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The Digital Underclass Glitch: Theorising a Digital Labour Public through Fiction

Katy Dadacz, University of Bristol, UK, katy.dadacz@bristol.ac.uk

Acceleration is central to the stories told of the network. This temporal pace is upheld by a digital labour public, optimised and sustained by the material and immaterial labour of endlessly replaceable and re-programmable human and nonhuman actors (Terranova, 2000). Whilst users and their labour have become protagonists in both contemporary literature and digital media theory, this sentiment is less often explored from the perspective of the members of the digital underclass who are entangled in uneven power structures. The network privileges those classified as human, at the expense of not-quite-human, globalised and diffracted bodies. This classification becomes a dominant mode of recognition for the digital underclass, functioning as a form of bio-political control necessary to the manifestations of the digital labour public, and an aesthetic violence which maintains the normative genres of class and race. In turn, digital labour has become an 'empty signifer', as Alessandro Gandini writes, that forgoes the geographies of relations within the network infrastructure. Through a reading of *Little Eyes* by Samantha Schweblin and *The Employees* by Olga Ravn, this article frames fiction as particularly suitable to conceptualise the digital labour public as an infrastructure of affect that maps uneven vectors and adjacent spaces. A mode of relationality between members of the digital underclass, and users, emerges that is centred around what I call the 'glitch of ambivalence'.

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'From across the Internet, it is not always easy to tell a human from a robot.'
Tung Hui Hu (2022: 63)

In 2008, Andrew Norman Wilson was fired from his contracted position at Google for interviewing low-wage, temporary ScanOps employees. ScanOps workers are employed to do the repetitive Fordist labour of scanning over 20 million books for Google Books, a service in which users can search for the full text of a book in a digital database. During his time at Google, Wilson noticed that most ScanOps employees are from Black and Latinx backgrounds, segregated from other Google employees and with no access to the 'perks' of working for the Silicon Valley company. Their names remain undocumented. Unable to continue interviewing the workers, Wilson begins to sift through the digital database of Google Books. Here, traces of the ScanOps employees' existence flicker. Scanned images show employees fingers in latex finger cots, or with painted nails and gold jewellery.[1] Sometimes a wrist or sleeve is seen when employees hold pages steadily.

Whilst Google's platform goes to great lengths to obfuscate these workers, Wilson reframes the scanned images into photographs to stage the human labour that makes access to Google Books possible. Neither Wilson nor the employees actively seek to induce a glitch, an error that results in the systematic collapse of Google Books. Rather, the project seeks to better understand the way we might become attached to the subversion or affirmation of the normativity of the digital labour public, a mediator of social relations between different actors, that makes invisible members of the digital underclass. The accidents trouble the transmission that the internet is just made up of digital servers, as told by corporations. Instead, the accidents reveal that human workers are in fact, always visible. This reframing reveals the contours of the affective state of ambivalence, a plurality of incompatible affective attachments and detachments, that shape the relations between the employees, technologies of reproduction, and users.[2] The friction of the affective state of ambivalence is a glitch in the dominant imaginaries of the digital labour public as seamless, optimised and not-human. Ultimately, Wilson reminds us that to be online is to always be in an ambivalent relation to a digital underclass mediated by the socio-economic conditions of digital capitalism; interconnected networks of production, extraction and optimisation.[3] In

[1] Wilson develops this into an ongoing artistic project. See Wilson, Andrew Scott. ScanOps (2012).

[2] Eve Sedgwick describes attachment and affect as one type of relation; 'affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects (2003: 19). In this article, I suggest that the attachments of the digital underclass are mediated through the social relations between different actors digital labour public, encounters with other human and non-human servers, technologies and the affective state of ambivalence.

[3] Following Christian Fuchs, I refer to digital capitalism as a 'dimension of the capitalist formation of society', rather than a new totality (2021: 27). This dimension is 'where processes of the accumulation of capital, decision-power (are)

turn, we must pay attention to the friction of ambivalent affective states—just like a sudden encounter with the fingers of ScanOps' employees—that bind us to the digital labour public.

The internet is animated by multiple forms of digital labour. Tiziana Terranova (2000) reconfigures the role of the user in relation to the digital economy in the historical period of the late 1990s and early 2000s, reconceptualising the 'reality of the Internet' as 'deeply connected to the development of late postindustrial societies' (34). She explores the production of culture within the digital economy as it relates to internet users through the concept of 'free labour' (33). Users participating online 'voluntarily [and] unwaged' result in a 'continuous production of value' (34) through data that is extracted and monetised. Yet, this digital labour only makes up part of the internet. The members of the digital underclass, associated most with 'digitally mediated service work' or 'platform labour' (van Doorn 2017: 900), occupy less accelerated temporal schemas and are configured to their labour conditions in uneven and less forgiving vectors of power. Examples of this form of labour span from gig economy workers such as Uber delivery drivers, social media platform moderators, and clickworkers performing online microtasks. Niels van Doorn reveals the way on-demand platforms 'exacerbate the already precarious conditions of contingent workers in today's low-income service economy' (898). These workers are predominantly globally diffracted, gendered and racialised bodies. The members of the digital underclass, or the human servers, are configured as passive, robotic and not-quite-human against the 'human' user.[4] This classification becomes the dominant form of recognition for the members

mediated by and organised with the help of digital technologies and where economic, political and cultural processes result in digital goods and digital structures' (28). Further analytical frameworks have come onto the scene in regards to the rise of the role of the internet, especially platforms. This is often framed as an intensification of neoliberal trends, or the emergence of new forms of capitalism; 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2019), 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek 2017, Boyer 2021), and the 'vectorialist class' (Wark 2019). This article emphasises the role of digital infra-structures as *mediators* and notes that all these frameworks need to be foregrounded through the hermeneutics of racial capitalism as defined within the article through Cedric Robinson and W.E.B Du Bois. For further thinking on reproduction in racial capitalism, see Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism* (2018). For further discussion on digital capitalism as racial capitalism, see Seb Franklin, *The Digitally Disposed* (2021) and Neda Atanasoski & Kalindi Voras, *Surrogate Humanity* (2019).

[4] The digital underclass is sometimes defined as individuals who are affected by the digital divide due to a lack of internet access (Lee 2024). I follow Tung-Hui Hu's (2022) understanding of the digital underclass as human servers. The term server in digital theory often denotes the virtual server, configured by computer programs with the task of responding to 'client' requests by completing complex protocols, ultimately 'providing assistance or delivering various services' (Krajewski 2018: 2) to users. Markus Krajewski offers a historical mapping of service from both human and nonhuman actors. Describing the work as 'noiseless and unnoticed' (2018:2), we can see how the affordances of agency for the humans working 'behind the screen' bear similarities to the virtual servers operating on platforms. The servers that are sold to users as virtual are in fact increasingly human, a 'pool of workers who rent out their spare time and resources for small, even miniscule jobs' (Hu 2022: xiv). This classification associates the digital underclass with automation. This

of the digital underclass. This functions as a form of biopolitical control necessary to the manifestations of the digital labour public, and the aesthetic violence of generic conventions of race, class and gender and other minoritarian positionalities. Here I draw from Lauren Berlant's framing of genres as social; the everyday, which is made up of dynamics, understandings and feelings, becomes conventionalised through genre. Genres provide 'an affective expectation of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art' (2011: 6). The generic conventions of gender, race and class make the digital labour public sensible.

As more critical attention is paid to labour and the internet, Alessandro Gandini (2020) argues that digital labour has become an 'empty signifier'. Tracing the theoretical trajectory of labour online, he claims that the generic expression of digital labour broadens all direct or indirect labour to any 'presence of a digital component in a context of work' (373). Rather than material objects, Gandini frames digital work platforms such as Uber or TaskRabbit as *digital media infrastructures*—a 'labour public' that mediates the social relations between different actors such as platform workers and platform users (375). He mobilises Gabriele Tarde's notion of the public as 'forms of ephemeral and interest-driven sociality' rather than a public sphere 'characterised by social bonds and a dimension of value sharing' (376). Gandini frames digital work platforms through this understanding of the public;

> Digital work platforms re-mediate and datafy the social relations that constitute the encounter between supply and demand of work, transforming these social relations into algorithmically regulated and coordinated, temporary relations of production. (376)

Understanding digital labour through the lens of infrastructure makes visible social relations mediated through vectors of power. Looking at these power dynamics shows how people gain agency through social norms and generic conventions set by digital systems. This can uncover how individuals, more specifically individuals in the digital underclass, are brought into complex forms of relationality with each other, their labour, technologies and the environment.

Reading *Little Eyes* by Samantha Schweblin (2020; trans. Megan McDowell) and *The Employees* by Olga Ravn (2020; trans. Martin Aitken), I offer an affective reading of the digital labour public suggesting that through paying attention to the glitch of

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automation defers the digital underclass to 'robots', understood both as a machine programmed by a computer and a human who responds mechanically or automatically. The word robot is derived from the Czech 'robotnik' meaning 'forced worker'. The etymological root is Old Church Slavonic 'rabota' meaning 'servitude'.

ambivalence we can begin to understand the way the digital labour public mediates the social relations between members of the digital underclass, users and their environment. This article utilises Gandini's turn toward infrastructure to comprehend the digital labour public as a 'social object' (2020: 377). Through a reading of both novels, I suggest that the digital labour public is an infrastructure of affect; patterned with affective attachments to the 'material technology [...] form or norm' of the digital labour public (Berlant 2022: 22).[5] In the novels, those in the digital underclass are affectively bound to norms of classification, other members of the digital underclass, users, technologies, and other affects. Rather than proposing a singular positive or negative affect to define the attachments that mediate the social relations between different actors, I characterise these social relations through *ambivalence*. Ambivalence is often thought of as a negative state of two opposing attitudes that precludes subjects from being fully affirmed in their attachments or causes subjects to act in self-defeating ways. [6] Yet, following Berlant (2016), Derek Ruez and Daniel Cockayne (2021), and Rebecca Coleman (2025), my critique is characterised by the generativity, rather than productivity, of ambivalence. Ambivalence offers a 'pluralistic attitude towards feelings' that are often understood as contradictory or incompatible (Ruez & Cockayne 2021: 88). In their turn to infrastructure, Berlant asks what it means to live a life of ambivalence, and what transformations might occur from this affective state.[7] Reading both *Little Eyes* and *The Employees*, I suggest that ambivalence is a glitch. Ambivalent affective states such as longing and hope reveal the inseparability of optimism, pessimism, the personal and impersonal, the erotic, the alienating, the intimate, the exposing, the isolating, the distancing and the confining. In turn, we can reflect on the

[5] For a review of affective infrastructures and infrastructures of affect, see Kai Bosworth, 'What is "affective infrastructure"', 2022.

[6] Ambivalence as two opposing attitudes can be found in Plato's writing of a divided soul.

The allegory of the charioteer pulled by two horses is characteristic of this definition of ambivalence (Razinsky 2016: 5). For Plato, this points to a defect of the will. As Justin Coates writes, Plato links the 'unified agency [...] the full integration of one's soul [with the] conception of the good life' (2017: 420). Yet, ambivalence necessarily 'involves a failure to integrate oneself'; to be a good agent is to have 'one's soul structured in a way that eliminates ambivalence' (ibid). The psychoanalytic framework does not frame ambivalence through such a failure. From a Freudian psychoanalytic framework, ambivalence indicates a conflict between the conscious and subconscious affective currents of love and hate; 'The conflict between these two currents cannot be promptly settled because [...] they are localised in the subject's mind in such a manner that they cannot come up against each other' (Freud 2004: 35). The repression of ambivalence towards others leads to the projection of the affective currents outwards. This creates a scapegoat for negative feelings directed at others. For a development of ambivalence in psychoanalysis see Melanie Klein 'Love, Guilt and Reparation' (1937), and Carol Owens & Stephanie Swales, *Psychoanalysing Ambivalence with Freud and Lacan* (2020).

[7] Here, Berlant writes 'What if we derived our social theory from scenes of ambivalence, which is to say, the scenes of attachment that are intimate, defined by desire, and overwhelming? We understand why we are overwhelmed by extreme and exhausting threats and actualized violence, as they menace the endurance of the world and of confidence in ongoingness'. (2016: 395).

endless modulation of attachments of a digital underclass who navigate an always-partial belonging.[8] Ultimately, we cannot understand the digital labour public without turning to the way affect is mediated through its infrastructure.

Samantha Schweblin's *Little Eyes* was first published in Spanish; Olga Ravn's *The Employees* in Danish. Both fictions have been printed, translated and read widely after their first publication. I encountered both literary texts through English translation. Rebecca Walkowitz explores the way translation has shaped fictional works, mapping the emergence of novelists that approach translation as a 'medium and origin' rather than as an afterthought (2017: 1). I borrow this way of understanding the relation between novels and translation in my framing of *Little Eyes* and *The Employees*. Translation shapes the narrative and form and in turn, new networks of affiliation are generated that are less bound to the nation.[9] Moving beyond national boundaries, both translated novels foreground critical imaginings of a collective life that can point to the attachments between globalised bodies located in uneven vectors. In a similar way to Wilson's ScanOps project, the novels promote an affectively ambivalent way of comprehending the multiple folds within the digital labour public.

Little Eyes is a fiction about the ways of being in relation within the digital labour public, and the atmospheres of responsivity that are made possible, or not, for users and human servers. Multiple narratives introduce the reader to lives of individuals who keep or dwell in a 'kentuki'; a small tele-robotic device in the shape of a toy animal with a camera built into its eyes. The word 'kentuki', a technology Schweblin speculates into existence in an adjacent present to our own, has multiple meanings that signal global displacement. Whilst the keepers purchase a kentuki, the dwellers install a programme on their device to control the technology. Initially, keepers and dwellers are assigned at random, with each connection lasting for a year. A voice recognition system is part of the kentuki's programme, to recognise the tone of the keeper's voice. Spanning fifteen cities globally, stories of dwellers and keepers appear in varying lengths, from a few pages to across chapters. Intimate contacts take shape from a close distance, mediated by forms of classification programmed into the technologies that are part of the digital labour public.

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[8] This in turn disrupts the online/offline, virtual/actual binary. For a developed critique of this digital dualism, see Nathan Jurgenson, *The Social Photo* (2019) and Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism* (2020).

[9] Globalisation, translation and digitalisation are foregrounded by Schweblin. Though she draws from her own experience of cities through literary events and artist residencies, Schweblin finds herself leaning into the network, working with Google Earth and the 'spontaneous collaboration of users of forums or social networks' (Ramakrishnan 2020). In one forum, she asks a Norwegian man to see if there are ramps between pavements and roads to make it possible for a kentuki to move through the city. Here, Schweblin comes to know the material infrastructure of a distant and unknown space.

In *The Employees,* the reader follows workers on a spaceship in the 22nd century. The employees are made up of humans, some modified by digital add-ons, and humanoids. The ship orbits above New Discovery, a planet filled with alien objects that the workers are ordered to bring into the ship and watch over. *The Employees* arrives to the reader as a detoured object. The novel is made up of a collection of numbered statements. Each statement is a response made by an employee to an investigation held by the corporation in charge of the ship. This experimental form attunes the reader to the strange atmosphere that makes visible the novel as multiple objects.[10] Information is redacted, names are concealed, and questions asked by the corporation are not recorded. Though *The Employees* is more experimental in form than *Little Eyes*, both texts make visible how digital media infrastructures materialise through the ambivalent relations between the not-quite-human actors, technologies and the environment.

If we are to read the digital labour public as a digital media infrastructure, we must pay attention to glitches that are inextricable from any infrastructural reading. I develop Tung-Hui Hu's claim (2022) that the exclusionary definitions of the digital underclass as the not-quite-human in digital culture is far from an 'unanticipated glitch' (64) but rather programmed into the norms of the digital labour public. This glitch is not in fact an 'error' but is built into the design of publics such as online platforms to allow for multiple modes of extraction by corporations from the members of the digital underclass. In both *Little Eyes* and *The Employees*, the 'unanticipated' glitch of classification mediates and limits the affective expression for the minoritarian subjectivities within the digital underclass, rendering an illegible subject. I then turn to a reading of the two novels through ambivalence. Ambivalence is a generative glitch that troubles the transmission of normative, exploitative forms of the social relations between social actors. The glitch of ambivalence does not offer a quick resolution by only reproducing negativity or generating positive affective attachments, as Ruez and Cockayne (2021: 89) point to. Writing in 1991, Donna Haraway writes with an optimistic tone that 'the unnatural cyborg women making chips in Asia' (154) may find 'pleasure in the confusion of boundaries' (150). I would, however, suggest substitute the feeling of pleasure with the affective state of ambivalence. Ambivalence signals a malfunction that holds with it the possibility for attuning into unpredictable relations, for an affective improvisation between self, labour, technology and the other.[11] Both *Little Eyes* and *The Employees* prompt the

[10] The text first appeared as an exhibition description; a leather-bound volume presented as part of artist Lea Gulddittе Hestelund's 2018 exhibition 'Consumed Future Spewed Up as Present'.

[11] I am departing from the framing of the glitch as a way for individuals to induce a technical error in the system, 'glitch-ing the system', most commonly in the context of contemporary digital Glitch Art (Menkman 2011). Rather, following

reader to confront the persistence of ambivalence as affects are made and remade within the encounters of the digital media infrastructure. In turn, literary texts excavate the affective attachments and encounters of subjectivities often forgotten within the collective entanglements of the digital labour public, undergirded by the exploitation of those occupying precarious, minoritarian positionalities.

The 'Unanticipated' Glitch of Classification

Both *Little Eyes* and *The Employees* set the scene for the affective conditions of the globalised world by invoking an atmosphere of otherness. In both novels, members of the digital underclass are affectively bound to the forms and norms of classification; the uneven classifications programmed into the infrastructural design of the digital labour public limit affective expression. Similarly to Andrew Wilson's ScanOps project, the novel becomes a technique of visualisation that signals the existence of multiple not-quite human actors. This in turn creates a fertile ground to conceptualise the pressures of proximity and vectors of power within the digital labour public. In this section, I extend Hu's exploration of the 'unanticipated' glitch of classification that assigns humanness to users whilst relegating the members of the digital underclass as passive, not-quite-human servers through processes of othering.

Kate Crawford (2021) explores the ways in which human labour has been relocated rather than replaced by technology. For example, clickworkers working remotely perform an endless queue of mundane tasks from data entry and tagging images to content moderation as part of a larger automated system.[12] Drawing from Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star (2000), Crawford (2021) understands classifications as powerful technologies embedded in working infrastructures that become invisible without losing power (127). The conditions of classification—what distinguishes human from the digital server—disappear whilst shaping the sociality of the digital labour public. Hu (2022) notes that these classifications are briefly made visible when the algorithm incorrectly assigns the person online to be a robot; 'algorithms look upon web browsers that don't load images with suspicion, reasoning that robots typically forgo images to load pages faster' (64). Corporations flag up an 'unanticipated' glitch on their platform, an error in the programme design that wrongfully accuses humans of being robots. Hu claims that the glitch makes apparent the exclusionary definitions programmed into classifications of humanness. Working definitions of humanness are a result of developer biases that programme algorithms to judge the 'right amount

Legacy Russell, the illegibility of bodies that do not fit into the binary system—Black, trans and queer—is already a glitch, a calculated failure that 'prompts the violent socio-cultural machine to hiccup, sigh, shudder, buffer' (2020: 11).

[12] Revealed to be powered by contracted human video-reviewers in India, Amazon's AI based checkout-free Just Walk Out technology is a recent example of the relocation rather than replacement of labour (Olson 2024).

of human interaction' (64). These definitions are formed by norms of recognition patterned by animateness and liveliness, 'manufacturing differences between active users and passive servers' (66). Human servers are classified as the not-quite-human, dwelling 'just outside of or within the imitation of human life' (66). These servers are members of the digital underclass, most often located in the global majority or at the intersection of race, gender and class.

The norm of classification makes up part of the generic conventions of race, gender and class that make the digital labour public sensible. Classification differentiates and conceals. This classification is an 'engineered imaginar[y]' that is limited by prior 'racial and gendered imaginaries of what kind of tasks separate the human from the not-quite human other' (Atanasoski & Vora 2019: 4). This aspect of classification permits an understanding of minoritarian positionalities in relation to digital capitalism. One way to do this is through a hermeneutics of racial capitalism. Cedric Robinson (2000) writes that 'historical development of world capitalism' has been influenced by the 'particularistic forces of racism' (9). The 'enlisting of human reserves' based on racialised differentiation is a significant aspect of this development (22). This differentiation originated from an exaggeration of 'regional, subcultural and dialectical differences into racial ones' (26). Ricarda Hammer and Tina M. Park (2021) draw from the Du Boisian concept of the veil as that which 'clouds [and] protects the metropolitan world from reckoning with the kind of violence upon which its comforts depend' (230).[13] Classification within the digital labour public is a 'digital veil' that results in the 'erasure' of racialised labourers (232). Companies disavow the operations of classification as an 'unanticipated glitch'. Yet, these classifications are built into the design, mediating the social relations between users and the members of the digital underclass to maintain the extractive principles of digital capitalism.

Little Eyes and *The Employees* reveal the way the uneven classifications, programmed into the infrastructural design of the digital labour public, limits affective expression. In *Little Eyes*, dwellers watch over the keepers and have access to their private spheres. This dwelling relegates them to the not-quite-human. The dweller's possibility for expression and communication is limited by the technology of the kentuki. The keepers' dominant way of recognising the dweller is mediated through the kentuki's posthuman interface—an overlapping of cuteness and strangeness. Strangeness materialises through the contacts between user and their kentuki. A keeper describes the kentuki as more like a 'watermelon than a rabbit', with 'bulging eyes' and ears falling 'languidly to either side' (Schweblin 2020: 14). Yet, the technology itself can only move and purr. A keeper in Oaxaca claims that without 'any other method of communication' the kentuki

[13] For the initial development of the veil, see Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk* (2018).

is ‘nothing but a dumb and boring pet’ (52). Following Berlant (2022), one can ask what kind of price is paid to live as the dweller, a keeper’s ‘inconvenient object’ (5). Sianne Ngai (2015) writes that the

> smaller and less formally articulated or more bloblike the object, the cuter it becomes [...] the formal properties associated with cuteness—smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy—call forth specific affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency. (185)

Rather than just an aesthetic, cuteness is an eroticisation of powerlessness that patterns the user’s mode of recognition of the kentuki as both a furry pet and a plastic object, animated by the technology but ultimately mute and powerless. The aesthetic of the technology obfuscates the dweller, making invisible the human operating the technology. Cuteness is one of many discourses that obscure the digital labour of the Global South. ‘Wrapping humans in robotic form’, as Hu (2022) writes, often has the effect of ‘mak[ing] it hard to recognise their work’. (71) Relegated to the not-quite-human, forms of exploitation arise. A dweller hacks into street security camera systems in Oaxaca to warn their taxi driver keeper with chirps as they approach areas monitored by speed radars. In exchange, the driver deposits five dollars into the dwellers account in Haiti—not because ‘he was cheap’ but because in Haiti it was a ‘fortune’ (Schweblin 2022: 163). The ‘unanticipated’ glitch of classification undergirds this form of exploitation, maintaining the uneven relation between keeper and dweller. This bears resemblance to ‘work-on-demand’ apps, which emerge from the dominance of platform economies. As the digital underclass, dwellers find themselves in the margins, limited in their expression and relegated to the not-quite-human.

In *The Employees*, mechanical language is imbued with affective expression to make visible the ambiguous operations of the ‘unanticipated’ glitch of classification. In turn, this reveals the exclusionary modes of recognition of ‘humanness’ patterned into the digital labour public. Each statement is represented only by a number, so the reader must scan the ‘data’ collected by the corporation to discover who is human and who is humanoid. Whilst in *Little Eyes* the dweller is obfuscated by the aesthetic categories of cuteness and strangeness, in *The Employees* classifications are staged as biases on what may feel *too* mechanical or *too* human on the level of expression. A more detached, programmed expression may point to a humanoid speaking, whilst affective expression may suggest a statement by a human worker. In statement 091, a worker reflects that the memories from Earth weigh them down, that together with other human workers they are ‘drawn by each other’s unhappiness’ (Ravn 2020: 84). Yet, Ravn purposefully creates an atmosphere of uncertainty for the reader. In statement 056, a worker reflects,

> The thing that's made the biggest difference for my work is without doubt being allocated half an hour with a child hologram of my son (it has) without doubt helped stabilise me as an employee here, and I can see that it's been beneficial to my work effort. (Ravn 2020: 55)

Can the reader assume that this is a human worker? Phrasing something slightly too mechanically, in support of the optimisation of the self for work as something positive for productivity, creates an atmosphere of uncertainty against the longing to see their son.

Are the memories of having a child in fact programmed into a humanoid worker to create connection with the human workers? In turn, the norms of classification take shape. Real-life companies respond to the need to be able to differentiate between human users and non-human bots by creating CAPTCHAs, an abbreviation of 'Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart', a computer programme requiring users to prove their humanness by solving distorted text or clicking on images. Everyday users become aware of lack of accuracy when CAPTCHAs impose the wrong classification; if you respond too quickly, you are classified by the artificial intelligence as not-quite-human. You are unable to flag this up to the company but instead must keep repeating the task until you are accepted as human. The experimental form of the novel positions the reader as a CAPTCHA, with the act of reading mirroring its function by sifting through the data to classify each statement. In turn, Ravn forces the reader to confront their own imposed classifications and exclusionary biases on what it means to be human.

Detached language may signal the existence of the not-human. Yet, individuals in the digital underclass are often managed and disciplined by their capability of machinic efficiency through productive metrics that act as tools of control and surveillance. In *The Employees*, employees accept the corporation's changes, such as digital add-ons, to become more productive in their work effort (Ravn 2022: 55, 100, 102). This is reminiscent of Crawford's (2021) example of the labour conditions in Amazon's warehouses, where efficiency is measured and classified against the speed of the robot workers. Human workers are recognised for their ability to do non-human labour, such as moving, assembling, and completing tasks, and disciplined when recognised as human, when searching, taking care, inspecting, planning, resting and taking bathroom breaks. This is monitored through an increase in 'worker surveillance and work rhythms [...] using a bracelet to capture data from and provide feedback about workers' movements' (Delfanti & Grey 2021: 658). The bracelets bear a clear resemblance to the digital add-ons in the novel. In *The Employees*, whilst their co-worker is 'ready to move on to the next task straight away', an employee is confused by their co-worker who decides to '*sit*

for a bit' (Ravn 2022: 33; original emphasis) after saving some time by streamlining the completion of a task. The employee decides to sit with the co-worker to not 'jeopardise (their) excellent working relationship' (33). The reader is left unsure who is human and who is humanoid, as poetic and affective expression is interwoven with detached corporate expression.

Whilst some employees in the novel rid themselves of 'human qualities' to conform to corporate standards, others express intimacy, feeling a desire to spend time doing a task with another worker. Does this mean they are human? One employee expresses the affective crisis resulting from classification: 'Am I human? Does it say in your files that I am?' (22). Unable to define oneself within the environment, the worker turns to the classifications imposed on them. Ravn reveals the illegibility of being 'assigned' humanness. This is further fractured in the novel's appendix. After the strike that results in the extermination of the employees by the corporation, recording equipment captures a statement that seems to come from a singular entity, suggesting to the reader that the novel in fact may not have been made up of statements by different subjects. The reader's assumption that the characters in the novel are individual beings may in fact be an error in their classification. Both novels reveal the way the digital labour public as a mediator of social relations. This mediation takes the form of classification and othering. *Little Eyes* makes literal the obfuscation of human servers by the technology of the kentuki, which limits the dwellers' possibility for communication. *The Employees* further reveals the way differentiation functions through the assignment of humanness within the possibilities of expression.

Glitches in Affect: Improvising with Ambivalence

In this section, I offer a closer reading of the ambivalence that patterns the digital labour public. This gives a specificity to the digital labour public as an infrastructure of affect, furthering Gandini's infrastructural reframing of digital work platforms. Whilst the 'unanticipated' glitch of classification binds those in the digital underclass to an exclusionary and extractive life-world, *Little Eyes* and *The Employees* reveal the glitch of ambivalence that materialises transformations in individual and collective spheres. Therefore, the glitch of ambivalence appears both within the relation to classification in digital capitalism and alongside it. Ambivalence opens up the possibility for members of the digital underclass to function in proximity to each other. The incompatibility of ambivalent attachments generates error, expressed by frictions between contradictory affects that trigger openings for affective improvisations and mobilisation. These improvisations tend to displace those in the digital underclass from habituated, often oppressive, digital terrains of production and reproduction. In *Little Eyes*, the glitch manifests through a prolonged process of living with the ambivalence of longing—

where complicated and contradictory feelings of detachment, loss, isolation, connection and affection collide—reorientating attachments to fantasies and desires that were dismissed as unattainable. In *The Employees*, contact with the objects that those in the digital underclass care for elicits affective leaks of erotic desire and depression, glitching the automated affects programmed by the corporation. In both novels, the affective glitches trouble the seemingly inevitable reproduction of infrastructural norms, forming alternative modes of speculative relationality to shape, even briefly, within the digital labour public.

Little Eyes represents the internet as networked connections filled with scattered connections of displacements and partial inroads. Dwellers find trouble, or lack enough agency, to secure a stable meaningful world. Marvin, a child in Antigua, grieves the loss of his mother. Emilia, an older lady in Lima, misses her son who works across different places globally. Cheng Shi Xu, a lonely middle-aged man, spends most of his days at home in Beijing. After installing the program, the dwellers negotiate with the ambivalent, fractured relation to space and time; existing behind the computer screen for most of their day and becoming entangled with the technology of the kentuki. In this in-between space, Emilia, thinks to herself, 'she had two lives, and that was much better than barely having one and limping around in free fall' (Schweblin 2020: 40). She occupies herself with the affective labour of taking care of her keeper. Schweblin frames dwelling as living with the ambivalent conditions of possible life-worlds. Aleksandra Bida (2018) writes that the acts that 'attain to dwelling' are those that build a life and create a sense of belonging to a way of life (2018: 13). Belonging, however, is a fragile affective bind patterned with the ambivalence of longing. Those relegated to the not-quite-human find themselves in the alterity of becoming entangled in the here and not here, negotiating with the friction of longing for being in both places.

In *The Employees,* relations between the humanoids become ambivalently entangled with the objects they work to take care of. While the spaceship represents the infrastructural relationality between the human and the humanoid which entraps them in the assigned roles of user and server, those in the digital underclass can experience affective glitches within the folds of this normative infrastructure, represented by the rooms filled with objects from the planet New Discovery. Forgetting to hang up one of the objects in accordance with the corporate instructions, the employee finds it humming on the floor. The employee senses 'some kind of sadness' (Ravn 2020: 13) in the passively saturated existence of the object. Another employee experiences a 'strong sense of having abandoned the object' and feels 'ashamed' of themselves (29). As the employees care for and maintain the objects, their attachment to their labour becomes a marker of affective self-disturbance.

In *Little Eyes,* glitches within the friction of ambivalence gesture new possibilities of agency for dwellers. Marvin dwells inside a dragon kentuki that is trapped behind a shop window in Honningsvag to attract customers. Surrounded by vacuum cleaners, Marvin dreams of touching snow for the first time. In the placeless place between Antigua and Honningsvag, Marvin imagines finding 'a way out [...] [a]t least in this other life, he wouldn't let himself be locked up' (Schweblin 2020: 28). With the friction of optimism and pessimism, of hope and depression, he 'had to remind himself that he had longed for his own freedom without once thinking of disconnecting' (138). Inhabiting the kentuki through prolonged dwelling in the ambivalent state of longing creates moments of improvisation that reveal the porosity of digital technologies and the self. One day, his keeper leaves the shop door open and Marvin leaves, with no plan to return. Marvin begins to feel differently, comprehending his own identity as a glitch: he no longer was a boy with a dragon, but 'a dragon with a boy inside him' 94). When the kentuki loses footing and falls, the 'noise on the tablet came from Marvin's own body hitting the ground' (210). Dwelling in this fractured space re-orientates his own subjectivity within the glitch of ambivalence that frays the classifications imposed on him as a passive server. Lost in the city, he is saved by Jesper a hacker activist who has formed a Liberation club of kentukis. This counter-structure forges new modes of relationality between kentukis, who are free to roam around within the safe zone, a radius of two kilometres from their base. The dwellers can download a programme created by Jesper to communicate with other liberated kentukis. In this chat room, Marvin can name himself (SnowDragon) rather than being named by a keeper, forging agency outside of the programmed possibilities of the digital kentucki. The chat room starts to shape an emerging structure between the dwellers who within the encounter share their hopes and dreams. Messaging another liberated dweller, Marvin shares his plan to go beyond the safe zone to touch snow. Though it is the kentuki that will 'touch' the snow, Marvin overlooks this as he is disassociated from his human body. In this ambivalent disassociation, he improvises with the longing of escape:

> '**Kitty03= from 1 to 10, how much do you wanna touch snow?**
> **"SnowDragon= 10"**' (142)[14]

The conversation is minimal, a number standing in for an affective description. Whilst Kitty03 does not share the same desire, an intimate identification between the dwellers occurs. Marvin's longing is overwhelming; this ambivalent affective state takes on

[14] Bold type is used throughout the novel to represent text online.

a different form in the chatroom, a fold within the digital labour public that is not mediated by the extractive modes of digital capitalism. He takes the chance to hack his kentuki body with the help of accessories like with all-terrain wheels, battery-life extension pack and a locator offered by Jesper. With these accessories Marvin could,

> take long excursions in a world where he could live without ever going down even once for dinner; in fact, he could live without eating at all [...] touch snow all day long, once he finally reached the mountains. (143)

Dwellers respond '**<3<3<3<3<3**', an emoticon that resembles the shape of a heart, repeated for five times (168). The glitchy attachments create brief openings for dwellers to improvise with alternative genres of relationality, away from the programmed realities possible for dwellers.

Whilst only limited communication is possible between keepers and dwellers, Schweblin imagines alternate structures that allow for dwellers to communicate with each other. In turn, affects emerged defy the limited rules of expression. Cheng Shi-Xu, dwelling in Lyon but connected in Beijing, spends over ten hours a day on his computer, losing touch with his life and his body. His friends give up trying to call him, and the fast food burns a 'hole in his stomach' (Schweblin 2020: 71). Controlling the kentuki, Cheng Shi-Xu is given 'total autonomy' by his keeper Cécile (72). Together, they regularly visit Jean-Claude, Cécile's brother, who lives in the apartment next door. Jean-Claude also has a kentuki, a dweller also residing in Beijing, whom he has named Titina (the reader later finds out the dweller's name to be Kong Taolin). As Titina, Kong Taolin is ordered to rub Jean-Claude feet with her 'plush body, brushing against them slowly from side to side' (Schweblin 2020: 73). This care work is done in exchange for Jean-Claude to teach her French so she can emigrate from Beijing. Unobtrusive, but available for commands, this narrative highlights the 'uneasy junction of race, work and geography' (Hui 2022: 66) in the digital labour public.

In Jean-Claude's apartment, Cheng Shi-Xu falls in love with Kong Taolin, experiencing the 'birth of a great love, perhaps the most authentic and inexplicable of his life' (Schweblin 2020: 71). Jean-Claude paints an alphabet on his bathroom floor so that Kong Taolin and Cheng Shi-Xu can glide over the letters as the kentukis and communicate with each other. A rerouting of communication channels creates new geometries of relation as both dwellers take a risk in reimagining what is possible within the digital labour public. Whilst Kong Taolin glides over the letters 'with grace', like a 'dance', Cheng Shi-Xu at first performs this awkwardly (74), unsure how to move around, how to improvise, within the ambivalence. The possibility for affective

attachments to emerge in the encounter requires patience. In the dead time of waiting for the users' command, the slow movements of gliding create a mechanism away from a temporal management of the digital labour public and into new synchronic choreographies that form counter-structures from within the folds. While both are Chinese speakers, Kong Taolin writes in French and Cheng Shi-Xu in English. Unlike the sense of immediacy within digital translation, it takes time to read each letter, one by one, and make sense of what is being told; 'my-name-is-kong-taolin' (Schweblin 2020: 74).[15] Within the constraints of a Western alphabetic writing system that is not used in the dwellers' native tongue, both Kong Taolin and Cheng Shi-Xu find a mode of surviving, if only barely, to the extractive demands of digital labour. For Cheng Shi-Xu, the 'echo of the kentuki's little motors dancing over the tiles' plays as he falls asleep in his apartment in Beijing (Schweblin 2020: 74). Barely above the surface of comprehension, this subworld is transformative, charged with an intimacy that becomes a collective condition of becoming-different. Until the moment where Jean-Claude removes the battery of the kentukis at 'forty-six days, five hours, thirty-four minutes' (Schweblin 2020: 81). From this disconnection, their story disappears from the novel.

Whilst *Little Eyes* reveals counter-infrastructural improvisations through glitches in affect, members of the digital underclass in *The Employees* experience the glitch as affective leaks that force an improvisation of affective attachment. An employee points to the transformative capability of the room filled with the mysterious objects; the spaceship is described as a 'secure and pleasant vessel, holding inside it a disaster retold' (Ravn 2020: 59). Within this ambivalence, data leaks of hidden memories and erotic desires disrupt the digital labour public of the spaceship. What happens when those inhabiting the uneven vectors of the digital labour public become overwhelmed with errors? Or when this crisis becomes unmanageable to the point at which it cannot be absorbed back into the reproduction of dominant digital media infrastructure? Ravn adapts the scientific trope of alien objects triggering emotional and epistemological crisis, such as Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic* (1972) or Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1962). Represented by the workers slow disengagement with the updates, deviation is part of the affective state of ambivalence in the novel. One employee shares that they appreciate their 'sadness' knowing that it is a 'deviation from the emotional behaviour' they have been allocated (Ravn 2020: 87). Another employee states that they are 'not programmed to cry', and that this 'must be an error in the update' (49). These errors cause a few of the not-quite-human employees to stop

[15] Anne Carson writes that 'nowadays […] the computer chooses the meaning of the word relevant to the passage and gives that, so you don't even get to the history of the word and a chance to float around among its possible other senses'. Immediacy comes with no hesitation, a loss of what she describes as 'on the way to knowing' (Dwyer 2024).

communicating with the rest of the workforce. Instead, these employees attune to a sonic frequency between themselves that is not audible to the corporation. Their presence is silent. Silence signifies refusal, as employees improvise with articulations of non-participation. This refusal resists the terminal integration of being subsumed back into the digital labour public. The social noise goes silent, so the corporation is unable to capture signals to exploit.

The ambivalence as glitch creates an opening for the employees to retrain their senses. One employee shares with the corporation that

> the day before yesterday you removed the very object to which I feel most attached, the one with the pink belt-tie around its middle, *the Gift*, and since then I've been experiencing palpitations, a tingling in my hands and feet, a sense of derealisation, and a feeling of impending disaster. (Ravn 2020: 76; original emphasis)

Employees begin to comprehend the exploitation programmed in the digital labour public within the disturbing episodes of affective leaks. To keep reinitialising the system, the corporation attempts to reboot the humanoid employees and fix the glitch; however, the employees keep re-activating with new affective attachments and detachments. Alongside negative or flat affects of detachment, lethargy and depression, appear affective states of sexual desire, promiscuity, love and empathy. As the attachments to the objects grow, the employees improvise with new modes of recognition. The humanoid employees 'let in particular objects, or to protect them once they have gotten under the skin' (8). One employee reveals that they 'recognise their gender' in the suspended object, calling it '*the Reverse Strap-On*' (18; original emphasis). Similar to Marvin in *Little Eyes* who names himself, the employee names the technical object. This intimacy signals to the servers of the network new points of identification, such as gender. They want to cling to, to rub up against, to cry with, and to assure themselves of their existence within the rooms of objects. These sensual glitchy affects extend subjectivity into different orbits. The smell of something 'old and decomposing' in the objects room triggers within the worker the desire to 'become a brand to break off, rot and be gone' (31). The employees experience emerging desires to be taken over, and to take over; to absorb and be absorbed, to dissolve and be dissolved. An employee embraces this, appreciating their 'sadness' as this signals 'a deviation from the emotional behaviour' they have been allocated (87). They state, 'I may have been made, but now I'm making myself' (87). Members of the digital underclass keep self-activating, and with each renewal, more affects emerge. The employees gain agency within these ambivalent states. In the final moments, the reader is also left

lingering, as what was thought to be statements by individual workers are suggested to be one voice. In this moment, Ravn reveals how the discrepant experience of ambivalence can circulate through the individual and the collective. By exploring the improvisations made possible through ambivalence, both the employees and the reader linger in the transitional opening after the glitch, which in turn becomes a moment of transformative possibility.

Life within the Digital Labour Public

Developing a reading of how infrastructure governs certain affects extends the ways in which the digital labour public as a mediator of social relations between different actors can be theorised. Fiction that stages ambivalence is generative in its ability to attune the reader to both minoritarian subjectivity and processes of differentiation and othering. By paying attention to how the novels represent the improvised ways to navigate the demands of agency for a minoritarian subjectivity, the reader is orientated in their position as a 'user' within the digital labour public. As one employee writes,

> You want to know what I think about this arrangement? I think you look down on me. The way I see it, you're a family that's built a house. And from the warm rooms of that house you now look out at the pouring rain. Safe from menace, you delight at the rain. You're dry and snug. You're reaping the rewards of a long process of refinement [...] I'm standing in the rain you think can never fall on you. I become one with that rain [...] This entire house is something you built just to avoid me. So don't come to me and say I play no part in human lives. (Ravn 2020: 86)

I have suggested that one cannot develop the digital labour public as a digital media infrastructure without paying attention to the glitching potential that infrastructures hold within them. I have foregrounded throughout the potential for remaking and interruption and glitching that accompanies defining the digital labour public infrastructurally and affectively. As Berlant writes,

> an infrastructural analysis helps us see that what we commonly call "structure" is not what we usually presume—an intractable principle of continuity across time and space—but is really a convergence of force and value in patterns of movement seen as solid from a distance. (2020:25)

This is generative in its possibility for transitioning away from what is commonly felt as the unchangeable structure of the digital labour public through the transformation of

affective attachments away from the norms of classification. Ultimately, *Little Eyes* and *The Employees* are a call to stay close to the glitch of ambivalence which holds within it multiple and overlapping directionalities for emerging relationalities to take shape. From this, one can pay attention to the appearance and emerging contours of glitches of affect within the digital labour public both in fiction and beyond.

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The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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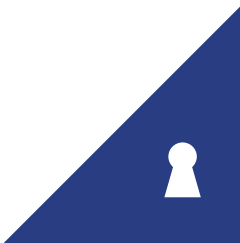
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