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Citation for published version (APA):

Cantrill, A. (2021). Neither Fact nor Fiction: Endnotes, Mythorealism and Reading "Inner Truth" in Yan Lianke's Lenin's Kisses. *Concentric*, 47(2), 123-147.

Published in:

Concentric

Citing this paper

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Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies 47.2
September 2021: 123-147
DOI: 10.6240/concentric.lit.202109_47(2).0006

Neither Fact nor Fiction: Endnotes, Mythorealism and Reading “Inner Truth” in Yan Lianke’s *Lenin’s Kisses* (*Shouhuo*)

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Abstract

This essay provides a new reading of Yan Lianke’s 2004 novel *Lenin’s Kisses* by focusing on its use of paratext, specifically the endnotes that make up the novel’s “Further Reading” sections. Main text and endnote regularly feature alongside urban and rural, utopia and anti-utopia on the long list of oppositional pairings explored in the novel. In contrast, I argue that the notes undermine these pairings by pointing to the subjectivity of such categories. I show how Yan destabilizes the division between main text and endnote by allowing their function to overlap. The false division of text then maps onto the other oppositions in *Lenin’s Kisses*, revealing difference as nothing more than a veneer. The notes allow Yan to critique practices of labelling and categorizing, becoming the aesthetic expression of his “mythorealist” (*shenshizhuyi*) genre. *Lenin’s Kisses* is here read as an “interactive” text, full of commentary on the pervasive and destructive nature of social categories.

Keywords

paratext, Yan Lianke, mythorealism, annotation, interactive fiction

On opening *Lenin's Kisses* (受活 *Shouhuo*) and turning past the accompanying introductory essay and contents page, the reader sees the monochrome image of a papercut. This image—the first of nine in the book—is dominated by a large black tree, a bird in its canopy, cutout flowers and fruits carved into its trunk. Suspended between the roots and low-hanging leaves are two human figures, one holding a scythe, the other a sickle. Beneath them the following in white text is cut into the black background:

現實主義——	<i>Realism—</i>
我的兄弟姊妹哦，	<i>Oh, my brothers and sisters,</i>
請你離我再近些。	<i>Please come a little closer to me.</i>
現實主義——	<i>Realism—</i>
我的墓地哦，	<i>Oh, my grave,</i>
請你離我再遠些。	<i>Please go a little further from me.</i>

(*Shouhuo* Papercut 1)¹

Then comes a double page spread, blank bar the novel's title written in black in the top corner of the left-hand page. Overleaf lies a second monochrome papercut. In its center stands a human figure with four plants growing out of their body like compass points. These vines create four chambers on the page, each of which contains a smaller human figure, hands outstretched to the nearby crop, baskets on their back to collect the harvest. Cut into the bottom left-hand corner are the words: 第一卷 毛鬚 (*Di yi juan maoxu* Book 1 Rootlets). Over the page the story itself begins thus:

第一章

天熱了，下雪了，時光有病了

你看啲，炎炎熱熱的酷夏裏，人本就不受活¹，卻又落了一場雪。
是場大熱雪³。

(*Shouhuo* 18) ²

¹ This essay refers to the 2007 Chinese edition of the novel published by Taipei Rye Field Publishing House. This refrain is not included in the 2013 English translation. All other translations into English in this essay are taken from the 2013 Vintage edition of *Lenin's Kisses* by Carlos Rojas, unless stated otherwise. The papercut images are not included in the English translation.

² The Arabic numerals included in this quotation are the citation numbers used in the original text. The citation numbers are not sequential, and they are made up of odd numbers exclusively. The

CHAPTER 1: HEAT, SNOW, AND TEMPORAL INFIRMITY

Look, in the middle of a sweltering summer, when people couldn't live,¹ it suddenly started snowing. This was hot snow³.

(*Lenin's Kisses* 3)

As these examples make clear, paratext dominates the novel's first few pages, from the papercuts to the "book" title and citation numbers dotted throughout its opening lines. These first pages are representative of what follows. Within the novel's text, Yan Lianke's (閻連科) prose is framed by volume and chapter titles in the orthodox fashion, then punctuated regularly by citation numbers and endnote matter in a manner not often encountered in the modern Chinese novel.³ Carlos Rojas, whose English translation of the novel was first published under the title *Lenin's Kisses* in 2012, contends that Yan's reliance on endnotes echoes the "peculiar temporal disjointedness" at the core of *Lenin's Kisses* (Yan, *Lenin's Kisses* vii).

It is certainly true that the main text and "Further Reading" (絮言 *xuyan*) operate along different timelines. As the reader navigates the text's various parts, they lurch from the Ming Dynasty to the Reform era, with interludes in the Qing Dynasty, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution along the way. On a superficial level there is also a neat symmetry between the plot and the layout of the text. *Lenin's Kisses* tells the story of Liven (受活庄 *Shouhuo zhuang*), a remote fictional village in the Balou mountains, Henan province, home exclusively to people with disabilities. Over the course of the novel this isolated community is influenced by an outsider who proposes that villagers establish their own travelling performance troupe to earn money to buy Lenin's embalmed corpse. This newcomer, a government official named Liu Yingque (柳鷹雀), suggests that they house the corpse in a nearby mausoleum, allowing the cadaver to become a tourist attraction that will bring prosperity to the villagers and secure Liu's glory for posterity. Whilst some of the villagers are keen to participate in the troupe and earn money, others are more reticent. Their reluctance is voiced by a woman named Mao Zhi (茅枝), the "village director" (主事 *zhushi*), who opposes Liu's scheme. Mao Zhi instead campaigns for the occupants of Liven to "withdraw" (出社 *chushe*) and cut themselves off from society entirely.

same pattern is replicated in the English translation by Carlos Rojas, as visible in the quotation that follows.

³ Li Er's (李洱) 2018 novel *Brother Yingwu* (應物兄 *Ying wu xiong*) is a recent exception. Li uses paratext throughout the novel, providing a commentary on events through a series of footnotes. This split narrative style is intended to imitate novels of the Late Qing.

Thematically, then, the plot is preoccupied with the meaning of interior, exterior, and the consequences of a meeting between the two. The novel's structural division between main text and endnote is often read as a pragmatic necessity, included to explain otherwise inaccessible plot points, as well as regionally and historically specific language, to the reader. When the notes are read as a creative decision, they are interpreted as an aesthetic reflection of the contrast between Liven and the outside world, and the power struggle between Mao Zhi and Liu Yingque (Song 648). This article proposes a new reading. It argues that the endnotes in *Lenin's Kisses* act as the aesthetic embodiment of Yan's "mythorealism" (神實主義 *shenshizhuyi*) genre: a tool to expose the role of textual aesthetics and labelling in the construction of narrative meaning.

Mythorealism is a genre of fiction grounded in neither reality nor myth, fact nor fiction. The name is Yan's own creation, and he has written extensively on its meaning, most notably in his 2011 set of essays *Discovering Fiction* (發現小說 *Faxian xiaoshuo*). The concept answers Yan's scathing critiques of realism as a "pile of garbage" and "self-serving" (Li and Yan 462), a literary style that produces "few works that dare to really question and doubt people and society" (Yan, *Faxian* 175). Despite this, mythorealism, as the name suggests, does concede that "reality" cannot be cast off entirely. Instead, it purports to seek a "non-existent truth, one you cannot perceive, a truth obscured by the truth" (*Faxian* 172). In this sense, mythorealism is not dissimilar to magic realism. Both seek to disrupt what Wendy Faris and Lois Zamora term the "singular vision" of the world espoused by realist novels, and to allow the reader to "scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation" (3).⁴ Whilst Yan acknowledges the confluence between mythorealist and magic realist novels, in particular those from Latin America, he nonetheless argues that Chinese writers should not merely imitate foreign authors without adding their own innovations (*Faxian* 195). The pursuit of mythorealism, in Yan's eyes, is one nascent within China's literary tradition—an endeavor that is by necessity separate from the various "realisms" found in fiction elsewhere.

In Yan's treatment, mythorealist works have two distinguishing features. First, they appeal to liminality to expose the realist novel as a false pursuit, and realism itself as a misnomer. Second, conceding that no book can truly capture reality, the mythorealist novel instead opts to capture truth by appealing to the human spirit

⁴ It is also worth noting the difference between Yan's "mythorealism" and what Jeanne Delbaere-Garant terms "mythic realism." Delbaere-Garant understands the latter as a form of magical realism rooted in the landscape, manifesting through "uncanny correspondences between character and place" (253-54).

(*Faxian* 205). The endnotes in *Lenin's Kisses* help to achieve both purposes. In a rejection of realist narrative conventions, Yan resurrects the split narrative voice present in the earliest examples of Chinese fiction which he cites as exemplary mythorealist texts. The division between textual categories also reflects on the human condition, specifically humanity's tendency to affix differentiating labels to everything we encounter—a tendency especially pronounced in Maoist political discourse.⁵ As the story unfolds, Yan blurs the functions of endnote and main text. As a result, far from reinforcing the juxtaposition between Liven and the rest of society, the novel's paratext highlights the folly of oppositional labels like “inside society” versus “outside society,” “inside the story” or “outside the story.” In both plot and presentation, *Lenin's Kisses* exhibits the inescapable power of labelling practices in literary conventions and society at large.

This essay begins by establishing the distinctive aspects of Yan's paratext. I then move to contextualize *Lenin's Kisses* within the history of paratext in Chinese textual culture, showing how it is purposefully reminiscent of the Classical Chinese novels that Yan cites as archetypal mythorealist texts. The focus then shifts to the idea of binary pairs—the prism through which Yan's works are so often assessed. I show how the supposed opposition between endnote and main text is undermined throughout *Lenin's Kisses*, as Yan uses factual and fictional registers interchangeably in both textual spaces as the novel progresses. The collapse of this textual divide mirrors the novel's other oppositional pairings, in particular Mao Zhi and Liu Yingque's relationship. In the third section, I discuss how *Lenin's Kisses* uses paratext to comment on the power of the annotator in shaping perceptions. Mao Zhi and Liu Yingque's interaction with annotation in the plot is paralleled in the reader's interaction with Yan's annotations as they move through the novel. In this way, the act of reading *Lenin's Kisses* mimics in microcosm the reading practices that dominated public spaces in Maoist society. For the concluding section I turn to the question of Yan's position as an author and public intellectual. I add another dimension to this well-established discussion (Liu, *Zhuangzi* 187, 203; Xie 46), proposing that Yan's use of paratext in *Lenin's Kisses* points to his despair with the inescapability of social categorizing—a practice that the novel portrays as both arbitrary and deeply destructive. Through paratext, Yan emphasizes his own complicity as a writer in the habits of labelling that *Lenin's Kisses* quietly condemns.

⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss commented on this universal habit in his influential “Science of the Concrete” concept (2-3).

Crossing the Threshold: Yan's Innovative Use of Paratext

Studies of paratext often gravitate toward questions of function. Endnotes, titles, and prefaces are all highly intentional additions to any work of fiction, and consequently, as Gérard Genette surmised, the “functional aspect” of paratext is the “main point” (12). Though the exact purpose of paratext varies from one example to the next, there is a consensus that it introduces a different kind of writing to the main text it accompanies. There is also an implied hierarchy between the different sections, as the terms “main text,” “endnote” and “footnote” all suggest. Genette’s landmark analysis spatialized the two textual categories, drawing a stark distinction between fictional narrative and factual paratext. For Genette, to read from main text to endnote demands a movement to a place of in-between, neither wholly within the novel nor beyond it (2). In other words, paratext and main text are placed in opposition: whatever one body of text is, the other is not.

Existing analysis of the endnotes in *Lenin's Kisses* conforms to this interpretation of paratextual function. Wang Hongsheng and Carlos Rojas both conclude that the endnotes are “explanatory”—or “navigational” to use Ruokkeinen and Liira’s designation (124)—acting as factual tributaries to the narrative’s general flow (Wang 97; Rojas 433). Jianmei Liu, meanwhile, understands the novel’s endnotes as presenting an “official history” in contrast with the “oral history” contained in the main text (*Zhuangzi* 200). Liu and others, including Wang Hongsheng and Thomas Chen, also propose that endnote and main text represent two differing conceptions of utopia (Liu, “To Join the Commune” 8; Wang 90; Chen 67). These differing utopias include the clash between communist state-led collectivism and capitalist individualism, along with the more subtle exploration of what a happy life entails. Here the modern equation of wealth with happiness goes head-to-head with the traditional utopic trope in Chinese literary culture, the absolute seclusion of Tao Yuanming’s (陶淵明) *Peach Blossom Spring* (桃花源記 *Taohua yuan ji*). These different readings of *Lenin's Kisses* do make mention of paratext, though these mentions are often brief, with paratext seen as one further reflection of the novel’s exploration of binary pairings. The endnotes themselves are rarely prioritized, nor are they contextualized through reference to paratext theory. Given the extent of Yan’s own writing on literary theory, and the dominance of paratext in *Lenin's Kisses*, it is in some ways quite striking that its endnotes have not been subject to a more thorough enquiry. Such an enquiry, as this essay shows, opens an alternative understanding of the novel. By prioritizing the endnotes in *Lenin's Kisses*, we reveal its critique of

arbitrary categorizing, with the typical distinction between paratext and main text being one example amongst many.

Yan's commentary on his "mythorealist" genre hints at the deeper purpose of the paratext in *Lenin's Kisses*. As noted above, mythorealism is in part about outing literary truth as a constructed fantasy designed with intent, even when its details replicate recognizable scenes and events. It seeks to reveal to the reader the great deception of the literary universe—namely, that it can't perfectly capture lived reality after all. Paratext facilitates the discovery of this mirage. It is a mode of textual presentation with established connotations, as a reader is inclined to understand an endnote as a reliable narrative voice. The notes are typically delivered in a factual register, offering supplementary reading to the plot proper. It is precisely this confidence in paratext as a realm of "fact" that Yan probes throughout *Lenin's Kisses*. Though the novel is seemingly divided into opposing blocks—with the main text appearing as "fictional," the endnotes as "factual"—in actuality the two categories are riddled with details that contradict their aesthetic presentation. In this way, we are presented with "truth obscured by the truth," as the division between main text and endnote masks the way their content overlaps. By blurring the binary between the two textual realms, Yan undermines the conventional interpretation of paratext espoused by scholars like Genette. In turn, a mythorealist interpretation of the endnotes allows us to view the novel's other oppositions in a new light. The chasm between Liven and the rest of society narrows, and they are not as different as they first appear.

Lenin's Kisses is neatly coupled with Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), as both novels use paratext to mount a commentary on textual categories (Rojas 433; Yan, *Lenin's Kisses* vii). They are also both examples of what Andrew Ferguson terms "interactive fiction," a reading experience, as David Walker suggests, where the reader is encouraged to question how their mind pieces together the information presented to them by the author (Ferguson 102; Walker 204).⁶ As Shari Benstock contends, here endnotes are more than "stylistic" embellishments. Instead, they are intended to trigger self-reflexivity, serving as a reminder of the "presence of author and reader on textual grounds" (205). It is precisely this hierarchy between author and reader that Yan points to in *Lenin's Kisses*. He controls the perimeters of the novel, and the reader relies on him to do so. Of course, said reader may choose to ignore his additions, but their understanding of the text will be compromised as a

⁶ Carlos Rojas has compared *Lenin's Kisses* to Nabokov's work, though he approaches their coupling as part of a commentary on the structural similarities of their works. The overlapping function of this shared structure is yet to be probed in detail (433).

result. In this way, Yan shows how the labeler, or the annotator, exercises a significant degree of power—an observation that rings true in *Lenin's Kisses*. The “truth” he uncovers is contained not only in the content of the text, but also in its presentation.

Parsing the Paratext

Lenin's Kisses features a range of endnotes throughout its eight volumes, from short commentaries included at the end of narrative passages to the contents of entire chapters labelled “Further Reading.” Yan’s comments on China’s literary history point to several historical novels as sources of inspiration for this extensive paratext. He cites a number of Classical Chinese texts, including *Journey to the West* (西遊記 *Xi You Ji*) and *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (聊齋誌異 *Liaozhai zhiyi*), as exemplary mythorealist texts (*Faxian* 188). At the time of their publication in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these texts were often accompanied by abundant paratextual material. They relied on marginalia and supplementary essays for explanation and exposition, as was the norm in the textual culture of the period. By incorporating commentary into the body of the novel, *Lenin's Kisses* serves as a modified reconstruction of these older Chinese novels. The endnote becomes the perfect textual mode to establish a parallel with these older ways of reading and writing, where narrative speaks in a chorus of voices dispersed across different parts of the text.

The intimate relationship between China’s historic textual culture and paratext is well documented. The majority of research concerned with paratext in Chinese materials has a premodern focus, analyzing the annotations, seals and prefaces that accompanied manuscripts produced in Imperial China. This includes an expansion of the “paratext” concept to accommodate practices unique to sinograph writing systems. Hang Lin, for example, argues that the dropped strokes in “taboo characters” (避諱 *bihui*) should be read as paratext (153).⁷ Similarly, David Rolston argues convincingly for the influence of commentaries (評點 *pingdian*) and punctuation (圈點 *qiandian*) added to manuscripts—two forms of writing that he discusses as paratext in all but name (4, 24). Among these observations, the turn of the seventeenth

⁷ Michael Schoenhals provides a relevant example from the Taiping Rebellion about the counterintuitive definitions of these characters. He notes how the characters for “funerary” (喪 *sang*) and “death” (死 *si*) were banned from the Taiping court. As a result, “funerals” (喪事 *sangshi*) were written as “weddings” (喜事 *xishi*), “prior to death” (死前 *siqian*) as “prior to birth” (生前 *shengqian*) (2). These conventions are a perfect example of the written word obscuring an “inner truth,” as Yan would term it.

century has received especial attention, as several studies have identified the twilight years of the Ming Dynasty as the period when paratext began to appear in earnest (Chow 152; Lin 132). The growth of commercial printing throughout the Wan-li era, as Kai-wing Chow outlines, saw a proliferation of paratext as a growing group of readers and editors amended texts with their insights, ranging from marginalia to full-fledged supplementary essays (152). Chow contends that these peripheral markings promoted new interpretations of the Confucian canon, deviating from the *Cheng-zhu* reading endorsed by the political establishment at the time (151, 157). This understanding of paratext as a medium for dissent is well established in paratext studies (Sedlmeier 70). It also resonates through criticism that envisages Yan's use of paratext as a reflection of his own voice, articulating a cryptic critique from society's edges (Rojas 433).

There is a long history, too, of paratext in Chinese fiction. The pages of tales from the Ming and Qing dynasties often harbored lengthy commentaries in their peripheries. Rolston traces this practice to the publication *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國演義 *Sanguo yanyi*) from 1522. This “earliest extant edition of a full-length work of fiction,” he explains, came replete with explanatory notes, deployed to aid the reader in navigating the text's historical obscurities (44). The interest in paratext from Chinese historical fiction is best captured in the enduring fascination with “Red Inkstone” (脂硯齋 *Zhiyanzhai*) and “Odd Tablet” (畸笏叟 *Jihusou*), the two infamous annotators of *Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢 *Honglou meng*). Their notes, both separate from the plot and integral to it, have proved so “seductive,” to borrow Anthony Yu's term, that the “scholiasts” frequently attract attention equal to if not greater than that of Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹) himself (12). Though paratext in *Lenin's Kisses* is of a different variety to the marginalia of Inkstone and Tablet, Yan's work nonetheless harkens back to this earlier mode of reading and writing. As the endnotes add commentary and contradiction, the authorial voice splinters. The reader by necessity forges their own path through the narrative, balancing paratext and main text as they go.

In more recent times, annotations have disappeared from Chinese novels—pushed out, as in other parts of the world, by changes in book production and the arrival of what Christopher Reed terms “modern Chinese print capitalism” in the late nineteenth century (4). In the drive to modernize textual culture under the auspices of the New Culture Movement (新文化運動 *xin wenhua yundong*), commentaries fell out of vogue as symbols of a dated mode of writing. They were also viewed as impediments to a blossoming book market looking to mechanize apace. Reprints of “traditional” novels at Oriental Book Company were supplemented with “Western-

style punctuation” (Rolston 49), whilst editors at Commercial Press sought out comment-free manuscripts for lithographic reproduction. These clean editions, as Robert Culp highlights, would prove near indecipherable for the even the most learned of readers, bar a select few with specialist knowledge of the text in question (136). Even as Zhonghua Book Company printed mock-up Classical texts with “imitation Song font and string binding” (144), annotations were a receding feature in the shake-up of textual aesthetics at the beginning of the twentieth century. Of course, the changing composition of the book did not eradicate commentary altogether but merely relocated it. Interpretations and explanations migrated to new, extratextual spaces, including literary journals, newspaper review columns and, more recently, the internet.

Through its wealth of endnotes, *Lenin’s Kisses* disrupts these now well-established reading conventions. It subverts the expectation that main text and commentary should exist in different spaces. It also fulfills Yan’s stipulation that contemporary mythorealist works “draw on the experience of twentieth century world literature” whilst also ‘taking root and growing in the cultural soil of our nation’ (Yan, *Faxian* 173). By splitting the narrative voice between main text and endnote, Yan induces a purposeful lack of narrative clarity, obliging the reader to determine what they understand as fact or fiction in the world of the novel. This ambiguity, as we will see in the following sections, allows Yan to comment on the illusion of opposition, the dangerous power of annotation, and the author’s complicity in these arbitrary systems of social and literary organization.

Blurring the Binary

As Jianmei Liu highlights, Yan’s works are bound together by oppositional pairings: urban and rural, sickness and health, and past and present (*Zhuangzi* 192; “To Join the Commune” 5). These pairings are so prominent that scholarship on his work often discusses their significance. Within this body of work, a consensus has emerged that Yan utilizes juxtaposed themes to comment, with varying degrees of didacticism, on commercialization, political corruption and progress for progress’ sake in contemporary China. Yu Wang and Jinghui Wang both touch on the latter in their discussion of “ghost marriage” (冥婚 *minghun*) as a plot point in *Seeking the Land* (尋找土地 *Xunzhao tudi*) and *Dream of Ding Village* (丁庄夢 *Dingzhuang meng*).⁸ In these works, Yan places the folkloric custom of ghost marriage alongside

⁸ A “ghost marriage” (冥婚 *minghun*) primarily takes two forms. In the first, a living person is wed to the deceased (the “ghost”). In most cases, this kind of marriage takes place when one half

contemporary absurdities to underscore the pitfalls of rapid economic development, with Jinghui Wang adding that these issues are presented without qualification, “with no intentions of resolving them” (Wang, “Religious Elements” 148; Wang, “Ghost Marriage” 92). Shelley W. Chan shows how Yan uses metaphors of disease to a similar end. In several of Yan’s works, disease serves as the corporeal manifestation of societal sickness, providing an allegorical reference to materialism’s corrosive influence (194). The trilogy of works Chan refers to in her study—*Days of the Sun* (日光流年 *Riguang liunian*), *Lenin’s Kisses* and *Dream of Ding Village*—are all set in a rural Henan villages consumed with sickness of one kind or another. The fictitious rural village appears here, as Xuenan Cao has emphasized, almost “outside the world” (180), a kind of control-variable altered with dramatic effect once the urban “outside” seeps in.

At first glance, the endnotes in *Lenin’s Kisses* seem to embody these oppositions. Main text and endnotes are spatially and aesthetically differentiated, printed in different fonts, and regularly siphoned into separate chapters entirely. The separation is especially pronounced in the novel’s opening passages, where endnotes appear as what Elaine Freedgood terms “scientific space”—which can also be understood as non-literary space (202). This organization encourages the established spatialized reading of main text and endnote. It erects Genette’s “threshold” between the textual territories (2), tempting reader and critic alike to understand endnote and main text as the aesthetic mirrors of the apparent moral and political chasm between Liven and the outside world. And so, criticism has calcified around the reliable image of a binary. As discussed above, endnote and main text are seen to symbolize official records and oral histories, rural and urban, as well as the leadership struggle between Mao Zhi and Liu Yingque. Underpinning each of these pairs are contrasting conceptions of what a perfect society looks like and of how to live a happy life: utopias and anti-utopias.

A mythorealist reading of *Lenin’s Kisses* contradicts these arguments. Even as the text signposts endnote and main text as distinct, Yan simultaneously allows the categories and labels in the novel to blur. The “scientific” tone of the endnote bleeds through to the fictional main text. Meanwhile, citation numbers act as the running stitch tying the two textual spaces closer by degree as the plot progresses. In the same way, even as the protagonists outwardly insist on their fundamental difference, their actions weaken the divisions between them. Jianmei Liu goes some way to

of a betrothed couple dies. In the second, marriage takes place between two deceased individuals. In each instance, they are designed to create or maintain ties between different families in lieu of death. See Yu Wang (87-88).

acknowledging this relationship in her comment that the novel’s “anti-utopia” and “utopia” are “mutually dependent” (“To Join the Commune” 8) in much the same way as there is no light without shade. Yet arguably their connection extends beyond dependency. Both visions of society in *Lenin’s Kisses* are structured around categorizing principles of one kind or another. Long before the labels of Maoist utopia and its capitalist equivalent filter into Liven, the village is already divided spatially by category: the blind live in one space, the mute in another and so on. The villagers even differentiate themselves from the non-disabled, whom they term “wholers” (全人 *quanren*). From this reading, the novel does not in fact present a number of oppositional pairs. Instead, it characterizes the entire notion of absolute opposition as nothing more than an implement of narrative construction and social organization—an attractive fiction. Yan does not expose the existence of antitheses, as much as society’s insistence on labelling concepts and persons as such. Set against the background of Maoist political discourse, *Lenin’s Kisses* foregrounds the subjective meaninglessness of labels. At the same time, it also emphasizes the ability of these labels to command power, and even induce violence, as reflected in the scenes of sexual and physical aggression at the novel’s close.

Deputy County Chief Liu Yingque’s arrival in the village of Liven is not a harmonious one. The village’s de-facto leader, Mao Zhi, is particularly vocal in her criticism. Despite their public declarations to the contrary, however, village director and Deputy County Chief share a remarkably similar worldview. They are both fixated with labels. Liu Yingque values his professional titles above all else; throughout the novel he treasures the distinction between Deputy County Chief and County Chief, as though these job titles reflect his integral worth. Mao Zhi is similar. She spends significant portions of the novel obsessing over the labels of “entering society” (入社 *rushe*) and “withdrawing from society” (出社 *chushe*). At various moments, she derives her sense of self from her status as an exemplary “revolutionary” who was present at Yan’an, a talisman of social significance that she brandishes whenever her position is under scrutiny. She clings, too, to the “village director” title as a reflection of her value to the community. The novel’s great rivals apply a shared logic in their attempts to order the world. The only difference is that they use different labels for the same things.

There is a disjunct here between what the characters claim to be and how they behave in practice. As the novel progresses, Yan continues to unpick their designations of difference. Both Mao Zhi and Liu Yingque pronounce the incalculable difference between their job titles, yet in practice they repeatedly mirror each other’s actions. In the novel’s opening passages, Liu is dismayed to learn that

Mao Zhi commands authority in Liven without a position bestowed on her by the state. Though it is noted that the people wouldn't call her a "cadre" (幹部 *ganbu*) as she hasn't been through the processes attached to such designations, she nonetheless undertakes the tasks normally undertaken by individuals in said position (Yan, *Shouhuo* 69-71). Despite his initial protestations, Liu is later quite comfortable taking on the accustomed duties of the village director when he organizes the Liven festival following the harvest (68). Mao Zhi, who is equally dismissive of Liu's claim to leadership, later follows in his footsteps by agreeing to organize the second performance troupe (208). The pair's actions at pivotal moments betray the arbitrary nature of the labels they value so highly. Liu seems to admit this when he promotes himself from Deputy County Chief to County Chief before he is officially given the title by his superiors. By blurring the binary between the protagonists, Yan also shows how their hierarchical view of society—and their resulting sense of superiority—are, in practice, underpinned by the same biases and desire for power.

This contrast between the appearance of absolutes and the reality of flux also underpins the relationship between endnote and main text throughout *Lenin's Kisses*. The novel's "Further Reading" sections are written in a factual register, mimicking a non-fictional tone. In the opening sets of endnotes in particular there are cross-references to a "county gazetteer" (縣志文字記載 *Xianzhi wenzi jizai*) (Yan, *Shouhuo* 22-23), and events are described in relation to dates as opposed to seasons. The notes are also replete with a series of definitions, some of which define terms that Yan himself devised. In these definitions we encounter several jarring inconsistencies in the "scientific" space of the novel, as fictional information is presented in the guise of fact. Similarly, in the latter half of the novel, a factual register infiltrates the main text. Mao Zhi performs a new act in the performing troupe where she pretends to be 241 years old. In the process of describing her performance, the main text supplies a chronological narrative of the events through which a 241-year-old would have lived: a potted history of China from the time of the Hongli Emperor to "Liberation" in 1949 (283-284). The purpose of both textual bodies established in the novel's opening volumes—one in pursuit of fact, the other of fantasy—collapses. The polarity between endnote and main text, like the polarity between Liven and the outside world, is exposed as illusory.

The various categories in the novel are further destabilized by the revelation of their subjectivity. A poignant example comes at the novel's close, with Yan's treatment of what is arguably the novel's most important label—"withdrawn from society." As the plot reaches its violent climax, both Mao Zhi and Liu Yingque cling to the "withdrawn" label as a comfort in the face of crisis. On discovering that her

granddaughters have been raped by “wholers,” Mao Zhi points to their violation as proof that Liven has no choice but to withdraw from society (391). Liu Yingque, meanwhile, faces a personal crisis as his career is thrown into disarray by scandal and disgrace. He allows himself to be run over by a car so he too can “withdraw” to Liven and forgo the life of a wholer (428). Even as Mao Zhi and Liu Yingque pin their desperate hopes on withdrawing, the reader ultimately feels its significance lapse. The novel’s conclusion shows how “withdrawing” is just as subjective and indefinite as other categories. After witnessing Liven successfully “withdraw,” Mao Zhi dies. In the pages that follow, a new set of migrants pass through Liven, explaining that they are heading to a spot even more remote in the Balou Mountains, to live lives better than those lived in Liven and to “withdraw” properly (441). Their arrival robs the novel of a neat resolution. As the act of “withdrawing” is redefined, it seems entirely possible that Liven has not “withdrawn” after all. The command of these categories is exposed as volatile, forever subject to broader societal dynamics that no single individual can control. As Mao Zhi’s husband reflects early in the novel as they discuss entering society, “but if you say that we have entered society, does that mean we necessarily will?” (Yan, *Lenin’s Kisses* 146). The concluding events of *Lenin’s Kisses* demonstrate that society and its violence will find you irrespective of whether you label yourself part of the world or beyond its reach.

The same subjectivity can be applied to the endnote and its accepted status as a breakaway from the main text. In his essay on textual borderlines, Derrida places great emphasis on quotation marks as agents of textual maiming: “they divide it, rework its bodies and its insides” (76). Similar crimes are attributed to paratextual markings when they appear in fiction. Freedgood focuses on citation numbers in particular, casting them as a “rupture” in the overall narrative flow (39). Though paratext can signal a break in textual integrity, these markings—and citation numbers in particular—can equally be understood as points of connection and integration between the spaces of a novel. In *Lenin’s Kisses* the citation numbers can be understood not as severing the textual body, but as weaving the groups of text together, eroding their aesthetic opposition and creating an intertextual web within the world of the book itself. The reader cannot proceed through the main text without reaching a visual representation of the endnote—the citation number—and vice versa. The spatial division between one realm of the text and the other that seems so absolute at first glance thus dissolves, the two territories becoming mixed up in one another. In using paratext, Yan spotlights our need, like Mao Zhi and Liu Yingque, to organize the world around us, including the book in our hands and the story in our minds. He

equally exposes that organization for what it is: a comforting construction that commands our understanding, and yet is vulnerable to change entirely in an instant.

There is a broader commentary at work here. As I noted above, *Lenin's Kisses* is anchored in historical references recognizable to the reader, with the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in particular imposing a historical timeframe onto a text that otherwise dodges temporal specificities. Though these references mainly populate endnotes, they also reverberate through the main text, as the reader witnesses Liu Yingque covet a Mao-style cult of personality to call his own. These reality checks, “informants” as Barthes terms them, “embed fiction in the real world” (96). Through this embedding, Yan focuses his critique of categorization on the most intensely political periods in Maoist China. As Lynn T. White outlines, “labelling” was instrumental to the Communist Party’s consolidation of power from 1949 onward, with labels such as “worker” (工人 *gongren*), “revolutionary soldier” (革命軍人 *geming junren*) gaining social capital and establishing what White describes as “new kinds of collective group consciousness” (8, 10). In *Lenin's Kisses* Yan parodies this system. Compulsive labelling and division by category pose as declarations of a fragile power, vulnerable to the volatile subjectivity endemic to this model of ordering a society. Yiching Wu argues that during the years of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, certain labels were stretched to “near lunacy,” with their definitions fluctuating according to place and time (235). Yan exposes this lunacy while stressing its violent potential in the novel’s final, pessimistic chapters. The reader has an appetite for oppositional pairings; they are a convenient and satisfying way of ordering the world. The paratext in *Lenin's Kisses* acts as the perfect vessel to allow this illusion of opposition to infiltrate the fabric of the text itself. As the opposition unravels on closer inspection, Yan exposes labelling as a way of understanding the world that is both enticing and dangerous due to its ability to mask reality’s inherent contradictions.

Writing on the Wall

Midway through *Lenin's Kisses*, Liu Yingque’s foster father, on his deathbed, bequeaths to Liu all his “entire life earnings,” stored in a warehouse across the yard, with the promise that said savings will bring him great success (211). The Cultural Revolution is in full swing, and Liu Yingque’s foster father, formerly a schoolteacher, has been demoted to sweeping the school courtyard. Upon entering the warehouse, Liu discovers piles of books about a selection of famous political leaders: Marx, Engels, Lenin, and, atop them all, Mao Zedong. Tucked away in each volume are

pieces of paper detailing the humble origins of each of these “great men” (偉人們 *weirenmen*). The information of particular importance is underlined with a varying sequence of red lines. Eventually, Liu stumbles upon a final piece of paper that is left blank, bar the same red lines. After his foster father’s death, Liu has a moment of enlightenment and realizes that the blank paper is for him, that his foster father intended for him also to achieve greatness and have his humble origins recorded for posterity. Once he is made Deputy County Chief, Liu dedicates an entire room to these notes, pasting them to the walls along with the portraits of the “great men”—hand he adds his own father, the annotator, to their ranks.

Conveyed to the reader in a single endnote, this sequence of events points to the power of annotation in creating narrative. The pieces of paper, themselves notes on longer volumes, construct a very particular story about the lives of each political leader, with the varying number of red lines adding varying degrees of emphasis. It is left to Liu to interact with these notes and deduce their relevance to his own circumstances. In an earlier set of endnotes, we witness Mao Zhi undergo a similar process. On a trip to a nearby market town, she encounters a sign containing the word “mutual aid team” (互助組 *huzhuzu*), which is then repeated in slogans painted on a wall nearby. Unable to grasp the significance of these words alone, she relies on the input of a passer-by, who provides a definition after first expressing his surprise at her ability to read the word yet not understand its meaning (Yan, *Shouhuo* 140). His interpretation pushes Mao Zhi to action. With her revolutionary fervor reignited, she is inspired to established Liven’s own work team and to urge the secluded community to “enter society.” In these instances, Mao Zhi and Liu Yingque reach understanding through a marriage of text and an interpretative framework provided by an outsider. In both cases, words act as motivation, a call to action. For Mao Zhi, the physical landscape surrounding her is punctuated by text. Liu Yingque, meanwhile, projects a physical architecture onto the words he encounters: the stacks of books are each described in “the shape of a tower” (塔狀 *ta zhuang*) and “tower style” (塔式 *ta shi*) (212).⁹ Later, he integrates his father’s notes into the architecture of his office by plastering them to the walls.

Through these moments, the reader observes the novel’s principals encountering and processing their own set of annotations and annotators. As Mao Zhi and Liu Yingque read and determine meaning with the aid of outside actors, so too the reader of *Lenin’s Kisses* balances main text and “Further Reading” in the pursuit of a narrative through-line. In both instances described above, there is an implicit comment on the power dynamic established between reader, writer and annotator.

⁹ My own translation.

Both, also, speak to the public act of reading during the Maoist period, as the walls of buildings became sites of annotation themselves. Geremie Barmé discusses the big character posters (大字報 *dazibao*) strewn across buildings and makeshift frames in 1957, and again in 1966, as examples of “text and subtext in a constant and complex exchange” (3). In *Lenin’s Kisses*, the reading practices inspired by such displays not only infiltrate the plot, but also the very act of reading the novel itself. As big character posters vied to hold the reader’s attention and incite them to action, so too the citation numbers and endnotes disrupt the textual landscape, pulling the reader up short and directing them to action—to turn the page and read elsewhere. Through this parallel, Yan constructs a participatory narrative evoking the highly politicized reading practices that took place in public spaces under Maoism. While the plot often operates in surrealism and myth, the book’s organization delves into the realities of reading, annotation and action during the Cultural Revolution and beyond. As mythorealism strives to unmask inner truth, reading here appears as the ultimate “internal” act, where the deliberations of conscious and subconscious interweave to make decisions based on a handful of sentences.

Indeed, the act of reading and annotating provokes tangible physical reactions at various moments in *Lenin’s Kisses*, with text frequently urging the body into action. After reading about mutual aid teams, Mao Zhi’s heart “started racing, like a dammed-up underground stream that had suddenly been opened” (Yan, *Lenin’s Kisses* 142). Her newfound physical energy, derived from the act of reading, drives her not only to establish her own “team,” but also to have sex with her husband. Liu Yingque’s life, meanwhile, is a compilation of actions inspired by his father’s annotations. We witness specific moments of physical intensity when he adds lines of achievements to his list of honors. When he comes to add the false title of County Chief, his hands sweat and his heart pounds. Completing the act of writing then brings him a sense of physical calm, as “he felt a wave of peace flowing over him, and the energy and warm blood that had been surging through his body began to subside” (238). Reading and annotating are thus shown as catalytic acts, provocative enticements that register with the body before their significance has fully registered with the mind. Ann Anagnost has written extensively on the movement of revolutionary discourse from text to body and back again in Maoist society (18). She notes how oral action and acts of the body—speaking bitterness, struggle sessions and so on—were prompted by the written word, and often accompanied by textual explanations that formed a backdrop to acts of violence, whether that be big character posters or writings affixed to the body of the denounced (31). The movement of text that Anagnost describes here is mirrored in *Lenin’s Kisses*. At various crucial

moments, Mao Zhi wears a burial robe marked with the characters “longevity” (寿 *shou*), “sacrifice” (祭 *ji*), and “libation” (奠 *dian*). Over time, these characters spread everywhere as people of all ages don burial robes decorated with the same characters, until it seemed “the entire land had become a world of longevity, sacrifice and libation” (Yan, *Lenin’s Kisses* 428).

The substance of the endnotes also parallels the real-world labels that saturated political discourse during the 1960s. As Xing Lu argues, the terms used at that time such as “revolution,” “proletarian,” “class enemy” and others were intentionally “abstract and ambiguous” (49). They were left, in other words, open to annotation and interpretation, allowing their meaning to differ from one locality to the next. The lack of a universal definition for these terms in turn ensured that power lay with those who determined what each category meant. In a lexicon built on shifting sands, authority sits with the interpreter and the annotator, the voice willing to commit to speech or paper the meaning of vital terms. To some extent it is this power to determine meaning that Liu Yingque so deeply desires. It is his father’s interpretative red lines that instigate his self-mythologizing, and it is only through Liu’s imitation of this that he can feel validation for his professional advancements. His father’s portrait, and then his own, hung on the wall beside the “great men,” are self-explanatory declarations of the perceived affinity between power and the act of annotation. Liu even seeks to extend this authority beyond his own death. The words welded to his crystal coffin “*May Comrade Liu Yingque be Eternally Remembered by Posterity*” appear as the ultimate annotation, an attempt to define Liu’s significance even after death (Yan, *Lenin’s Kisses* 410).

Through Liu’s unrelenting deference to his father’s notes, the plot points to the power dynamic and inherent hierarchy between reader and annotator. That same dynamic exists between Yan and his readers. The endnotes frequently offer definitions to the reader, either of terms defined by Yan himself or explanations of terms regionally or historically specific language. Interaction with the text thus depends on Yan’s own constructions and delineations of meaning. Critics have paired these definitions with Han Shaogang’s 1996 novel *A Dictionary of Maqiao* (馬橋辭典 *Maqiao cidian*), a text that similarly grapples with the issue of language definition under Maoism (Liu, *Zhuangzi* 201). In *Dictionary*, as in *Lenin’s Kisses*, paratext is used to disguise narrative within a factual aesthetic: the plot unfolds through a series of dictionary entries. Vivian Lee suggests that the novel’s unique organization “helps thematize fiction as a medium of knowledge,” an insight that points to the blurring of textual categories that occurs in both works (172). Both novels play with aesthetics to expose the consequences of lexical ambiguity, appearing as knowing satires of

what Perry Link terms the “tendency toward abstraction” ever present in the political vocabulary of Maoism (246). Yet where *Dictionary* makes no secret of its paratextual experimentation, the endnotes in *Lenin’s Kisses* are subtler, as they afford the author the ability to interfere in the reading process time and time again.

Another vital distinguishing factor between Han Shaogang’s work and Yan’s is their chosen timeframes. Whereas Han operates almost entirely within the years of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, Yan pushes the chronology to the period of Reform and Opening (改革開放 *Gaige kaifang*), with much of the plot taking place in the 1990s. However, in *Lenin’s Kisses*, the interaction between endnote and main text continues irrespective of the time in which the action takes place. This consistency highlights how the discursive legacies of Maoism cannot simply be compartmentalized and amputated from the present day, as Perry Link has discussed (342, 347).¹⁰ How reading and writing function today must, in part, be an evolution from these earlier ways of ordering the world via the word—particularly given the destructive consequences of such ordering. *Lenin’s Kisses*, like *Dictionary*, foregrounds the extreme practices of reading and writing that characterized the middle decades of the twentieth century, but Yan does not isolate this earlier period as exceptional. Through the events of the novel, he shows how the habits of labelling and categorizing persist. In the novel’s paratextual divides he coaxes the reader to conform to those same reading practices as they move through the text, deciphering meaning from multiple narrative voices and balancing annotation with main text. The novel’s paratext rebuts historical revisionism and is consistent with Yan’s intention for mythorealist texts not only to describe the world, but also analyze its workings.

Yan has described how he wishes for his books to possess their “own language” (Li & Yan 470).¹¹ The endnotes in *Lenin’s Kisses* do indeed permit him to establish his own lexicon and plant it within the mind of the reader. Through a system of definitions, a new “collective group consciousness” is forged between readers of *Lenin’s Kisses* and its author. Reading in this way becomes a participatory act, allowing Yan to convey with ease the ways in which systems of meaning are derived from the presentation of text. As a result, *Lenin’s Kisses* captures the politicized

¹⁰ Punctuation played a part even here. The speech marks affixed to the term “Cultural Revolution” by government direction from the summer of 1980 onward amount to a postscript, a redefinition of the term “revolution” and its applicability to those “catastrophic years” (Link 270).

¹¹ Yan is not alone in this desire. Particularly relevant to *Lenin’s Kisses* is Thomas More’s creation of a utopian alphabet in his own treatise on the secluded social idyll. More’s utopian letters are similarly distinguished from common English through aesthetic. Their distinctive typeface is intended to distinguish this perfect typeface from the magnitude of alternatives available (Schmidt 25-26).

reading and writing practices of Maoist society in microcosm: the implied hierarchy between reader and writer, the competing narratives and definitions, the literal movement of the eye and hand from one section of text to the next. The divide between main text and endnote lends the text an immersive quality that, as Tao Dengfeng acknowledges, comments on the “real” equally if not more astutely than the works of realist literature set during the Cultural Revolution (45).

What’s in a Name?

In an interview with Suman Gupta, published in *Wasafiri* literary magazine in 2008, Yan Lianke outlined his creative motivations as such: “I still do not write with readers in mind, but to express my internal anguish” (33). In 2020, Yan expanded on the nature of this ‘anguish’ in an interview with Xie Haiyan, reflecting on his “despair of reality” as a source of profound anxiety (“An Age Without Classics”). Jianmei Liu sees this despair reflected throughout *Lenin’s Kisses*, reading the novel as an expression of Yan’s conflicted position as an intellectual in contemporary China. She envisages him trapped in a liminal state, caught between “entering the world” (入世 *rushi*) which she defines as “active participation in social change” and “withdrawing from the world” (出世 *chushi*) (*Zhuangzi* 187). The weight of social categories and labels, who is considered “in” and who is considered “out,” continue to play out in Yan’s own life as a writer to this day.

As such, though *Lenin’s Kisses* isn’t an autobiographical novel in the traditional sense, it is certainly intertwined with Yan’s perception of his own relationship with society—a notion integral to autobiographical writing, as Janet Ng highlights (120). Within this self-assessment, there is recognition of the dangers of social categorizing, alongside an acknowledgement that Yan, as an author, is himself complicit in the mechanics of naming and labelling. Mythorealism is the manifestation of his paradoxical position. As a genre, it rejects absolutes, or the notion of a concrete “truth,” yet it in turn defines what qualifies as “truth” and how to find it. It is unable to escape what Hans Kellner views as the oppressive overtones of absolute truth or reality (301). Nevertheless, in seeking to destabilize our attachment to absolutes, Yan endorses another definition of the real, proving that definitions of reality are pervasive. Perhaps, then, this is the ultimate anguish—not the decision of whether to intervene in society or withdraw from it, but the realization that these two states of being will continue to persist as arbitrary organizing principles, irrespective of one’s actions.

Paratext in *Lenin's Kisses*, and Yan's entire conception of mythorealism, are not attempts to abandon labelling and categorizing entirely, but instead are tools designed to draw our attention to the existence of these discursive activities and the command they exercise over our public lives. In the face of the sheer inescapability of category, Yan critiques its presence by submitting explicitly to its world view. Paratext is the perfect vessel for this pursuit. When they appear in fiction, endnotes expose the hand of the author as it moves across the page. They act as an impediment to immersion, signaling the position of author as creator and reader as consumer. In *Lenin's Kisses*, Yan writes himself onto the page, and the reader senses this act of writing—of constructing—churning beneath the narrative. The citation numbers act as a call to action, prompting the reader to move around the text and partake in the construction of the literary real. Reading here truly becomes “an act of choice, an act of will,” as Kellner puts it (18). Through paratext, Yan delegates some of his authorial anxiety, inviting the reader to share in the gargantuan task of questioning the real both on the literary page and beyond its margins.

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[Received 6 November 2020; accepted 8 September 2021]