time and space.”[27]

The commodity produced through immaterial labor is primarily conceived of as information, and as such it “is not destroyed in the act of consumption, but rather it enlarges, transforms, and creates the ‘ideological’ and cultural environment of the consumer.”[28] Tiziana Terranova, writing specifically about work in the digital economy, the site of capture for “forms of labour we don’t immediately recognize as such: chat, real-life stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters and so on,” further elaborates on this transformation of the commodity.[29] For Terranova, the shift to immaterial production causes the commodity as we knew it to begin to vanish. The commodity is subordinated “to the quality of the labour behind it” and as such it “becomes increasingly ephemeral, its duration becomes compressed, it becomes more of a

[25] Ibid., 135.
[26] Ibid., 137.
[27] Ibid., 140.
[28] Ibid., 137.
[29] Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 79.

process than a finished product." The commodity now must be worked over again and again, if not constantly reproduced, at least constantly added to. "The role of continuous, creative, innovative labour as the ground of market value is crucial to the digital economy. The process of valorization (the production of monetary value) happens by foregrounding the quality of the labour which literally animates the commodity."[30] In essence, all meaningful distinction between the commodity as such and the labor that produces it has been lost.

This informatization of the commodity also blurs the distinction between producer and consumer. Lazzarato claims that "the process of social communication (and its principal content, the production of subjectivity) becomes here directly productive because in a certain way it 'produces' production."[31] Consumption—now figured as communication—requires active input from the consumer. The entire factory model of production, wherein a limited variety of commodities are produced in vast quantities and then passively consumed is turned on its head. Instead, the commodity is produced in direct response to the demand of the consumer.

This is the outline for the phenomenon I will be referring to when I discuss immaterial labor, but I would like to think a bit more about the relation to labor and the "subjectivity" Lazzarato claims it produces. I would like to argue that if labor produces "identities" or "subjectivities," it does so performatively. J.L. Austin originally defined the performative as an utterance which enacts what is uttered (for example, the priest officiating a wedding declaring, "I now pronounce you man and wife"). Judith Butler has since expanded the performative to include bodily gestures, acts, and desires, and argues convincingly in the context of gender identity that it is the repetition of these acts which produce the appearance of an abiding and

[30] Ibid., 90.
[31] Ibid., 143.

essential self.[32] If new labor practices restructure our behaviors, our gestures, actions, and desires, this does not entail that they enact a change on a pre-existing essence within each of us. Rather, what they do is compel us to perform identities differently than we did in the past.

Butler argues that "to qualify as a substantive identity is an arduous task, for such appearances are rule-generated identities, ones which rely on the consistent and repeated invocation of rules that condition and restrict culturally intelligible practices of identity."[33] This claim is useful to us here for two reasons. First, it draws our attention to the fact that the "arduous task" of creating an identity is in fact labor. Like the immaterial commodity in Terranova's formulation, the individual seems to be constantly vanishing behind their own labor, required again and again to add to the "self" in order to appear stable.

Second, this quote suggests how the shift from factory labor to immaterial labor may impact our identities. If, as Lazzarato contends, our very conception of what work is has changed, this change would also alter the rules through which identities become intelligible (and, as a consequence, valuable). By changing these rules, this transformation of labor practices in turn alters the way we are allowed to signify ourselves (and what sort of selves we need to perform in order to be considered "productive").

This turn to Butler will be useful here for another reason. Butler also articulates how understanding identity as performed can engender a new politics of resistance. She argues that by shifting the discussion of identity from the realm of "epistemology" to that of "signification" we can reformulate "the question of *agency*" (emphasis Butler's).

> '[A]gency,' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition [which produces the illusion of stable identity]. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but

[32] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York and London: Routledge, 1990.
[33] Ibid., 144.

> enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility [. . .] then it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible.[34]

Thus playing with the very rues mandated by the regime of immaterial labor to creatively produce new types of identities can be understood as a sort of resistance to capital. These creative permutations not only expose the rules by which they are produced, but in the process have the potential to "displace" those very rules, and thus produce new regimes of legibility. We may find ourselves hemmed in anew by new labor practices that restrict identity formation in novel ways, but these new rules also offer new opportunities for resistance, new ways to signify radically.

Finally, let me close with a note on my own usages of terms. In the discussion that follows, I will refer occasionally to affective labor as a way to specify that there is an emotional element to the acts of labor at hand. That said, references to immaterial labor should be understood to include within them affective labor, and references to labor more generally should also be understood to include all forms of immaterial labor.[35] The theory of affect employed here is drawn from Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect*. She defines affect as "the physiological shift accompanying a judgment," and makes no strong distinction between affects

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[34] Ibid., 145.

[35] In *Empire* Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri position affective labor as a sort of immaterial labor, but differentiate it from a colder sort of information work that "can be recognized in analogy to the functioning of a computer" (291). While there may be a place and time to make a distinction between these two kinds of work, I also believe dividing the two to be quite problematic. By proposing these two "faces" of immaterial labor as intrinsically different, Hardt and Negri limit our ability to think about how these two sorts of labor interact. As such, it obscures several key questions, such as: What's at stake when our affects pass through the digital apparatus and becomes informational? How is information itself imbued with affective weight? What sort of affects emerge around the very machines that enable these processes? These two faces of immaterial labor must be seen in constant interaction. They work on and transform each other.
Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire,* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000).

and emotions in the more everyday sense. Affects, in her theory, are both embodied, and transmittable from body to body.[36]

***Install*: Writing the Self Online and Offline**

I would like to begin my analysis of labor in these texts with a discussion of *Install*. I have chosen to begin with this text rather than *Exodus* because so many theories of labor and identity take the individual as a privileged site of agency. Indeed, even theories like Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" which theorizes the construction of collective identities focus on the individual as the unit that actually performs that identity. The logic is that if enough people perform the same sort of identity, then a group can be formed. *Install* thus serves as a highly productive starting point, for it forces us to question the epistemic ground by which we judge individual identity.

I'd like to propose something of a bad faith reading of this text. I say "something of" a bad faith reading, because I cannot—and I would contend that no one can—claim with total confidence that it is untrue. This reading goes as follows: Two young and highly capable people manage to employ the networks of international capital around them (internet access and a computer provided by their families) to find a job and have their labor exploited by capital. When the particular work cycle they participate in ends (Miyabi quits her job, and is thus no longer a character online for them to play), and disciplinary forces (parents) catch on to what they're doing, they are forced to stop working. Both characters seem to experience growth by surreptitiously making use of their virtual potentialities as workers, and thus return to their normal lives better conditioned for school, part of the ideological training meant to prepare them

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[36] Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 5.

for their future in an economy where work is increasingly both precarious and digitally mediated.

Such a reading seems to be reinforced by Lazzarato's view of subjectivity. Lazzarato claims that the product of immaterial labor—and for him subjectivity is just that—"will be constrained to draw from the 'values' that the public/consumer produces" and that "these values presuppose the modes of being, modes of existing, and forms of life that support them."[37] Thus chatting and learning to play the ditzy housewife who is also a sex worker functions not only to drive the plot of the novel, but also as metaphor for joining the labor force. One can imagine a less sensitive Marxist critic claim that by playing a whore online, Asako and Kazuyoshi literally become whores to capital, and that they have sealed their fates to be exploited again and again in the future.

The flaw in such a reading is that it collapses labor and identity into practically one and the same thing. It does not allow for any reflexive distance whereby the act of work can be meditated on by the individual and then incorporated into the subjectivity of the worker herself. Labor simply and unproblematically produces identity. But this formulation is obviously challenged by *Install*. The text presents labor itself as a sort of performance, the willful putting on of an identity that is not self-same with the identity of the actor. As such, we are forced to ask, how can we formulate a theory that allows for this reflexive construction of subjectivity, where the identity being performed, on the one hand, informs and affects the individual performing it, while, on the other hand, it is acknowledged (albeit, in secret) as performance?

Terranova's stance on subjectivity doesn't force us to see performance of a certain identity as equal to subjectivity, but it still leaves us in an ambivalent position in regards to the relation between the two. For her, subjectivity is almost a non-issue for the individual is nothing

[37] Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," 146.

more than an "epiphenomenon" of the network.[38] The individual subject is constantly caught in an antagonism between the flattening, rule-based structure of the network and a need for at least the performance of individuality which enables one's profitability. She writes of reality TV shows as a preeminent, if somewhat exaggerated, example of how control and subjectivity function in network culture. Reality TV shows are caught up in a constant state of contradiction. Sets and contestants are closed off, yet they are open to participation from the audience in the form of votes and ratings. Thus these programs

> demand the impossible from their willing participants: that they relinquish their individuality by being forced to interact continuously with a group which will decide their fate (hence they must become a unit ready for selection); that they relinquish their privacy by being continuously placed under the surveillance gaze of a camera; and, at the same time, that they hold onto and reinforce such individuality as part of the competitive structure of punishments and rewards of the game. They demand then a self that is stripped down to the capacity to collaborate and compete by a strict set of rules operating within an economy of punishments and rewards, which determine the persistence or disappearance of the self as such.

Individuality (not either subjectivity or identity) emerges out of structured necessity, though that same structure is antagonistic to the individuality it demands. Terranova also claims that the true prize of any of these shows is not the prize only one contestant can take at the end. "More fundamentally," she writes, "the competition is for the fleeting, rather than scarce, flow of the audience's attention and sympathy that from the outside keep impinging on the game."[39] What the performance of individuality demands is attention and recognition.

This model where work demands a certain sort of individuality or persona fits nicely with the work we see in *Install*. There are rules involved in taking up the mantle of Miyabi online.

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[38] Terranova, *Network Culture*, 123.
[39] Ibid., 127.

Kazuyoshi and Asako must inhabit a particular sort of character. Asako realizes this quite early on:

> There were other chat rooms. The 21-year-old office lady Kiriko was a dominatrix type. The 20-year-old housemaid Mariko was the innocent type. There was a silent understanding that we were all categorized that way. It seemed that twenty-six-year-old Miyabi played the role of the empty-headed wife type, so I was careful to avoid *kanji* and to write things that sounded a bit stupid.[40]

Being able to understand and play the proper role is an important part of Asako's job. She is well aware that, though she is exercising a certain degree of freedom by impersonating Miyabi, she cannot play any identity she wants. Further, their prize (profit) comes from keeping the client's attention for as long as possible, much like how contestants in reality TV must garner the audience's votes in order to win, or at least continue to participate. By distancing ourselves from an understanding of subjectivity as produced directly through labor, and seeing immaterial labor as demanding only the performance of individuality, we can understand Kazuyoshi and Asako's work as something other than a direct reflection of their own subjectivities. However, by calling our attention to the identity that lies behind the performance, the very narration of *Install* demands we push on this model. How does one identity perform another willfully?

Here I would like to turn to two theories of identity formation online, Ayu Saraswati's "wikisexuality" and Lisa Nakamura's "cybertypes." These two theories will help us contextualize the complex issue of identity online, but, we shall see, they do little to address the relation between embodied and online performances. I have chosen these two theories in part because they illustrate the divide that exists within theories of cyber identity: are online identities liberating, or just another iteration of the same systems of power that oppress us offline? But, in

[40] Wataya, *Install*, 83-4.

either case, by cleaving online and offline identities they distance themselves from the messy question of the relation between multiple identities. While they help us articulate the terms and materials of online identity construction, they, like theories of labor, fail to take into full account the relation between online and offline identity in their theorization.

Saraswati defines wikisexuality as "a new formation of sexuality in cyberspace that" allows us to "consider the virtual space as its own epistemic point of reference." This is not to privilege online sexuality, but rather to prevent its subordination to sexuality in the "real world." Wikisexuality changes "with each encounter" and further highlights "the fluidity of sexuality that traverses the various layers of 'reality,' that is, the virtual and physical/actual/'real' worlds."[41] This formation is useful for us as it allows tactical performance of identity. Not just sexuality, but subjectivity "is performed and constructed at the moment of encounter."[42] The singular, abiding self is rejected here in favor of an image of self provisionally constructed on a moment-to-moment basis.

In contrast to this seemingly liberating theory of performance of online self, Lisa Nakamura offers up the cybertype. She uses the term to "describe the distinctive ways that the Internet propagates, disseminates, and commodifies images of race and racism," though we must recognize that her theory can apply to gender, among other identity categories as well.[43] Nakamura draws on her research on LambdaMOO, an entirely text-based virtual community where people are allowed to select a character name and identity and describe themselves

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[41] Ayu Saraswati, "Wikisexuality: Rethinking sexuality in cyberspace," *Sexualities,* 16 (2013), 588.
[42] Ibid., 592.
[43] Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet,* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

however they choose. While one must select a name and gender,[44] there are no preset options from which to select race. She found that a majority of users who chose to perform racial identities (which had to be typed up independently in one's own character description) in these spaces were either treated with disdain for "they introduced what many consider a real life 'divisive issue' into the phantasmatic world of cybernetic textual interaction" or took on highly stereotyped identities. She considers this virtual donning of an ethnic mask as a sort of "identity tourism," wherein nonwhite racial identities are reduced to stereotypes.

> The choice to enact oneself as a samurai warrior in LambdaMOO constitutes a form of identity tourism which allows a player to appropriate an Asian racial identity without any of the risks associated with being a racial minority in real life. While this might seem to offer a promising venue for non-Asian characters to see through the eyes of the Other by performing themselves as Asian through on-line textual interaction, the fact that the personae chosen are overwhelmingly Asian stereotypes blocks this possibility by reinforcing those stereotypes.[45]

While even Nakamura acknowledges the possibility of digital technologies allowing one to identify with the Other, she stresses that we must not naively accept online performances and identity fluidity in itself as emancipatory.

> The celebration of the 'fluid self' that simultaneously lauds postmodernity as a potentially liberatory sort of worldview tends to overlook the more disturbing aspects of the fluid, marginalized selves that already exist offline in the form of actual marginalized peoples, which is not nearly so romantic a formulation.[46]

[44] It is also of note that while LambdaMOO offers neuter options outside the male/female binary, Nakamura found that those who chose such identity categories were often interrogated about their 'real' gender identity. Thus in the case of LambdaMOO, while one could choose not to select a binary gender, the gender binary was still reinscribed within the conversations that took place there.
[45] Lisa Nakamura, "Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet," accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.humanities.uci.edu/mposter/syllabi/readings/nakamura.html.
[46] Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, xvi.

While there is an undeniable tension here, it is also important to note that Saraswati and Nakamura make several similar claims about online identity. Neither would like to see online identities as in any way inferior to or less important than the identities we inhabit in the "real world." They both note that identities on the internet are constructed collaboratively and both also discuss the ways identities are assembled from pieces drawn from a shared cultural database. And, just as Nakamura acknowledges the liberatory potential of taking on another identity online (though she is quick to note that it rarely happens if ever), Saraswati likewise mentions that there are barriers to the sorts of free play of identity that she analyzes, most notably, financial ones. Performing an identity online is thus never totally liberating, nor is it ever purely dictated by systems of power.

Several of the descriptions here are useful to us for outlining the performance of online identity in *Install*. Asako and Kazuyoshi's performances rely on their customers' input. They react and respond, crafting the performance collaboratively, a feature Lazzarato discussed as part of immaterial labor. Miyabi, the character they perform, is certainly a gendered type, or maybe more precisely, a combination of types, in Nakamura's usage. The most useful element of these theories is that they demand we position this labor in broader social contexts. They beg the question: does the work Kazuyoshi and Asako do allow the free performance of new identities, or does it simply recirculate tired cultural stereotypes?

We shall return to this question later, for it is certainly an important one. However, I would like to point out that what underpins it is a break between embodied experience and online performance. In the terms of both Nakamura and Saraswati, the above question really only pertains to identities *on the internet*. The possibility that new identities could be constructed through the relation of virtually performed identity and embodied identity is bracketed, if not

entirely effaced. Severing these two layers of performance subtends both Saraswati and Nakamura's arguments. Saraswati is quite open on this matter. Online and offline sexuality share no epistemic point of reference, not even within the individual who inhabits one sexuality online and another off. For Nakamura, the situation is a bit more complicated. For her, the internet recirculates images of our embodied identities, often as hurtful caricatures, and it is because these performances are grounded not in lived experience, but in culturally reinforced images of others, that cybertyping is so dangerous. Nakamura then attenuates the hard epistemic break between online and offline identities Saraswati makes by recourse to a culturally informed process of signification. In other words, while it is because there is no substantial link between the performed identity and embodied identity that cybertyping can reinforce stereotypical racial (and also gendered) images, their production both relies on, reproduces, and circulates certain shared cultural images.

This deserves some unpacking. Indeed, for Nakamura there does seem to be a connection between embodied and online performance, but the connection Nakamura introduces is really only another effect of power. By analyzing a performance and revealing the truth/falsity of it (that is, it's one-to-one equivalence with an embodied performance), one can evaluate another's identity and judge its value. While I believe Nakamura's analysis of stereotyped racial figures is good, taken to its theoretical limits, it rests on the idea that two performances can be held up against each other and compared, and one can be shown as "truthful" while another is simply a "type." This power dynamic, the arbitrating of the truthfulness of a performance, is one that runs rampant on the internet, and also one we see at work in *Install*. However, not only does it introduce fraught concepts of authenticity to this discussion, it also all but forecloses the possibility of a creative relationship between the performed identities. That is to say, in

Nakamura's analysis, it is highly unlikely that one performance can actively influence another. Furthermore, as Butler reminds us, even embodied identities are caught up in the process of signification, and can only draw on the limited repertoire of signs deemed "intelligible" in our culture. When Nakamura claims that "all database-driven new-media objects" are "experienced by users as much more profuse and open than they really are," we need to ask, is this not also the case offline?[47] Isn't any performance, online or otherwise, a performance of a type?

These theories of cyber identity, just like theories of online labor, fail to make a productive link between the identity performed online and the embodied identity of the performer. But it is precisely this space that *Install* opens up for us. Early on, Asako gets aroused while chatting. "I got wet. When they wrote a message, when I wrote a message, the lower half of my body began to get hot. I felt like I was going to collapse, and my panties got wet."[48] There is no sharp epistemic break between online performance and embodied experience here. The performance itself, as experienced by Asako, leads to an immediate physical reaction. Furthermore, this reaction cannot be reduced to the circulation of erotic images. While we can acknowledge those images as the material of the interaction, it does not alter or explain Asako's reaction. We must acknowledge then a psychic, affective connection between online performance and the embodied self.

Asako also certainly recognizes chatting as a sort of structured performance, and one different from embodied sex work. She later explains to Kazuyoshi that their performances are different from real sex. She tells him "people don't like lines that are too close to real sex like, 'Don't put that big thing in me,' and 'Bite me there!' They don't want to touch skin and have an

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[47] Lisa Nakamura, "Cyberrace," *PMLA*, 123 (2008), 1675.
[48] Wataya, *Install*, 82.

almost real experience. They just want to have chat sex."[49] What is pleasurable is precisely the performance of something which is not sex. While we can understand this as a separate category of experience from the skin-on-skin sex work that Miyabi does at her brothel, the affective responses are no less real, and cannot be said to be housed simply within the digitally performed identity.

But these confessions of affective response must also be understood in themselves as performances. Later Asako also finds herself sad from watching all these men "fall" out of the chatroom. The word fall (*ochiru*) is used online to signal that someone's going to leave a chatroom.

> Why is it when people say they're "going home" I can imagine meeting them again, but when they say they're "falling" I feel like I definitely won't? It's not that I have any desperate desire to meet them again. But still, the moment someone I've shared an intense thirty minutes with suddenly comes back to their senses and "falls," leaving me alone in the fantasy world we created together, I can't help feeling empty. And then after one man falls, I have to start all over again from introductions with a new man.

Here the continual chat and continual stream of men is seen as saddening and emotionally draining. This passage is interesting for several reasons. First, immaterial labor is again seen as collaborative. Asako works with her clients to construct their fantasies. Affective responses should then be presumed to be reciprocal, if uneven. Second, this suggests that even immaterial labor is in some sense rote work. While it seems unlikely that each individual interaction is identical, they can still be typed and generalized. This means that not only exchanges themselves instill affect within Asako, but also the continued stream of work in general. Most importantly, these responses are articulated through narration. That is to say, they are recollected and told

[49] Ibid., 88.

again, introducing a temporal lag between their initial occurrence and their reappearance in text.

Kazuyoshi expresses a similar sentiment as well. After an exchange with a problematic client, Seiji, whom we will discuss further in a moment, he claims that "chatting with lots of people just flowing by every day, you get numb to everything, and then when you meet someone like this who stops that flow, you notice that, wow, they're talking to this person, and it's me."[50] Again, we see here an affective response integrated into an embodied identity through a linguistic performance.

These passages are quite different from the one in which Asako describes her arousal. Rather than narrating an immediate affective reaction, we see both Asako and Kazuyoshi recollecting a pattern. We have to see this labor then working on Asako's subjectivity in two ways. Not only is there the possibility of immediate affective reaction to the performance, but also the space to look back and reconstruct those affective moments within the terms of both the self and the character being performed. This suggests there are two levels on which performance and labor can influence offline identity. The first is immediate and affective in character. An affect can move directly from performed identity to embodied one, suggesting a direct link between the two. The second is the reflexive representation of that link, where performance is recognized and narrated. We must also recognize that because of the nature of narrative storytelling, the first sort of response is always subsumed within the second. While Asako's narration may present us with what seems like an immediate experience, it is still reconstructed through narration.

The rest of this reading will focus on this second relation between performance and identity. How is performance itself narrated, and thus, performed? My goal is to show that by

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[50] Ibid., 118.

looking at Asako's self-presentation of her own performances and identities, we can open up a space in both theories of identity and labor that complicates their relation to digitally performed identity and embodied identity. The very fact that relations between labor, performance, and identity can be narrated suggests that those relations cannot be separated from a narrating voice external to that performance. This means there must exist a separate epistemic level which allows the narration of the mediation between the two. Theories of labor and identity must be able to take account of this second-level performance, where the original performance itself is integrated into the performance of another identity.

This also requires us to take into account Asako as a narrator who performs a distinctive self to the reader. Asako's linguistic contortions throughout the text illustrate her easily performing a wide variety of characters. She summons up the language of video games referring to her health as "HP," uses grammatical structures from classical Japanese, quotes comics, calling her mother's silence a "finishing move," and even briefly imitates a "female gambler," at different points of the novel.[51] Thus we must always consider the narration itself as a sort of performance. We cannot simply accept what Asako says at face value.

Interestingly, Asako's transformation over the course of the novel from overworked high school student, to drop-out, to her sudden desire to "meet lots of flesh-and-blood people," doesn't seem to entail any radical change in the way she sees herself or identity in general. In one sense, as she claims, "Nothing has changed."[52] However, one could also offer a reading where her work impersonating Miyabi allows her to embrace the performances required in everyday life, and thus return to school transformed (a reading that would be quite similar to the

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[51] Ibid., 14, 15, 38, 77.
[52] Ibid., 128-9.

potential Marxist critique offered earlier). I would like to argue that, as Asako actually presents us with a reflexive construction of her self through narration, we are left unable to offer a definitive reading of the text. Has Asako changed, and not let us in on it? Or is she telling the truth? It is precisely this position of unresolvability, I would like to contend, that exists at the core of every identity, and offers the potential for resistance to capital and its systems of power.

Asako seems to stop attending school for two reasons. The first is a desire to differentiate herself from her classmates. The story begins with her telling her friend Kōichi, "Can I keep living this life, the same as everyone every day? Taking the same classes as everyone in the same classroom, every day. I mean, I don't have any specific dreams, but I have aspirations. I'm definitely gonna be famous. I don't want to be on TV, though."[53] Though her life is essentially indistinguishable from her classmates', she insists that she is somehow different. Not attending school would allow her to illustrate her uniqueness.

Asako is also fed up with her classmates. She sees her classmates as simply "fooling each other." She quotes a conversation she hears other girls having only to interrupt in her own imagination: "Are you studying for college entrance exams? Not at all. Yesterday I fell asleep at nine. Really. That's why I'm so energetic today. Well then, I wanted to ask, what are those bags under your eyes?" But this whole game of lying about studying seems a waste to her because "everyone sees through all of everyone else's lies."[54] From the very beginning of the novel, then, Asako recognizes the performances of self that individuals put on. Before even impersonating anyone, Asako has a reflexive understanding that what individuals say is not necessarily the truth of what they feel.

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[53] Ibid., 9.
[54] Ibid., 12.

Yet she also sees what could very much be considered "true" identities. Upon meeting Kazuyoshi's mother for the first time, she compares her to the "*burikko*" girls she sees at school.

> There are lots of girls who try to look cute and purposefully pretend to be clumsy types. We make fun of them and call them *burikko*, but that forced clumsiness is way better than the real thing. Clumsiness used as a weapon to make yourself look good is cute and gets some light laughs, but this real clumsiness, there's nothing appealing about it. It's ugly, and trashy, and makes the people who see it tense up and get serious.[55]

While elements of personalities can be faked, for Asako at least there are also ones that can be recognized as real.

In this light, Asako's truancy and throwing out all of her possessions can be read as an attempt to assert a true self. If school and the things she owns are taken as signifiers for a type of social identity that she sees as non-essential, abandoning them leaves nothing but the true self. This reading also resonates nicely with the way Asako presents her own actions to Kazuyoshi. When he shows her the now working computer she explains that she threw out her possessions "to try and start something new. I threw out everything in my room to make myself feel better. I quit school, and emptied out my room. I did that all in a fit (*hossani*), and then wondered what I had left. But there was nothing left." Asako claims that abandoning the signifiers of identity has left her with nothing.

While Asako claims she did this all "in a fit," that is without any premeditation, planning, or thought, her narration actually contradicts these claims. She tells Kōichi before dropping out that if she skipped even a single day of school, she'd never come back, suggesting that dropping out was calculated. When she is throwing out her things she lingers on her computer, and contemplates its sentimental value. She also has to call a moving service to have her desk and

[55] Ibid., 44.

piano taken out of the apartment. Thus even in this seemingly honest conversation we see a careful presentation of self. Even presenting the self as empty, as nothing, requires a careful construction and performance.

Chatting does not drastically alter Asako's perceptions of individuals as possessing both a true and performed self. She is perfectly aware that the people she talks with could be lying about the identities they present to her.

> Having publically become a chat queen under Miyabi's name, I talked to nervous salary men with their computers open at work, *rōnin* who were free in the afternoon, and truck drivers who left for the highways late at night. Since I was only in the chatroom in the morning and afternoon, it seemed the people who came were only of those professions. But I was just guessing what they did, and in this chat world where anyone could lie as much as they want, there was a large possibility that people lied about their work.

The difference from the real world is not that people lie, but that there is no way to find out if they're lying or not. Thus in the chat world, while one can imagine an essential self facing a screen somewhere, there is no need to be concerned about that other body, as all one has access to is the performed persona, the text on the screen. Asako is of course aware that she too is playing the system.

> Even me, my age, and name, they were all lies. I was only here because I was taking full advantage of the anonymity of the internet, so I couldn't say anything impudent myself, but it was ridiculous how many people there were who claimed they were a "constantly busy businessman."[56]

While Asako acknowledges her complicity and the fact that she is lying about her identity here, she also positions herself as a sort of knowledgeable judge of others' performances. Because of her experience and how many people she meets (and presumably fools), she can offer up a claim

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[56] Ibid., 81-2.

about the number of businessmen she talks to. Though she may not be able to pick out any individual as a liar, she can still do the mental math and realize that some people are likely lying.

Towards the end of the novel, Asako encounters a client named Seiji. His name is written with complicated *kanji* and upon seeing them she claims, "People with odd names like this tend to make themselves into characters. They create a new self online, become that character completely, and wander this electronic world for a long time."[57] Asako draws a distinction here between Seiji and herself. The character she inhabits is merely a performance while Seiji on the other hand thoroughly becomes his character. As such, he experiences a certain freedom she is not privy too. He can be whoever he wants, while Asako is stuck being Miyabi.

Seiji soon becomes angry because Asako does not remember talking to him. She rightly assumes that this is because Seiji spoke with Kazuyoshi the night before. However, she tries to play it off. She, Kazuyoshi, and the real Miyabi have all done so successfully in the past because "Miyabi's character is stupid."[58] However, all does not go according to plan. Seiji grows angry, demands the real Miyabi, and begins repeatedly sending suspicious links to a page that will presumably infect her computer with a virus. The next day Seiji returns and again demands the real Miyabi, and requests that Asako tell him "Those words he sent in throes of passion."[59] When Asako cannot answer they begin to fight and Seiji "sees through to my real personality. [. . .] You're an only child, you don't have friends, you're a virgin. He kept hitting the mark and finally he even realized that I was a high schooler." When Kazuyoshi returns, he calms Seiji down. Asako then asks Kazuyoshi, "Am I such a pathetic person that you can tell just through chatting

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[57] Ibid., 103.
[58] Ibid., 105.
[59] Ibid., 112.

with me?"[60]

Here again Asako distinguishes between herself and the character Miyabi that she performs. There is a "real personality" that exists behind the performance and by finding that true personality on the other side of the performance, Seiji manages to deeply trouble Asako. However, this passage does not seem to mark a distinctive shift in Asako's understanding of essential and presented self. In fact, it does the opposite. The fact that the line between performance and self could be crossed is exactly what is so troubling to Asako. Not only the quality of her performance, but also her ability to distinguish between performance and the real self is being called into question here.

But if there is no drastic change within Asako, what causes her to suddenly feel the urge to meet "lots of flesh-and-blood people" at the end of the novel? Given Asako's propensity to perform within her narration, we must question how earnest such a line really is. It seems entirely possible that Asako is simply performing the protagonist of a coming-of-age story, creating an unnerving contrast whereby on the one hand she allows the audience to see her growth, while at the same time also telling them quite clearly that "Nothing has changed." It is, after all, this manipulation of affect through text that she has been developing through her work as a chat queen. In fact, in her conversation with Seiji she even refers to her dialogue as *buntai,* or "writing style," a word with undeniable literary connotations.[61]

On the other hand, any meaningful embrace of the performative nature of identity requires us to recognize that identity, the self, and subjectivity simply cannot exist without being articulated. Until the transformed Asako, who now values human interaction, is performed, it

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[60] Ibid., 114.
[61] Ibid., 106.

does not exist. We can constantly extrapolate and guess at motivations or reasons she would say such a thing, just as Asako can, looking at the overall flow of customers she interacts with, guess that some of them are lying about their jobs, but there is just no way we can make a sound conclusion.

This, I believe, is what makes *Install* such a profoundly provocative work. While it calls our attention to a theoretical blind spot—the relation between performed identity and the seeming subjectivity that we sense behind it—in the same motion it effaces the possibility of theorizing that space by exposing how it too can only exist as performance. One of the qualities that makes the text so pleasurable to read is its idiosyncratic shifts in style and voice, but it is those same elements that expose the highly constructed, and thus epistemically questionable nature of that performance. What *Install* does, to take the words of Judith Butler slightly out of context, is reveal that "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause."[62] Here we have no body, merely a text, but this text too, seems to have no center, no core, no essence upon which we can hang a totalizing reading.

Thus returning to our broader questions of labor and identity, we must acknowledge that there certainly is a relation between the variety of performed selves that share a body, a culture, or a language. However, this relation itself will always be performed. Elements and bits of performances can leak between the various identities constructed in various ways, and no sharp lines can be drawn between 'working self' and 'leisure self' or 'self online' and 'self offline.' This realization allows us to rephrase the question of whether Asako and Kazuyoshi's labor

[62] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 136.

allows for the free performance of new identities, or simply enables the recirculation of stereotypes. We must also ask, does the performance of the subject's relation to this labor obscure the repressive or ideological element that inevitably structures all such interactions? Asako's shifting narrative style resists any direct answer to this question, but maybe it is precisely this measured ambivalence that allows us to see the potential for both liberation and oppression inherent in the work she does.

***Exodus*: (Net)working Together**

After abandoning the school system, the ex-students of *Exodus* embark on many business ventures. They use their nation-wide network to start a film service, and join with both an international news organization, Vltava, and also a Japanese company that makes programs of local, amateur dance and music performances for satellite TV; they start a digital delivery service and an online security service; they do a lot of volunteer work.[63] All of these different businesses, however, are connected and circuited through Namamugi News which later explicitly becomes part of ASUNARO. Each and every one of these organizations relies on a pool of flexible labor that can be summoned up at any moment, anywhere in Japan.[64] While some of ASUNARO's services involve technical skills (such as their net security service), others involve more rote work like scanning or typing up documents.[65]

What I would like to focus on in this discussion, though, is not any one of these individual organizations. Rather, I would like to think more broadly about the network itself. I will argue here that the network, like individual identity in *Install*, is constructed through members' labor. The network, like individual identity, can only come into being through the

[63] Murakami Ryū, *Exodus*, 129-36, 346, 243.
[64] Ibid., 137, 346.
[65] Ibid., 346, 137.

constant addition of communicative labor on the part of its members. This process is also immanently valuable. Furthermore, while this particular organization of labor is highly democratic, it also puts high value on the individual, and in particular, individual productivity.

Extensive parallels can be drawn here between the description of a network in *Exodus* and more theoretical descriptions. For example Wendy Hui Kyong Chun argues that the networked "we" is different from the "we" of Benedict Anderson's imagined community because it is both "deliberately temporary" and also serves as a "network weapon" which can cause crashes, derailing the entire system.[66] She further argues that networks "embody neoliberalism's vision of individuals as collectively dissolving society" and also "answer the dilemma posed by postmodernism—How to navigate an increasingly confused and confusing globalized world?—by diagramming allegedly unrepresentable interactions."[67] What differentiates Namamugi News and ASUNARO from more theoretical descriptions like Chun's, however, is that the network is also deliberately limited in *Exodus*. This, we shall see, is important for the act of limiting the network not only produces economic value, but is tied up in the production of a shared set of values as well.

The link between the delimitation of a group and the production of economic value appears quite early in the text. In Sekiguchi and Goto's second interview with Nakamura and Pon-chan's group, Goto asks about the security of Namamugi News. How, he asks, can they be sure that all the members of the now unified Namamugi News are middle schoolers? Pon-chan explains that the previous year, when the Ministry of Education had Hikari Fiber cables installed in all the schools, they also set up one hundred and twenty-six blocks, each with its own unique

[66] Wendy H.K. Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*, (Boston: The MIT Press, 2016), 36, 28.
[67] Ibid., 39.

code to verify the computer systems of these schools. A member of Namamugi News wrote a program that "uses those codes as they are" to verify that all users are actually ex-middle school students.[68] The establishment of Namamugi News as a nation-wide network also mandated a process to monitor and verify who can access it, a process of limiting membership.

The network here must also be understood in a very immediate way as a sort of commodity. In this same conversation Pon-chan also tells Sekiguchi and Goto that the ex-students contemplated simply selling access to their message board as an initial way to make money. What's peculiar about the network as a commodity in this case is that its value is derived on the one hand, from the size of its user base, but also from the limitations set on that user base. Goto explains to Sekiguchi that "a message board with hundreds of thousands of people accessing it will produce that much value." And he adds that what's particularly special about the case of Namamugi News is the combination of the great number of members and the "uniformity of their values and lifestyle."[69] Thus we can say that by restricting membership to Namamugi News and installing a technical apparatus by which they can verify the identity of users, the ex-students actually increase the value of their network for economic value is derived not just from the number of members, but also from the fact that they form a discrete group represented by a certain identity category.

How, exactly though, do the members of ASUNARO imagine their group identity? When discussing ASUNARO they tend to describe it in terms of a network, and also as radically democratic. Consider, for example, Nakamura's description of the Blue Gang's decision-making process.

> Pon-chan doesn't give out orders. He offers ideas. The

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[68] Murakami, *Exodus*, 133.
[69] Ibid., 109.

> representatives of the one hundred and twenty-six different school groups have made a bunch of different mailing lists, and they share ideas about business for example.[70]

Top-down control is replaced by vertical communication. Even seeming "leaders" do not command, but rather suggest. Their relationship is one of constant discussion. As another ASUNARO representative explains, "Our group was not formed through a systematic plan. In other words, there wasn't anyone at the top who decided to make this sort of structure; no one followed any blueprint to establish certain posts or assign these people there. We don't have a leader."[71] ASUNARO is democratic, formed organically from the bottom up.

Pon-chan invokes a similar ethos in his speech at the Diet. When asked why eight-hundred thousand middle school students refuse to go to school, he refuses to even try to answer, simply saying instead that "There are currently approximately eight hundred thousand students not attending school. And there are approximately eight hundred thousand reasons why we're not going. We are doing the same thing, but we all have different reasons for doing it."[72] ASUNARO then appears to be defined by its highly democratic nature and a sort of looseness of relation. That is to say, membership in the group does not demand sacrificing individual identity. There does not seem to be a sort of demand for a *type* of personality that then consumes individual identity (or must be navigated in terms of one's individual identity).

Despite the looseness of this sort of group formation, it proves highly effective at making a political statement. I'd like to look more closely at the scene of Pon-chan's Diet Budget Committee Hearing. While previous analyses of this scene have zoomed in on Pon-chan's speech, I believe there's a lot more to see here. This scene is first of all, a technical spectacle.

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[70] Ibid., 138.
[71] Ibid., 330-1.
[72] Ibid., 304.

Because he's worried about being arrested, Pon-chan does not attend this committee meeting in person. Instead, several members of ASUNARO set up a screen at the Diet and he teleconferences in. Sekiguchi tells us that "Pon-chan's face was bigger than the torso" of the Committee chair, so "it felt just like watching a science fiction movie."[73] Even this technological absurdity suggests ASUNARO's range of influence—not so much in a technical aspect, but rather because a place as conservative as the Diet would let their representative appear in such an unorthodox fashion.

These Budget Committee meetings are usually broadcast exclusively by NHK, and thus are watched primarily only in Japan. But soon after the broadcast begins, it cuts off. It comes to light that ASUNARO, under the guise of visiting NHK's facilities to discuss a possible collaboration in the future, set up a system to remotely access NHK's control center. They hijack the broadcast, and send it to news media throughout the world, transforming what should have been a Japanese media event into a global one.[74]

This hijacking certainly establishes ASUNARO as a group with considerable technical savvy. An NHK commentator later suggests that they must be about equivalent to a medium-sized information-broadcasting company.[75] But this performance also explicitly positions ASUNARO in opposition to the Japanese government and media. By manipulating the entire frame of this media event, they render the entire Budget Committee literally silent. "None of the members tried to ask questions, and everyone, including the chairperson was struck dumb from surprise. No one knew what to do."[76] Sekiguchi goes on to say that Pon-chan and his group

[73] Ibid., 303.
[74] Ibid., 305-7.
[75] Ibid., 322.
[76] Ibid. 390.

probably knew it would have a similar freezing effect on the Japanese media generally.

> They probably took over NHK's operation center and sent the feed to the foreign media because they knew their influence. The Japanese media couldn't criticize Japanese people or organizations recognized by foreign media. Those people and companies are automatically removed from Japanese media's standards of judgment. . . They have no standard to judge or criticize them. They've never needed that standard.[77]

Thus by positioning themselves as an international organization engaged in a global conversation, ASUNARO effectively neutralizes the influence of both Japanese politicians and media. They very successfully embarrass, on a global stage, those in power.

But there is another trick to this. This performance also produces a great deal of value for ASUNARO. Towards the end of his talk, Pon-chan mentions that ASUNARO has been collaborating with several different companies, and that those companies will later announce their joint ventures. In turn,

> BBC and CNN played Pon-chan's talk on their evening news. There were also [. . .] segments suggesting what kind of companies ASUNARO would work with in the future [. . .] BBC and CNN listed over forty Japanese companies and financial institutions [. . .] The stock prices of the companies discussed on BBC and CNN went flying.[78]

While previous analyses focus on Pon-chan (and indeed, his speech is quite moving), what I would like to stress is that the success of this whole complex media event required a great deal of labor from many people. Nakamura-kun worked hard setting up the hearing; members had to sneak into NHK and set up the system to take over their control center; others had to manipulate that system. Still more people were certainly required to coordinate with foreign news outlets, and also make sure that Pon-chan's feed wasn't traced. This work had to congeal together to let

[77] Ibid. 333-4.
[78] Ibid. 317-8.

Pon-chan utter his famous line, “Japan has everything . . . But there’s no hope.”

I would like to stress once again Pon-chan’s refusal to speak for the eight-hundred thousand ex-students, for it is this position which makes this group action truly radical. What the network enables is the coordination of a vast but temporary coalition. The members of ASUNARO may share certain ways of thinking, affects, experiences, or goals. However, whatever it is that binds them together in these moments of collective action is not seen as subsuming their individual identity.

While this may appear a radically ethical stance, ASUNARO is not purely revolutionary. There are many “dark parts” in their brief history as well. ASUNARO is potentially responsible for releasing videos of celebrities visiting abortion clinics and clinics that specialize in the treatment of STDs, videos that potentially lead to a suicide.[79] They installed surveillance cameras outside a high school girls’ dormitory and started a payed streaming site where people could watch the feed.[80] But possibly the most terrifying example of this targeting of others, and the one I would like to focus on here, is “UBASUTE.” A member of ASUNARO started this branch organization with the stated purpose of creating “a modern day *Ubasuteyama*.”[81] This ASUNARO member proposes they create a facility in the mountains, have old people walk there (“we leave the ones who fall along the way”) and once they arrive they “can study and learn skills, and only those who have learned something can come down.”[82]

I want to linger on this particular example of contemplated cruelty for, I believe, its stated purpose and reasons reflects the negative side of the networked organization. Old people become

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[79] Ibid., 164.
[80] Ibid., 267.
[81] *Ubasuteyama* refers to a mountain from Japanese folklore where infirm and elderly people were left to die when the village could no longer care for them.
[82] Ibid., 209-210.

the target here for many reasons. Some of this member's tirade against the old seems to reflect a youthful distaste for an older generation's preferred entertainment (old people, they claim, like dead things like "*enka*, and bonsai, and period movies"). But the elderly are also targeted because they are unproductive. "We don't need people who just live a long time," the ASUNARO member claims. "Most elderly people don't work or study, and they're sickly." They even mention that the elderly "have no international competitiveness, and don't bring in any foreign money." What we see at work here is a sort of internalization of a neoliberal economic view expressed outwardly to judge a group of people. The importance of productivity is also coupled with a certain take on individuality. Another of their proposals is to make the elderly write essays, and "those that don't move us all go to the mountain."[83] This is the negative side of the ideology of the network, the ideology that decomposes the group into a loose collection of individuals.

The final radical move of *Exodus*, the titular exodus of the text, is explicitly described by Pon-chan as an attempt to use ASUNARO's capital to rein in this proliferation of neoliberal economic thought creeping into every aspect of life. "We've come to understand a bit about the market," Pon-chan explains to Sekiguchi. "It's a place to communicate desires, and just like air, or a virus, it penetrates everything and destroys the communities that were there before. *It makes the morals and rules of those communities meaningless*" (emphasis mine). Pon-chan goes on to explain that while the market is certainly "neutral" the "inequalities it produces are evil" and that "following the rules of the market has started to seem stupid."

> The liberal economy always produces losers, so the winners have to live in constant fear of revenge, right? Don't you think that's a waste? There was that middle schooler who killed his mom because she didn't buy him a DVD player, right? And there were

[83] Ibid.

> tons of middle school girls working as prostitutes, right? There are homeless people who sell their organs, and college students who sell their skin. That's because the market has crept into the deepest corners of our lives, and even things like organs that are supposed to be part of the individual have become objects to be bought and sold. If we keep on like this, we think we won't be able to help becoming the same as the adults we hated.[84]

Identity here is envisioned in much the same terms by which Terranova described individuality earlier. That is to say, the individual is understood primarily as a result of their environment. It is only by transforming this environment (a process Terranova describes as "soft control"[85]) that the members of ASUNARO can imagine producing a different sort of life where they won't become like the adults they hate. Thus we can understand Nohoro as an attempt to create a community that guides its members to become good through the fine-tuning of rules and incentives. It's also of note that Pon-chan leads his moral argument with a call to productivity. Inequality is bad not innately, but rather because it hinders productivity. There's an uncanny ambivalence here, in that Pon-chan's tirade against liberal economics is in fact thoroughly liberal.

But this makes a strange sort of sense. Nohoro as a city does incentivize good behaviors. Taxes are cut if you donate money to NPOs or NGOs recognized by Nohoro, but since Nohoro is still part of Japan, this system only works because ASUNARO pays national taxes. Donating money to a wind-energy fund gets you electricity almost for free, but again, ASUNARO covered the costs of the initial windmills Nohoro built. Nohoro can refuse funding from the nation of

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[84] Ibid., 359.
[85] Terranova writes that "The abstract machine of soft control is concerned with fine tuning the local conditions that allow machines to outperform the designers' specifications, that surprise the designers but spontaneously improve on them, while also containing their possible space of mutation."
Terranova, *Network Culture*, 119.

Japan thanks to a series of bonds issued by the city and backed by a bank that works with ASUNARO. That means that if ASUNARO's market value were to come into question, Nohoro, too, would go broke. The closing section of the book makes it quite clear that if economic stability is a prerequisite for stable society, the work of building and keeping up that society will never end.

Furthermore, though growth seems to offer one solution to this problem, it brings with it its own difficulties. Nohoro issues its own electronic currency, the ex, which at the closing of the novel is still quite valuable. But, a member of ASUNARO living in Nohoro explains that "there are some scary bits" to their currency. Controlling the amount of ex in circulation is incredibly difficult. Furthermore, ASUNARO is planning to build new facilities in Kunigami and Nagano. There's so much demand for ex at the moment, people are even willing to pay exorbitant rates to buy it on the digital black market. Of course, there's talk of potentially issuing bonds based on the ex to maintain its value, and allow it to grow without becoming a target for speculation. The conversation ends with the ASUNARO member saying, "I don't know what will happen when we come to that."[86] Expansion and openness to the economy then threatens the "value" of Nohoro not just in an economic sense. Loss of economic value would also ruin their utopia, deprive Nohoro of the values and ethics they work so hard to maintain.

The Individual, The Network

What I tried to argue in regards to *Install* was that there is in fact a sort of relation between identities we perform online and ones we live in the "real world." How these identities relate to one another is not predetermined, but we can, to some extent at least, use them as material to produce new identities. In my discussion of *Exodus* I tried to show that the creation of

[86] Murakami, *Exodus*, 413.

a group is a similarly willful task, and also a productive one that engenders value. It can also produce new relations of power and control. Again, this is neither necessarily good, nor bad. But once created, maintaining those systems also requires constant labor.

I would now like to draw a few connections between these two arguments. First, I believe both these arguments have shown that control must be understood as at least potentially both productive and radically ethical. It is Asako's control of her narrative that suggests the possibility she is not fully incorporated into the capitalist machine. In *Exodus* it is the control over the ex, as well as a set of economic controls that produce an independent society. However, this sort of control seems to require the constant exercise of will, the constant input of more and more labor.

Second, we must pay close attention to the way affects not only flows through these networks, but are produced around them. In *Install* we saw that affect can reach through the performance directly to Asako, the embodied person, but also emerges through certain routines. I did not argue this point in *Exodus*, but there are suggestions in the text that affect is one of the primary forces that congeals group action. For example, Pon-chan's invitation to change the schools:

> Everyone, I know you all have your opinions, and have things you want to say. But since starting school refusal, we've done a lot, and it hasn't really been fun. That's honestly how we feel. We thought it would be great if there was no school and we didn't have to study, if we could just play games and go to karaoke as much as we wanted, but after a week, we've gotten pretty bored. That's what we really think.[87]

Pon-chan's appeal is couched in the language of feeling, of boredom and fun. Throughout the text we also see Sekiguchi's fear and confusion at the radical actions of ASUNARO. Affects not only bring together, but they can also separate. We must ask what else can these affects do? How

[87] Ibid., 61.

else can they be spread, shared, or produced?

Finally, both of these arguments were also attempts to firmly position these technological "worlds" within what Terranova calls the "outernet," the "network of social, cultural and economic relationships which crisscrosses and exceeds the Internet—surrounds and connects the latter to larger flows of labour, culture and power."[88] Technology impacts the way we live, and the way we work. As it grows more and more everyday, it becomes even more important that we pay attention to these technological interfaces, how we relate to them and how we relate through them. Technology is not an "elsewhere" and when it provides fantasies of that sort, that is possibly when we should tread most carefully, and pay the most critical attention to what and who is at work.

Conclusion: Putting the Child Back in Place

By way of conclusion and in hopes of tying together some of the many different threads I've drawn out, I'd like to return to the question of the child. In his essay, "The Discovery of the Child," Kōjin Karatani argues that "Although the objective existence of children seems self-evident, 'the child' we see today was discovered and constituted only recently."[89] It is through modern institutions such as developmental psychiatry and schools which position children "as abstract and homogenous entities" and uproot them "from their productive relations, social classes, and communities that had previous been their concrete contexts" that the seemingly obvious figure of "the child" comes to exist.[90] We see these assumptions of the child as a natural category at work in many commentaries about *Install*. For example, in the suggestion that Asako

[88] Terranova, *Network Culture*, 75.
[89] Kōjin Karatani, *Origins of modern Japanese Literature*, ed. Brett du Barry, (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1998), 115.
[90] Ibid., 130.

and Kazuyoshi "peek into the adult world."[91] Technology does not allow Asako and Kazuyoshi to become adults, but to glimpse briefly and partially what adults do. After one of his many talks with Nakamura and Pon-chan's Blue Gang, Sekiguchi explores the grounds for this difference:

> Nakamura-kun said sometime that he thinks that rebellious students used to smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol, worry about their clothes, and drive cars and motorcycles because they wanted to copy adults. Pon-chan and Nakamura-kun aren't copying adults; they're actually doing what adults do. Maybe that's why they don't care about booze and cars and clothes.[92]

What I am trying to get at here is that rethinking what counts as labor, taking dead seriously what the characters in these stories do as work, involves tearing down the restrictive barriers set up in the modern era precisely by plugging "the child" back into "productive relations, social classes, and communities." It may allow us in some sense to imagine life without those barriers. While this is often interpreted as a sort of moral degradation, I hope I have shown that it can also open up spaces to think about new, ethical ways of being in the world as well. The question I would like to close with is, what other barriers might we have to rethink if we take the concept of immaterial labor seriously?

[91] Maruyama Asuka, Takahashi Sunahiko, Shima Kanae, Omori Aki, "*Nenrei gyakuten,netto shakai*," *Yomiuri Shinbun,* January 18, 2002.
[92] Murakami, *Exodus*, 267-8.

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