

**Resistance and Refusal in the New Literature of the Office:
Reading Lydie Salvayre's *La Vie commune* and Delphine de Vigan's *Les Heures
souterraines*
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Pierre Lamalattie's 2013 painting "Nuit au bureau" depicts a naked young woman asleep on an office cabinet, slumped between a printer and a computer.¹ The discomfort of her position is apparent, and Lamalattie's drab palette, with its dark overtones of night-time, conveys an unmistakable fatigue. Traditionally, this image might have been read as a parable of the danger of over-identification between life and work, or as a commentary on the competitive over-work of advanced capitalism. I read it, however, as representative of a vital new turn in the contemporary literature and philosophy of the workplace, one that sees a vital instantiation of the body as a marker of the possibility of a rejection and a refusal of the contemporary cognitive labour experience. With the subject's body marking a radical reaction against casual identifications of work and life, Lamalattie's painting articulates an emerging philosophy of the office.

Often the philosophy of office life has been discussed as a part of more general labour critiques. Over the past quarter-century, in particular, many philosophical studies have targeted the realm of 'cognitive labour' or the 'knowledge economy', an area of work based on the creation and processing of knowledge by workers in tandem with machines (i.e., computers). Since the 1980s, many labour critiques have focused on how increased work flexibility within the globalized economy has affected the workplace and the worker, not least those labouring within the cognitive economy. Written in the earliest days of widespread adoption of the internet in the workplace, U.S. sociologist Richard Sennett's *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (1998), for instance, famously identified 'the emergence of institutions in which people are treated as disposable', where 'promotions and dismissals tend not to be based on clear, fixed rules, nor

¹ Pierre Lamalattie, 'Nuit au bureau' (2010), Acrylic, oils and materials. <http://www.lamalattie.com/14-nu-et-corps/a-nu-et-corp-nouveaux/nuit%20au%20bureau%20bis.htm>

are work tasks crisply defined.’² For Sennett this represented the dismantling of ‘rigid bureaucratic hierarchies’, and was indicative of the extremely flexible future that work and the workplace, including the office, would be facing in the approaching years. Sennett focused on how these factors shaped other aspects of the contemporary human experience, from self-image and family life, to geographical and lifestyle choices. Later, in France, sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (*Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, 1999) exposed the effects of global capital on the French workplace, where, like elsewhere in the west, the priorities of change, mobility and risk-taking began to replace an earlier high investment in job and life security.³ In the past number of years the issue of ‘flexibility’ within the workplace has increasingly become associated, and has often become interchangeable with, the ‘precarity’ of the worker and the crisis of labour rights.⁴

Focusing on these new types of work, certain critiques have turned to the domain of affect (feeling, sentiment or psychology), and how it is harnessed by contemporary neo-liberalism through specific work practises.⁵ Investigating the crossovers between work and affect in the present day, for instance, Italian philosopher and activist Franco Berardi has described how the project of capitalism has infiltrated all aspects of our psychic and somatic existences. ‘What is involved in the cognitive labour process’, Berardi warns, ‘is indeed what belongs more essentially to human beings.’⁶ Social production, he argues, has started to incorporate more and more of the ‘mental activity’ and ‘symbolic, communicative and affective action’ that functions towards the ‘creation of mental states, of feelings, and

² Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 146, p. 139, p. 23.

³ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2005). First published as *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

⁴ Among the well-known interventions on job insecurity and precarity in the present age are: Andrew Ross’s *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Work in Precarious Times* (New York: NYU Series in Social and Cultural Analysis, 2010); Richard Seymour’s ‘We Are All Precarious - On the Concept of the ‘Precariat’ and its Misuses’, *New Left Project* (February 10, 2012).

<http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/we_are_all_precarious_on_the_concept_of_the_precariat_and_its_misuses>; and Jonathan Crary’s *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013).

⁵ A recent article by cultural theorist Deirdra Reber, for instance, distinguishes the contemporary turn to affect as the emergence of an episteme. In her work she describes how ‘with particular intensity over the past two decades, affect (understood as both topic and optic) has been forging an epistemological immanence of enquiry’, noting ‘the ways in which we have begun to narrate and represent our social selves and the world around them now hinge on our capacity to feel.’ [Deirdra Reber, ‘Headless Capitalism: Affect as Free-Market Episteme’, *Differences* 23:1 (2012), 62-100 (p. 63-64) my emphasis]. This, she argues, is indissolubly bound up with how capitalism operates in our era. She traces its genealogy back to the homeostatic logic of passions and well-being promoted in texts by nineteenth-century liberal thinkers such as Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham.

⁶ Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 2009), p. 84.

imagination’, rather than of anything material *per se*.⁷ For Berardi, capitalism’s appropriation of communication is problematic. Communication, in his view, has in capitalism become less about ‘gratuitous’ or ‘pleasurable’ contact, and more about ‘economic necessity.’⁸ This is a theme that has since been picked up by Alexander Galloway. ‘Never before in history’, he suggested in a recent article, ‘have the immaterial and informatic assets been so closely intertwined with Capital’.⁹ As the French philosophical collective Tiqqun identified at the turn of the millennium, cognitive capitalism has become intertwined with so many aspects of human existence that ‘steering or management’ has emerged as the primary metaphor to describe ‘not only politics but all of human activity as well’.¹⁰

Significantly a number of these concerns have also motivated the literary text. Over the past two decades the office novel has become a genre in its own right, spanning international literatures. In Germany, novels of the office such as Katrin Röggla’s *wir schlafen nicht* (2004) and Phillip Schönthaler’s *Das Schiff das singend zieht auf seiner Bahn* (2013) have taken an ironic view of the culture of overwork and the ‘optimization’ of the human in the workplace. American novels such as Amy Rowland’s Kafkaesque *The Transcriptionist* (2014) and Josh Ferris’s *Then We Came To The End* (2007), meanwhile, have offered grim snapshots of present-day office life in New York. Like their international counterparts, French novels of the workplace have largely sought to expose the new order of work underpinning contemporary cognitive capitalism. Above all they have explored themes such as flexibility and expendability and their impact on office experience. French novels are particularly useful for this kind of exploration, not least because France is often portrayed as exhibiting a resistance to globalization or ‘Anglo-American’ economic policies. Resistance to neoliberal policy has also been traditionally strong in the politics, activism and philosophy of the French left. As well as showing the changes that have come about in the workplace through globalization and changes in practice, therefore, French novels of the office also exhibit forms of resistance to these new practises and policies.

This article, therefore, will explore how these issues have been articulated and worked

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁹ Alexander Galloway, ‘The Cybernetic Hypothesis’, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Studies*, 25 : 1 (2014), 107-131.

¹⁰ Tiqqun was a French philosophical collective publishing between 1999 and 2001. They took their name from the ancient Hebrew phrase *Tikkun Olam*, which can be translated into ‘world repair.’ Their first journal of philosophy, *Tiqqun: Organe Conscient du Parti Imaginaire*, was published in Paris in February 1999, with the follow up, *Tiqqun: Organe de Liaison au sein du Parti Imaginaire*, published in 2001. In general, the journal *Tiqqun*’s subject matter was varied, but for the most part consisted of a radical critique of French society and the contemporaneous conditions of global capitalism. Many of their articles have been translated into English, as well as other languages.

through within two French novels of the past quarter-century: *La Vie commune* (1991) by Lydie Salvayre, and *Les Heures souterraines* (2012) by Delphine de Vigan. Functioning as more than just diagnoses or critiques of contemporary office life, these narratives, I argue, also formalize a critical response to the cognitive labour experience. Taking up this position invites a new kind of dialogue between literary and philosophical approaches to the office. When philosophy has dovetailed with the literature of the office in the past, the discussion has usually focused on Herman Melville's Bartleby figure, whose modest refusal ("I would prefer not to...") has been taken as emblematic of the worker who effectively refuses capitalist demands by having no demands of his own.¹¹ One aim of this project is to begin moving beyond this motif. To do so, I will use the recent critiques of the knowledge economy mentioned above, some of which have diagnosed the human as a mere disembodied agent within contemporary systems of labour.¹² Working through and beyond these established literary and philosophical positions, this article will show how recent narratives of French office life articulate a kind of bodily momentum or overflow. Emerging in texts through diverse forms such as illness, madness, depression or breakdown, these bodily responses display what I argue to be a reclamation of personal affect, and an almost redemptive *refusal* of certain cognitive labour infrastructures.

While addressing the intersections between advanced capitalism, cultures of managerialism and the new flexible knowledge economy, this project will therefore interrogate new theorizations of refusal. Chief among these is the recent concept of the *grève humaine*, or 'human strike.' Formulated by Tiqqun, this strategy suggests a generalized disruption to the economic or societal conditions in the world, a whole bodily refusal of participation. My contention is that, counter to the human-as-disembodied-agent model of

¹¹ In *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* by Herman Melville, Bartleby is a clerk who refuses work and instead camps out in the office of his employer. Modern European philosophy's turn to Bartleby as a figure of passive resistance and laterally as a talisman of occupational rights is well documented [See for example Giorgio Agamben's 'Bartleby, or on Contingency' in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 243-271; Gilles Deleuze's 'Bartleby; or, The Formula', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997), pp. 68-90; and Jacques Rancière, 'Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula', in *The Flesh of Words*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 146-164]. As the ultimate embodiment in literature of the strike that can lack demands, Bartleby only ever expresses himself in the curious crypto-negative 'I would prefer not to', a phrase used by Melville throughout the text to emphasize a particular form of resistance. My contention is that there are new models in contemporary literature that we might consider in a similar light to Bartleby.

¹² See especially Berardi's *The Soul at Work*, which describes the disembodied 'virtual class' of cognitive workers (p. 104), which I will focus on in more depth below. [See also Tiqqun's 'A Critical Metaphysics Could Emerge as a Science of Apparatuses', in *This Is Not A Program*, trans. by Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), pp. 135-204. Tiqqun ask us to imagine here 'the obvious paradox of bodies growing stiller the more their mental functions are activated, captivated, mobilized, the more their mental functions seethe, responding in real time to the fluctuations of the information flow streaming across the screen' (p. 139)].

the cybernetic agenda identified and critiqued by Berardi, Galloway, Tiqqun and others, the contemporary French literature of the office is trying to offer something redemptive. Precisely through examples of bodily human agency positively disrupting the workflow, this literature engenders a new form of “Bartlebyism” by offering escape routes beyond over-identification with labour apparatuses. Ultimately, what all of these novels have in common, beyond mere diagnosis, is that they gesture, through a variety of forms, towards a bodily refusal of the labour culture that they describe.

**Flexibility, Expendability and Affect in French Novels of the Office: *La Vie commune*
and *Les Heures souterraines***

Lydie Salvayre’s *La Vie Commune* is a first-person account of a work-related psychic breakdown, narrated by the middle-aged ‘Suzanne’. After serving for thirty-two years as a devoted administrator in an advertising company, Suzanne has been driven to despair by the arrival of a new secretary, with whom she must share her office. Recounting the petty incidentals of her situation, Suzanne’s narrative moves between descriptions of her home and office life to appraisals of colleagues, family and neighbours. Throughout she attempts to do justice to the impact, personally and professionally, that the arrival of the new secretary has had on her life.

Across her monologue, Suzanne explicitly positions the secretary as an embodiment of a new order that she believes is creeping into the French workplace. Against Suzanne’s old-fashioned virtues of respect, hierarchy, method, organization and loyalty, the new worker represents a brash, expendable, global culture that has begun to infect traditional French values. Consequently, she refuses to engage with her new colleague on equal professional grounds. Much to Suzanne’s disgust, the new worker boasts that she can type on a Mac, a symbol of global American corporatism. She devours chatty women’s magazines, gossips on the job and calls her boss names behind his back. The more we hear from Suzanne, however, the more we realise that her own psychic landscape is compromised. As Suzanne rants she reveals more and more about her own foibles, disgusts and hatreds, and also about her emotional history. Ultimately driven to madness by her hatred for her colleague and what she represents, Suzanne injures herself and has to spend some time in a rest home, or possibly, like many of Salvayre’s other characters, a psychiatric institution. When she returns to work, she is forced to take early retirement. She is given a new provision, her boss counsels her, one

aimed at *‘les personnes maladies ou fatiguées qui approchent de la soixantaine.’*¹³ Before she leaves, however, she attacks the secretary. Ripping at her hair, she pulls her to the ground.

Suzanne’s case illuminates a number of fears surrounding labour expendability. In nineties France these fears were especially associated with an encroaching globalism and increased flexibility in the workplace. Against the flexible and indifferent systems of capital, as described in studies such as Sennett’s and Boltanski and Chiapello’s, Suzanne clings to an older bureaucratic regime, and tries in vain to resist the new order. She prides herself, for instance, on not taking part in gossip or even being friendly with colleagues, and distances herself, effectively, from the affective logic permeating the new capitalism. Particularly, she tells us: *‘Je me défie des phraseurs, des diserts, des diseurs, des marchands de sentiments et autres articles en solde.’*¹⁴ Elsewhere she boasts that she has long banished from her heart *‘tout le fatras sentimental et la sensiblerie qui lui est assortie.’*¹⁵ She repeatedly conjures as her moral compass the rigidly moralistic figure of her dead father, who she takes as representing the old ways. According to Suzanne, her father would be horrified by the changes to society, and particularly the indifference and self-interest of the workplace.

Tellingly, the secretary in Suzanne’s narrative is only ever named as such. Her abstraction actively renders her a merely conceptual figure, one representing the new economy of flexibility, affectivity and indifference, often associated with Anglo-American work models. Suzanne’s descriptions of the secretary are highly satirical, making her into a comical cut-out figure intended to elicit our disgust. As Jeremy F. Lane has described, French texts and film over the past twenty years have tended to employ the coding ‘foreign or Anglo-Saxon’ to represent ‘the aggressive forces of neoliberal capitalism’. Playing on this phenomenon, the secretary—to the annoyance of Suzanne—pronounces the word ‘*champagne*’ in the English way instead of the French.¹⁶

Ironically, however, the secretary is not figured as a major force driving neoliberal anglicising change. Rather, she is positioned as just another worker who has become caught up in these wider corruptions. Indeed, perhaps what annoys Suzanne the most are the secretary’s vulgar sensibilities and tastes, many of which are not traditionally ‘French.’ If the secretary is meant to embody something of a new globalism, moreover, she appears at times as much of a petty bigot as Suzanne. At one stage she wonders whether Meyer (the name of

¹³ Salvayre, p. 147.

¹⁴ Salvayre, p. 20.

¹⁵ Salvayre, p. 40.

¹⁶ Jeremy F. Lane, ‘Come you spirits unsex me: Representations of the Female Executive in Recent French Film and Fiction’, *Modern and Contemporary France*, 23:4 (2015), 511-528 (p. 514); Salvayre, p. 29.

her boss) is ‘*un nom juif*.’¹⁷ Suzanne is taken aback by this: ‘*Mon couer se fige, docteur. Monsiuer Meyer, un juif*.’¹⁸ Perversely however, what horrifies Suzanne is not so much the secretary’s crude enquiries into ethnic or religious backgrounds as the very fact that she sees the accusation of being Jewish itself as an abomination. Yet Suzanne herself later voices subtler bigotry, this time against Spanish anti-Francoists. ‘*Je connais une personne qui professe des opinions communistes, une femme excessivement vulgaire*’ she utters, ‘*une Espagnole antifranquiste avec un sans-gêne incroyable et des manières d’une rusticité!*’¹⁹

Although Suzanne professes to detest affect in the workplace and in life in general, she relays her tale in a highly emotional register. The arrival of the new secretary stirs in her something so deep that she is no longer able to behave in the rational way that she otherwise esteems. Extreme points of affect are a common feature of Salvayre’s work in general, according to Warren Motte, who has described the ‘clamor of voices’ that emerge throughout her work. ‘They shout’ Motte tells us, ‘they whisper, they castigate, they wheedle, they condemn ... As often as not, nobody listens—except for us, if we are willing.’²⁰ Suzanne’s turn to affect betrays all of these emotions, to the extent that she could be accused of oversharing her thoughts and feelings in her monologue. She imagines, for instance, that she might reveal her loneliness to her daughter by complaining she would like a partner who would open her up ‘*en deux doucement comme un fruit, la nuit*.’²¹ She quickly counteracts this with ‘*ma fille, pardonne-moi, je ne devrais pas te confier ces choses indécentes...*’²² Ironically, the affectual elements of office life that Suzanne rejects are actively stirred up in her, and come to heavily punctuate her monologue. Nowhere is this more the case than in Chapter Seven, which is simply composed of three lines: ‘*Je l’abhorre. Je l’abhorre. Je l’abhorre*.’²³

Les Heures souterraines focuses on a successful female account executive for a global cosmetics company. By disagreeing with her long-term close associate and boss, Jacques, Mathilde unwittingly brings about both the dénouement of her career and the devastation of her health. One morning, during a meeting with other colleagues, Mathilde disagrees with Jacques about the way a certain accounts campaign should be run. Over the course of the following months, Jacques then steadily freezes Mathilde out of every team decision. After

¹⁷ Salvayre, p. 44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁰ Warren Motte, ‘Voices in Her Head’, *Substance* 33: 2: 104 (2004), 13-29 (p. 13).

²¹ Salvayre, p. 54.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Salvayre, p. 47.

months of cold treatment, she is finally left with no computer and no work to undertake. She is removed from her large office to an end-of-corridor box-room beside the men's toilets. Although her co-workers know that she has been badly treated, no one speaks up for her for fear of their tenuous positions, and she begins to be recognised as toxic company. Without any allies in the workplace, Mathilde spirals into a deep state of depression.

In contrast to the stiff and inflexible Suzanne, the character of Mathilde in de Vigan's novel appears to have always been a flexible employee. Adaptable and movement-oriented, she effectively represents the twenty-first-century cognitive worker. Not only is she prepared to work extra hours and under any conditions for the good of capital, but she is even happy to open her whole existence to her career. Mathilde in this sense actively embodies Franco Berardi's descriptions of the contemporary cognitive worker. According to Berardi, this worker 'prepare[s] their nervous system as an active receiving terminal for as much time as possible', participating in an economy where 'workers offer their entire day to capital and are paid only for the moments their time is made cellular.'²⁴ Reflecting these conditions, Mathilde has always, at least in her own narrative, gone above and beyond the call of worker flexibility. Ever the consummate 'networked' employee within the firm, she always took work home and made herself available for calls and emails outside of set hours.

Because we are made aware of Mathilde's impeccable record in the workplace, an extreme sense of injustice pervades the text. Above all this is captured in the specialized language of human resources. Although she has been an extremely flexible worker, Mathilde is told by the HR manager, Patricia Lethu, that she should be more 'on message'. Instead of blaming the company or even Jacques for her troubles, she suggests, she should take stock of where she is professionally. It is necessary, according to Patricia Lethu, that Mathilde admit to herself that '*rien n'était immuable, accepter le changement, rechercher les ajustements, être capable de se repositionner.*' She should think about '*une nouvelle orientation, à une mise à jour de ses compétences, de faire un bilan.*'²⁵

Mathilde and Suzanne's tales, although they are some years apart and are concerned with contrasting office experiences, have some very obvious overlaps. Both protagonists are female, and both have been left widowed young with children. Both work in the realm of the cognitive economy, and both have been faithful employees to their respective companies. Furthermore, both women experience their own expendability by being forced out of their positions and replaced by younger, more flexible workers, while also being blamed for their

²⁴ Berardi, p. 90.

²⁵ de Vigan, p. 93.

own workplace difficulties. For both, familial relationships and friendships begin to suffer. Each of these overlaps point towards significant questions that might be pursued in studies the female cognitive worker in the contemporary French novel. The most significant overlap for my project, however, is how both protagonists begin in the midst of their crisis to have cognitive and bodily upsets, ranging from physical injuries to sleep deprivation, dreams, fatigue, depression and agoraphobia. Rather than reading these upsets as the inevitable result of overwork and the demands of contemporary cognitive capitalism, I argue that they function in these texts as representations of means and methods of resistance against the new order of the workplace. It is precisely these narratives of pain and resentment, I argue, that demand to be appropriated for a more positive political narrative, such as one of refusal. Focusing first on how both protagonists' psychic upsets begin to *mirror* the metaphor of the network, so crucial to contemporary iterations of the new cognitive economy, I will now turn to analysing the descriptions of bodily breakdown and refusal as narratives of redemptive refusal. Next, focusing on the solidarity of bodies as sites of resistance, I will propose an argument that reading these novels in tandem gives us some impression of an 'inoperative' solidarity, one that reaches across textual boundaries.²⁶ This, I argue, is a model for reading solidarity that could incorporate many more office narratives across national and linguistic boundaries.

Traumatic Networks

As a metaphor, the 'network' functions as a way of conceptualizing many practises, not least labour practises, within contemporary globalization. In many current conceptualizations of cognitive work, the metaphor of the network is used to describe the collective nodes of information or output (human or otherwise) operating in a chain of command. Alexander Galloway, for instance, emphasises knowledge work as 'a specific epistemological regime in which systems or networks combine both human and non-human agents in mutual communication and command.'²⁷ Elsewhere, Franco Berardi describes this as 'the automatic fluidity of the network', while Dierdra Reber uses the homologous terms 'homeostatis' and 'constellation' to gesture to a similar principle animating current conceptions of life and work.²⁸ Speaking specifically of cognitive labour in France, Boltanski and Chiapello describe a turn in the nineties to the concept of 'a liberated firm', with 'self-organized teams working

²⁶ I borrow the concept of 'inoperativity', which I explain in more detail below, from Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, trans. by Peter Connor et al (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991)].

²⁷ Galloway, p. 111.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88; Reber, p. 67, p. 69.

in a network that is not unified in time and space.²⁹ French management literature in the nineties deployed the image of the ‘network’ to shore continued expansion of global capitalism in France, according to Boltanski and Chiapello. As they argue, ‘the answers proposed by 1990s management literature to the two questions of most concern to it—anti-authoritarianism, and an obsession with flexibility and the ability to react—are conveniently assembled by the authors under the *metaphor of the network*, which is displayed in all sorts of contexts...’³⁰ Beyond simply acting as a descriptor, it appears the network metaphor incorporates a more pernicious agenda. Intended to pacify resistance against the new order, it is deployed to deflect the accusation that the concepts of flexibility and resilience are there simply to serve capitalism’s interests.

As life and work become more tumultuous in the two novels, the more they turn to the network as a descriptive metaphor. Specifically, both *La Vie commune* and *Les Heures souterraines* deploy rhizomatic and networked imagery to illustrate moments of psychic distress brought about through work problems. In *La Vie commune*, Suzanne’s daydreams about her workplace become populated by spiders, ‘*d’immenses champs d’araignées noires*.’³¹ The new secretary is even described in pure rhizomatic terms, with Suzanne lamenting how ‘*elle m’habite comme un arbre et pousse ses frondaisons dans les moindres fissures*.’³² Similarly, she dwells on how her nemesis’s vetiver perfume permeates and infects the office space. For the sickened Suzanne this is an intangible crime which will never be recognised as such, complaining that ‘*Les lois ne se soucient guère de ce genre de nuisances*.’³³ Meanwhile, Mathilde in *Les Heures souterraines* becomes obsessed by the ebb and flow of the thousands of travellers weaving their way across the underground network in Paris. Across this travel network, according to Mathilde, there are two kinds of travellers. The first follow well-rehearsed journeys, and ‘*suivent sur ligne comme si elle tendue au-dessus du vide...ils ne dérogent jamais*’. Yet the other kind of traveller, the amblers, ‘*traînent, s’arrêtent, se laissent porter, prennent la tangente sans préavis*.’³⁴ Time, too, takes on a strange pattern for both protagonists. No longer able to perceive things in a linear temporality, both women begin to conceive of time as rhizomatic, or as an amorphous whole. Suzanne complains that since her co-worker’s arrival her life proceeds differently, complaining that ‘*ma vie n’avance plus suivant un beau mouvement rectiligne mais à la*

²⁹ Boltanski and Chiapello, p. 80

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³¹ Salvayre, p. 33.

³² Salvayre, p. 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁴ de Vigan, p. 239-240.

manière tortueuse du crabe.³⁵ For Mathilde, too, time has taken on an amorphous hue, whereby ‘*le temps s’est amalgamée, agglutiné, le temps s’est bloqué à l’entrée d’un entonnoir*’.³⁶ Overall the rhizomatic or network metaphor seems to assert itself more frequently in both novels as their work traumas unfold.

Bodily Breakdown and Refusal: A Form of Resistance

As frustration with their current positions begins to consume both protagonists, illness and breakdown start to manifest in their once work-capable bodies. These narratives of breakdown, I argue, can also be read as stories of resistance and refusal against the new regimes of cognitive labour. What might initially be perceived as helplessness or weakness, from this perspective, may also be interpreted as forms of tactical refusal. In order to think through these possibilities here, I turn to Tiqqun’s notion of the *grève humaine*, or the ‘human strike’.³⁷ A cornerstone of Tiqqun’s philosophy, the ‘human strike’ is characterized in their manifesto ‘How Is It To Be Done?’ as a ‘*conspiracy of bodies*. Not critical minds, but *critical corporalities*’.³⁸ Against the general strike in labour history, where, Tiqqun point out, operations were ‘limited in time and space’ and alienation was considered ‘piecemeal, thanks to a recognizable, and therefore beatable, enemy’, the *human* strike that Tiqqun refer to involves an all-out rejection of dominant structures, rather than the temporary refusal of concrete or recognisable failings of the system.³⁹ With contemporary official work practises being networked, flexible and movement oriented, it may be impossible to know exactly where and when to strike, and, crucially, even *who* to strike against. Yet the human strike bypasses all of these issues, occurring only where the whole body is mobilised in a way that resists and refuses the dominant culture. The body’s breakdown and refusal to take a part in the world of work, through this lens of the human strike, attains an intensified political significance in both of these narratives.

³⁵ Salvayre, pp. 11-12.

³⁶ de Vigan, p. 180.

³⁷ The term is also used by the contemporary artistic collective, Claire Fontaine, which consists of former Tiqqun member Fulvia Carnevale and the Glaswegian artist James Underhill. Claire Fontaine is a conceptual persona or substitute figure for the two artists. Accordingly, they speak about their project in the third person. In ‘her’ piece ‘Human Strike in the Field of Libidinal Economy’, Claire Fontaine writes that the term human strike ‘defines a type of strike that involves the whole of life and not only its professional side, that acknowledges exploitation in all the domains and not only at work. Even the notion of work is modified if seen from the ethical prism of human strike: activities that seem to be innocent services and loving obligations to keep the family or the couple together reveal themselves as vulgar exploitation’. [See Claire Fontaine, *Human Strike Has Already Begun & Other Writings* (Leuphana: Mute/Post Media Lab Publications, Leuphana University, 2013), pp. 35-50 (p. 38-39)].

³⁸ Tiqqun, ‘How Is It To Be Done?’ in *Introduction to Civil War*, trans. by Alexander Galloway and Jason E. Smith (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), pp. 195-231 (p. 218).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 219-220.

One radical moment of refusal occurs in a quasi-suicidal fantasy during *Les Heures souterraines*. Mathilde imagines being annihilated by some outside force in order to escape from and defeat the system. Months of depression have led her to fantasize about being blown to pieces in the underground, her body pulverised and scattered.

*Qu'elle serait victime d'un attentat, au milieu du long couloir qui relie le métro au RER une bombe exploserait, puissante, soufflerait tout, pulvériserait son corps, elle serait éparpillée dans l'air saturé des matins d'affluence, dispersée aux quatre coins de la gare....*⁴⁰

Elsewhere, Mathilde longs for a medical professional to examine her and confirm how ailing her body is. She wants somebody to affirm that it has '*n'a plus la force, qu'il ne reste rien, pas un atome, pas une onde.*'⁴¹ Similarly, in *La Vie commune*, Suzanne also wants a doctor to legitimize her illness. In a monologue she pleads '*Pourriez-vous me prescrire, docteur, quelques pastilles qui rassemblent les morceaux épars de ma pensée...?*'⁴² Elsewhere she admits her illness '*est incurable.*'⁴³ Both Suzanne and Mathilde break bones. Suzanne breaks an ankle when she falls off a ladder in work (an act for which she feels ridiculed by her workmates), while Mathilde breaks a wrist when she falls down the stairs in the Metro. Mathilde burns herself with a hot water bottle in bed, while Suzanne develops chest pains and high blood pressure. Importantly, both recognize their illnesses as work-related. As Suzanne explains to her doctor, there is '*une secrète connexion entre ma douleur dans la poitrine et l'arrivée de la nouvelle secrétaire.*'⁴⁴ Mathilde, meanwhile, wonders how the body can withstand such intense grief. '*Combien de fois a-t-elle pensé*', she asks, '*qu'on pouvait mourir de quelque chose qui ressemble à ce qu'elle vit, mourir de devoir survivre dix heures par jour en milieu hostile?*'⁴⁵ Across both narratives, the mental and physical discomforts that arise are framed as inevitable reactions to inhospitable work situations. Yet they are also singled out as markers of the indignity of these situations. It is in this sense, I argue, that they appear as signs of possible resistance, as the body in grief and pain figures as a form of politicized resistance towards the very internalization of the expectations of the new labour economy.

What, however, can these narratives of immense pain and resentment offer us in terms of a redemptive formula? As well as being a sign of distress in both novels, the motif of the

⁴⁰ de Vigan, p. 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴² Salvayre, p. 69.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁴⁴ Salvayre, p. 40.

⁴⁵ de Vigan, p. 41.

broken-down body also incorporates a sense of positive resistance towards the new order. This is especially apparent in moments of breakdown, madness and illness. When towards the end of *Les Heures souterraines*, for instance, Mathilde glimpses her haggard physical appearance in an elevator mirror, she chooses not to lament. Instead she recognises these changes as outward signs of her growing inner resistance. Although her depression has made her look tired and old, she sees it as giving her a warrior-like appearance. The changes in her body effectively become a crucial identification of her willingness and ability to resist the intolerable situation in which she finds herself. In *La Vie Commune*, on the other hand, Suzanne's ultimate act of resistance occurs when she uses her body antagonistically against the new regime of labour. On hearing she will be forced to take early retirement, Suzanne hurls herself at the new secretary in what we may take as a metaphorical attack on an indifferent system. Believing the secretary to be looking at her smugly, Suzanne launches into action. '*Je me suis jetée sur elle*' she boasts, '*Je l'ai agrippée par les cheveux. J'ai tiré de toutes mes forces. Je n'avais plus pour de rien. Elle s'est mise à hurler. J'ai hurler plus fort qu'elle.*'⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, Suzanne's actions result in her immediate dismissal. But when her early retirement compensation is also revoked, the outcome arguably works as an analogue for the brunt borne by expendable workers within the new economy. Despite this suffering, tellingly, Suzanne's monologue remains triumphant throughout the rest of the novel.

Inoperativity and Solidarity Across Textual Boundaries

Returning to the image of the careworn body slumped against the computer, we can contextualise the Lamalattie painting as one of many artistic responses to contemporary overwork that invoke the body as a symbol or means of resistance towards new cognitive labour regimes. Alongside these artistic and literary engagements, many philosophical critiques of contemporary cognitive labour practises, such as Tiqqun's propose the instantiation of the body as a vital political tool in creating new forms of solidarity among cognitive labourers.⁴⁷ Franco Berardi advances a useful position here. Against conceiving of a disembodied 'virtual class' of cognitive workers who sit, figuratively, glued to their computer screens, he proposes the group term 'cognitariat.'⁴⁸ As a remedy, the term represents 'the social corporeality of cognitive labour', the flesh-and-blood existences of

⁴⁶ Salvayre, p. 148.

⁴⁷ See Tiqqun

⁴⁸ Berardi, p. 105.

those workers who exist ‘in the fixed contemplation of the screen’.⁴⁹ Berardi thereby seeks to arm this virtual class, whose very definition he sees as depending on the separation of their bodies from their work, with an attack against the isolation brought about in semio-capitalism.⁵⁰ Through this re-conceptualization, Berardi attempts to breathe life back into the forgotten bodies of this virtual class, while also trying to re-establish a solidarity wiped out through isolationist work practices. It is here, more precisely, that Berardi’s ideas resonate with the concept of the ‘human strike’, in which the body becomes a crucial agonistic political force. Tiqqun, if we remember, imagine a “*Conspiracy of bodies*. Not critical minds, but *critical corporalities*’. Like Berardi’s ‘cognitariat’, these defiant bodies might function as threats to the established and ever-changing standards, methodologies and ethics of immaterial production.⁵¹

La Vie commune and *Les Heures souterraines* illuminate flashes of the solidarity that Berardi and others have tried to conceptualize in recent years. Throughout both novels, Salvayre and de Vigan describe moments of collaboration brought about through human breakdown and distress. A scene in *Les Heures souterraines*, for instance, describes Mathilde witnessing a stranger having a panic attack on the Paris metro. Mathilde comes to the woman’s aid, helping her off the train and waiting with her until a doctor arrives. As the scene unfolds it becomes clear that Mathilde imagines that this fate also awaits her, and that it could happen to any traveller on a packed train. The focus on the distressed traveller, switching then to herself and then to human beings in general, shows a kind of solidarity in thought that might be engendered through moments of breakdown or distress. Kathryn Robson analyses this moment through the themes of empathy and compassion that otherwise appear within *Les Heures souterraines*. ‘Mathilde’, she argues, ‘literally imagines herself in the other woman’s position, identifying with her to the point that the distinction between them is momentarily dissolved’, until, continues Robson, ‘she realises that everyone watching will also one day experience that breakdown, expressed in terms of immobility...’⁵² Rather than reading this as a moment of solidarity, Robson argues that Mathilde is ‘not imagining how the woman feels, but how *she* would feel in the same position.’⁵³ Focusing on the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Semio-capitalism is a term that Berardi uses to describe ‘post-Fordist modes of production’, which takes ‘the mind, language and creativity as its primary tools for the production of value’ (Berardi, p. 5). In this sense, Semio-capitalism is a term to describe the exchange and value processes that encompass immaterial, cognitive or affective labour.

⁵¹ *Loc. Cit.*

⁵² Kathryn Robson, ‘Empathy and Compassion in Delphine de Vigan’s *No et Moi* and *Les Heures souterraines*’, *The Modern Language Review* 110:3 (2015), 677-693 (p. 683).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

limitations of compassion in the text, Robson suggests that the woman is not viewed by her fellow passengers, or even by Mathilde herself, as a victim of the overcrowded transport system. Instead she is considered by them as unfit to be a passenger in the underground. An alternative focus, however, might counter Robson's claims by emphasizing the body's impetus to react against the overcrowded train. Here, like elsewhere in both narratives, the body makes itself visible in moments of sheer distress. By attracting other bodies, such as Mathilde's, towards it with help and care, she here creates a significant moment of solidarity and compassion.

The solidarities in *La Vie commune* are ones that decisively go against the routinized work environment. In her apartment block, for instance, Suzanne is surrounded by a collection of non-conformists who listen to her woes. Her unexpected confidante, the retired widower Monsieur Longuet, lives on the floor below. He has a rattling cough, and in Suzanne's mind, appears to be at death's door. According to her descriptions, Longuet is a nuisance, a man who lives for '*les quelques mots qu'il arrache chaque jour à ses voisins d'immeuble.*'⁵⁴ He is described as tattered (*déguenillé*) and smelly (*malodorant*), sporting a non-conformist thick flannel sash and pyjamas under his trousers.⁵⁵ Monsieur Longuet is, however, the person she chooses to confide in, and he in turn is willing to listen to her woes. Through intense conversations about her work problems, during which he unquestioningly accepts Suzanne's version of events, Longuet goads her into taking action against the new office status quo. Similarly, Suzanne finds unexpected companionship with her Spanish cleaner, with whom she normally spoke very little. By the end of the novel, the woman she previously spoke of as merely her *femme de ménage* has now become her companion, participating along with Monsieur Longuet in a weekly game of rummy (*rami*).⁵⁶

Lastly, throughout the two texts both Mathilde and Suzanne imagine real human warmth as a form of radical healing. For Mathilde this might even take place with a stranger, '*un homme ou une femme*' who might approach her on the street and take the weight off her shoulders:

*Quelqu'un qui comprendait qu'elle ne peut plus y aller, que chaque jour qui passe elle entame sa substance, elle entame l'essentiel. Quelqu'un qui caresserait sa joue, ou ses cheveux, qui murmerait comme pour soi-même comment avez-vous fait pour tenir si longtemps, avec quel courage, quelles ressources.*⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Salvayre, pp. 18-19.

⁵⁵ Salvayre, p. 34.

⁵⁶ Salvayre, p. 149.

⁵⁷ de Vigan, pp. 13-14.

Mathilde feels a temporary sense of wellbeing when a new colleague, who knows nothing of her situation, chats with her in the carpark. '*C'était étrange*', she observes, '*Cette femme était venue vers elle, lui avait parlé. Elle lui avait posé des questions, elle avait ri.*'⁵⁸ However emotionally reserved Suzanne conceives herself to be, meanwhile, her monologue betrays a deep longing for companionship and touch. She longs to have a less emotionally stilted relationship with her daughter, who visits her from time to time and coldly reads *Paris-Match*, refusing to entertain her mother's complaints about the secretary. According to Suzanne's monologue, however, a thaw in their relationship begins to occur after Suzanne's breakdown and removal from her job. Her daughter arrives to announce that she is expecting a child, and they embrace each other in a gesture unusual for their relationship. '*(J)'ai serré ma fille contre mon coeur dans un élan où se mêlaient une grande pitié et la tendresse inemployée de toute une vie*', says Suzanne, '*Et ma fille a répondu à mon étreinte.*'⁵⁹

Reading these novels as critiques of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century cognitive labour practises— and specifically of their impact on human lives and psyches— we can see a significant pattern. The texts are just two of a number, across international literatures, telling stories of disillusionment with, but also resistance against, the regime of the new cognitive labour economy. Read collectively, many of the characters in these novels, whose bodies react against the tide of this new regime, reflect Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of the 'inoperative community', or the community that may not be put to work.⁶⁰ Beyond their own specificities, as narratives of discontent and inoperativity, these texts offer us as readers a form of solidarity that reaches across textual boundaries. Inserting these narratives into a lineage of philosophy that deploys literature to foment and discuss the politics of refusal, I position these characters as heirs to Melville's totemic figure. With *Bartleby's* vital position as a talisman of resistance without demands secured, I here present the possibility of a contemporary community of characters ushering in new forms of resistance and refusal in the sphere of cognitive labour.

⁵⁸ de Vigan, pp. 192-193.

⁵⁹ Salvayre, p. 148-149.

⁶⁰ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*. Here Nancy elaborates on the fallacy and the danger of 'community' as we routinely conceptualise it, an entity built on norms and similarities, a fantasized monolithic past, or the willingness to invest in common or exclusionary futures. Although never fully elaborating on any alternative, as that would go against the very principles of his text, he also considers the 'unworking' or 'unravelling' aspects of solidarity, and how these forms might redefine community as a political tool. I borrow the term 'unworking' or inoperative in a very literal way to try to conceptualise a form of solidarity against work.

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