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ARTICLE

The Disabled Body Under Surveillance Capitalism: Tony Tulathimutte's *Private Citizens*

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Today's online platforms have become apparatuses for the automated monitoring and interpretation of bodies as data. Such data contributes to convincing predictive advertising models. Tony Tulathimutte's 2016 novel *Private Citizens* represents the emergence of this 'surveillance capitalist' system. The character Vanya is a paraplegic Silicon Valley entrepreneur who launches an ill-fated online platform named 'Sable' to challenge ablest stereotypes with content that centres on the experiences of people with impairments. However, the economic imperatives underpinning the platform transform Vanya's desire for inclusion and visibility into forms of surveillance directed at herself and her disabled audience. This article argues that, despite its attention to the subtleties of ableism in surveillance capitalism, *Private Citizens* enacts structurally similar practices of surveillance on disabled bodies. The article suggests that this novel reproduces normative interpretations of Vanya's paraplegia as source material for metaphors to elaborate themes of authenticity, work and self-presentation under surveillance capitalism.

Keywords: disability; surveillance; capitalism; *Private Citizens*; Tulathimutte

Industrial capitalism has historically categorised the disabled body as unproductive, its difference to the interchangeable 'universal worker' introducing disruptive contingencies to standardised models of labour and mass production (Davis 1995: 36). However, under the surveillant gaze of today's internet platforms, such as Google and Facebook, the categorisation of bodily difference has itself become a source of value. Any and all recorded data about users provides material to further augment complex models of targeted advertising. Far from threatening production, encountering difference between bodies indicates untapped areas to measure and translate

into significant 'user profile information'. While disability as a historically situated system of differentiating 'normal' and 'abnormal' bodies continues to exclude many from labouring in the post-industrial economy, this differentiation process generates valuable new avenues to internet platforms and extends their commodification of social life.[1]

The categorisation of bodily difference finds a precedent in literary history. Narratives have long invoked disability as 'a stock feature of characterization' and 'an opportunistic metaphorical device', using 'abnormal' bodies to index moral or social aberration in a character or a society, one that the narrative arc ultimately solves (Mitchell and Snyder, 2002: 47). In detailing the ways in which disabled characters' bodies diverge from an assumed norm, novels have invited readers to interpret that difference as socially meaningful. The extension of this opportunism into new technological arenas testifies to the fact that, as Mitchell and Snyder (2002) argue, beyond 'the search for a more "positive" story of disability' we need 'a thoroughgoing challenge to the undergirding authorization to interpret that disability invites' (59). This means investigating the documents and practices—or 'apparatuses' (Foucault 1980: 194–196)—that measure, classify, and in doing so reify differences between bodies. Through an analysis of Tony Tulathimutte's 2016 novel *Private Citizens*, this article will interrogate overlaps and clashes between the novel and online platforms as apparatuses that surveille the disabled body.

With the narrative arc of its character Vanya Andreeva, *Private Citizens* represents contemporary economic imperatives to record and commodify data about the disabled body. An aspiring Silicon Valley entrepreneur with paraplegia, Vanya launches a video blog and online community platform called 'Sable', ostensibly to challenge

[1] Scholars disagree over whether user activity on platforms should be considered a form of 'labour'. Terranova (2004) argues that the 'excessive activity' of users makes platforms attractive to new users, contributing to its value and thus meaning that users perform unpaid labour (73–4). Srnicek (2017), however, contends that, because platforms relocate existing 'socially necessary labour time' online rather than extending it, user activity does not introduce enough new value to the capitalist system overall to be considered 'free labour' (55–6).

negative representations of people with disabilities in mainstream American culture. However, her entrepreneurial zeal and willingness to conform to the demands of an exploitative socioeconomic system ultimately alienate her from other characters in the novel. This article will discuss how Vanya's desire for inclusion and visibility becomes transformed by the economic imperatives of 'surveillance capitalism' into forms of 'disability surveillance' directed at herself and her audience. It will then draw on existing critiques of literary representation from disability studies to suggest that *Private Citizens* reproduces traditional bodily norms even as it deconstructs practices of bodily surveillance performed on online platforms.

Surveillance Capitalism and the Silicon Valley Novel

Over decades of research, Shoshana Zuboff has detailed the history and logic of an emergent socioeconomic system she terms 'surveillance capitalism'. Platform-owning entities accumulate and analyse behavioural data extracted from individuals' activity both on and off their platforms. They then package these analyses into 'prediction models' to lease to clients seeking to target particular consumer segments.[2] This economic system relies on surveillance at a mass, automated scale: cookies, cameras and microphones tracking the activity of individuals without their meaningful consent. We voluntarily accept this surveillance; platforms having ingrained themselves in our 'felt needs for effective life' (Zuboff 2015: 83). Detaching oneself from a widely used platform like Facebook's Messenger app could affect our ability to contact certain people, for example.[3]

Set in San Francisco between 2007 and 2008, *Private Citizens* inhabits the salad days of surveillance capitalism. Google is solidifying its megacorporate status while

[2] Moroszov (2019) criticises Zuboff (2019) for presenting 'surveillance capitalism' a unique aberrance rather than logical development from 'prior' epochs of capitalism. Nonetheless, Zuboff's work remains useful for isolating and detailing an increasingly influential element of capitalism today. Zuboff's term is more specifically focused than Srnicek's (2007) 'platform capitalism', since it is foremost concerned with 'advertising platforms' and not the other types—'cloud', 'industrial', 'product' and 'lean'—that he details (49).

[3] Moreover, as platforms' 'shadow profiles' of non-users demonstrate, even when someone actively chooses to avoid surveillance capitalism it can incorporate them regardless (Garcia 2017).

Facebook is securing its own empire, the industry's take-over of the Bay Area drawing on seemingly bottomless capital and cultural prestige—years before Edward Snowden's 2011 leak of NSA files and the 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal. Although *Private Citizens* does not represent the financial crash of 2008, it does survey the neoliberal stupor of the months prior to this. The novel's San Francisco is inundated with tech bros, yuppies and hipsters. Those displaced by this influx are also marginalised in the narrative, their presence providing spectral reminders of local histories, communities and politics that have since shattered into commercialised simulacra.

The plot follows four neurotic Stanford University graduates—Will, Cory, Linda and Henrik—as they each fail to capitalise on their elite education. Their stories interlace to ask how we live authentically in a socioeconomic environment that appropriates the very notion of authenticity to clearly inauthentic ends. This open-ended thematic focus aligns with contemporary 'post-postmodern' or 'New Sincerity' fiction, which seeks a paradigm beyond the 'narcissism, solipsism, irony and insincerity' of a now-hegemonic postmodernism (Kelly 2010: 145). Much like the cultural milieu it depicts, the 400-or-so pages of *Private Citizens* compound references to mid-00s consumer culture with layer upon layer of irony. However, beyond reproducing postmodern surfaces, it seeks depth in the contradictions between them. As its characters' self-centred projects fall apart, they find themselves rediscovering their dependence on one another and embracing a messy and seemingly apolitical humanity that exceeds their clichéd ideologies and identities.

Where David Foster Wallace viewed television as embodying the postmodern irony he aimed to transcend, recent post-postmodern fiction has challenged the seemingly earnest utopianism of Silicon Valley. These texts therefore overlap with those that Eve and Street (2018) identify as an emerging 'Silicon Valley Novel' genre, which depicts a 'dialectic of enlightenment in which techno-progression is socio-regressive and […] disruptive entrepreneurship and innovation holds out but little hope of a revitalised culture or aesthetics' (83). Such novels view surveillance capitalist corporations as flattening the complexity of individual experience and interpersonal relationships they hope to recover. Here, narrative is placed in fundamental

opposition to data, the former framed as a means of accessing the messy, contingent humanity that the latter obfuscates.[4]

However, such an opposition overlooks how narratives function within surveillance capitalism. Hayles (2012) writes that data and narratives are two are 'different species' but they exist in a 'symbiotic relationship' (178). Whereas databases require explicitly defined values, narratives use temporal development and inference to suggest what cannot be so rigidly defined (178–9). Yet, rather than being in opposition, narratives are 'the necessary other to database's ontology, the perspectives that invest the formal logic of the database's operations with human meanings' (183). Indeed, narratives are themselves apparatuses, informing how and why governments, corporations and others record and interpret surveillant data. They structure how being watched is 'imagined and experienced [...] initiated and engaged by those who have become familiar with and even inured to surveillance' (Lyon 2018: 2). Crucially, Facebook and other surveillance capitalist platforms do not sell 'raw' data to clients. Instead, they market their own organisation and narrativization of this data, 'whether through the skilled labour of a data scientist or the automated labour of a machine-learning algorithm' (Srnicek 2017: 57). The dichotomy between narrative and data in post-postmodern fiction therefore does not reflect the state of contemporary surveillance capitalism so much as an 'anxiety of obsolescence' (Fitzpatrick 2006) regarding the cultural status of traditional narrative media such as the novel.

Although *Private Citizens* offers a critical representation of surveillance capitalism, it repeatedly frustrates any straightforward reading by foregrounding hypocrisy and naïveté among the characters who voice this criticism. For instance, Cory's railing against the 'vile, omnivorous privatization machine' of Silicon Valley deteriorates

[4] For example: Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* frequently describes data in terms of refuse and pollution, while books are 'a way to bridge the unfathomable gap' between people (2011: 309); Dave Eggers's *The Circle* contrasts Silicon Valley's drive to translate the entire 'messiness of humanity' into data—'completion'—with the importance of mystery and for storytelling and 'the soul' (2013: 491; 430); Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* contains multiple asides negatively comparing the value of entities like Wikileaks who 'spew' unfiltered data to traditional investigative journalists who 'collate and condense and contextualise' it and writers who 'attempt at precise and honest recollection' (2015: 493; 510).

into disjointed academic name-dropping, to which Will responds, 'you don't win arguments by saying Heidegger' (Tulathimutte, 2016: 122). This pattern of presenting lengthy critical arguments, only to immediately undermine them, recurs throughout the novel. Like other post-postmodern fiction, its primary thematic focus is not a socioeconomic system but 'what makes it tough to be a human being' within it, and how its flawed protagonists might connect with one another across their fragmented worldviews (Timmer 2010: 360–1). It pointedly refuses to cohere to a simple worldview by introducing ambivalence wherever possible. The novel's treatment of disability and surveillance capitalism must be understood through this tendency towards contradiction and messiness. Vanya states early on that mainstream cultures train individuals to 'react to [disability] with misplaced empathy' (Tulathimutte, 2016: 43). This statement frames her characterisation as the blinkered and unrepentant avatar for a dogged entrepreneurialism.

Although Vanya plays a major role in *Private Citizens*, the narrative focalisation is limited to its four able-bodied protagonists. As a 'secondary' character, her subject-position remains structurally inaccessible behind the mediating perspective of these characters, in particular her partner, Will. Will is supportive of Vanya's drive to succeed in a society designed to marginalise her, yet he views her as shallow in her self-presentation and wilfully oblivious to her relative class and racial privilege. This interpretation of Vanya is, however, informed by his own conflicts. His hyper-consciousness about racist microaggressions aimed at him as an Asian-American man develops into a paranoia and a misogynistic inferiority complex involving a desire to control Vanya and an addiction to online pornography. While Vanya relishes the public spotlight Sable brings, the incessant gaze of her users intensifies Will's paranoia, provoking him to attack a stranger on a bus during a Sable livestream. In a misguided effort to relieve his stress, Vanya suggests that he undergo surgery to make his eyes appear more Caucasian. This goes wrong, impairing Will's vision, and shortly after this he breaks up with her.

Reviews of *Private Citizens*, if they mention Vanya at all, interpret her as a secondary element within the tragic structure of Will's plotline, describing her as 'borderline psychotic' (Gilmartin, 2016, n. pag.) and 'a monster in a Silicon Valley society' (Brown,

2016, n. pag.). Lorentzen (2016) offers a more sustained discussion of Vanya as 'a cunning creation' who 'may be said to embody the characteristics Tulathimutte is most interested in mocking' yet remains 'an object of readerly sympathy'. He further suggests that the accident at a teen beauty catwalk that results in her paraplegia 'might be offensive if it weren't so silly' (n. pag.). Eve and Street (2018) note that Will and Vanya's plotline departs from the typically hegemonic perspectives of Silicon Valley novels by exploring cultural 'otherness' (90). However, their broad genre survey does not attend to the contradictions within this exploration. Although Vanya is vocal in her dialogue, her character plays little role in the novel's diegetic thematisation of disability. It is partially through this structural imbalance that the novel ultimately reproduces modes of surveilling disabled bodies, even as it criticises their function within surveillance capitalism.

Disability Surveillance

People with impairments have long been made the objects of data collection and narrative interpretation processes that frame them as deviations from a norm (Davis 1995). Saltes (2013) terms this 'disability surveillance': the 'practice of collecting, documenting, monitoring and classifying personal data that pertains to the embodied characteristics and attributes of impairment' (56). Although these practices of reproducing the disabled body as data—apparatuses of disability surveillance—tend to imbed reductive assumptions into the structure of institutions, they need not necessarily be ableist.[5] Disability surveillance 'oscillate[s] between biopolitical practices of social control that exclude people with impairments in order to prevent perceived economic "'risk" and practices of counting and classifying people with impairments in order to promote rights' (56). Recorded data about disability is necessary to improve infrastructures for including people with impairments in social life; however, it can also become a tool of oppression.[6]

[5] Ableism names the 'discrimination and devaluing of disabled people through the behaviour, attitudes, presumptions and practices that recognize and prioritize physical, sensory and cognitive norms and fail to accommodate for difference' (Saltes 2018: 82).

[6] In the UK for instance, 'there aren't national eligibility criteria for receiving mobility equipment and until 2015 there wasn't even centrally gathered data on wheelchair services across the country'

What does disability surveillance look like when conducted by automated machine-learning algorithms scanning 'big data' for 'insights' about user behaviour? Rouvroy and Berns (2013) argue that, unlike the nineteenth-century statistics that produced the 'average' or 'normal' man, today's algorithms relate individual cases to 'a system of eminently evolving relations between various measurements that are not reducible to any average' (3–4). 'Algorithmic governmentality' does not sort individual bodies into a fixed set of categories; rather, it distributes them across vast, multiple, always-shifting systems of relations that identify new categories from emerging patterns in data, reifying them in code. This 'a-normative objectivity' (3) might therefore radically restructure how bodily difference is categorised. However, with its depiction of Vanya and Sable, *Private Citizens* suggests that this a-normativity is lost amidst the normative narrativization of data demanded by surveillance capitalism.

The first narrative Vanya creates about disability is an earnestly positive story, Sable initially being a spin-off from the 'positivity-themed blog network' she had previously worked for (Tulathimutte 2016: 42). She describes the website to potential investors as filling a gap in the market for a 'mainstream' online community for disabled users that does not 'devolve into group therapy' and 'make[s] disability exciting to watch' (45; 43). Its content is packaged in the language of the mid-00s blogosphere, with titles including 'The 14 Worst Accessibility Design Fails', 'Watch This Deaf MC DOMINATE a Rap Battle (Wait for It!)' and *'@CCESS @BILITY: Shattering the Able Ceiling with Web 2.0'* (271; 250). These titles reflect Vanya's sanguine view of new media as offering people with disabilities a voice in a mainstream culture that has traditionally excluded them.

Ostensibly, Vanya's understanding of disability is more radical. She tells Will: 'Your glasses are prosthetics. So's my wheelchair. Storing info in your phone, that's

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(F. Ryan 2019: 103). However, from 2015 onwards, alongside gathering this data, the UK government increased the number of 'benefit investigators' who 'stepped up its scrutiny of disabled people receiving out-of-work benefits, resorting to supermarket CCTV, gym memberships, airport footage and surveillance video from public buildings, as well as posts from personal social media accounts, to suggest people are lying about the disabilities' (F. Ryan 2019: 46–7).

artificial cognition' (Tulathimutte 2016: 268). Her implication that all bodies require prosthetics reflects what Davis (2002) has described as a 'new ethics of the body [that] begin[s] with disability rather than ending with it' (23). However, Vanya expresses this ethics by self-presenting as beautiful, independent and productive: 'they should think I could be her, and she can be anything' (Tulathimutte 2016: 252). Regarding her extensive cosmetic surgery, Vanya states that 'I don't do it to please men. I do it because [...] I feel more like myself this way. Everything that I am is deliberate' (328). The novel ridicules this assertion through other characters, as when Linda describes her as 'very realistic-looking' (244). Vanya's assertion of control over 'everything' about her body, along with her description of herself as a role model, sublimates a desire to master the contingency of her body and her 'projected *self*-image' (328). This is further reflected in her heavy use of Adderall to increase productivity, and her attempt at the novel's conclusion to encourage a vision-impaired Will to return to work by saying 'Who knows more about overcoming disability than me?' (346). Ultimately, Vanya approaches disability as an obstacle to be overcome by the individual in their journey towards becoming productive.

Vanya strives to prove her worth as the ideal neoliberal subject whose 'project is to self-invest in ways that enhance its value or attract investors through constant attention to its actual or figurate credit rating [...] across every sphere of its existence' (Brown 2015: 33). Neoliberal ideology encourages subjects to think of themselves as individual 'risk takers rather than laborers' (Tsing 2009: 167). Vanya accordingly leaves her first job 'after two months in frustration at her lack of executive power' and throws herself into 'gathering favours, hustling, suffering debasements' (Tulathimutte 2016: 61). She is also exaggerated in her personal branding, describing herself as a 'Maker. Serial Entrepreneuse. Idea Bot', and a 'Type A Left-Brain ESTP Post-Wave Feminist True-Cost Social Capitalist Progressive Independent Compatibilist Challenger Mahayana Buddhist Straight Mono Switch Femme' (251; 241). Vanya's self-branding reflects a broader Silicon Valley culture. She is instructed by 'a dot-com-bubble survivor' that 'if you made incremental backstretches and accepted no payday until your big break, you'd build a disruptive organization with your personality

in its DNA: a Virgin, an Apple, an Amazon' (61). These corporate namechecks reflect Vanya's desire to achieve the 'mythic status' enjoyed by '(nota bene: male) names like Jobs, Gates, Zuckerberg, and Bezos' (Boellstorff 2018: 480).

Vanya sees in digital media a pathway for overcoming the industrial conceptualisation of the disabled body as 'disruptive to the "normal" speed, flow or circulation of people, commodities and capital' (Hansen & Philo 2009: 258). Silicon Valley proves particularly appealing here because of its reinterpretation of 'disruption'. The internet provides many ways to 'transcend the limitations of the offline world' particularly for those with mobility impairments, ameliorate 'social isolation' and join the work force or launch their own enterprises (Dobransky & Hargittai 2016: 20).[7] Vanya's success reflects that of various disabled digital entrepreneurs, whose 'experiences of value creation challenge the binarism of "ability" versus "disability"' reified under industrial capitalism (Boellstorff 2018: 485). With Sable, Vanya aims to prove the uniquely 'disruptive' capacities—in the sense valorised in Silicon Valley—of the disabled body for creating new areas of value when connected to new digital technologies.

Vanya markets the disabled body as an untapped source of value to potential investors, declaring that 'disability transcends markets', that Sable will 'redefine' Old Media stereotypes and succeed '*because* of its disability focus, not in spite of it' (Tulathimutte 2016: 46). Will silently observes contradictions in this pitch: 'how would she "transcend" the disability focus when it was the site's distinguishing feature? Why "redefine" stereotypes instead of eliminate them?' (46). Sable is thereby framed early in the novel as fundamentally contradictory and cynical in its activist branding when it is foremost designed to attract capital. It lacks the surplus of behavioural data necessary to wholly embody surveillance capitalism, relying on investment instead. However, it orients itself towards a surveillance capitalist model when Will builds 'a brand database for social intelligence monitoring' (Tulathimutte 2016:

[7] As many in disability studies note, however, structural barriers persist in the post-industrial digital economy, with the often-mandatory digital devices and software for work designed with a normative user in mind, leaving many with certain impairments on the wrong side of a 'digital divide' (Yu, Goggin, Fisher & Li 2018; Dobransky & Hargittai 2016; Macdonald and Clayton 2013).

249).[8] Vanya's storyline therefore concerns not the excesses of surveillance capitalism but rather its emergence. It represents an online platform ostensibly created for advocacy inevitably succumbing to a broader socioeconomic logic.

Zuboff (2019) terms the logic of surveillance capitalism 'instrumentarian' rather than 'totalitarian'. It is '[t]rained on measurable action, it is profoundly and infinitely indifferent to our meanings and motives, [and] it only cares that whatever we do is *accessible* to its ever-evolving operations of rendition, calculation, modification, monetization, and control' (360). Moral or ideological dimensions of user activity are secondary to the nudging of behaviour towards habits that better fit the 'symbolic dimension' of the platform's extractive framework (Zuboff 2015: 77). Cory identifies this logic in *Private Citizens* when she describes the internet as a 'global corporate holding pen masquerading as public commons […] Molding and standardizing human relationships to function as components in the assembly line' (Tulathimutte 2016: 123). Platforms care less about the quality of their content than about ensuring users' actions and utterances are performed in ways more easily measured and narrativized into data profiles to sell to clients.

Through Sable, Vanya performs modes of disability surveillance on both herself and her audience. She aims for the site's content be 'ever-flowing', producing the elusive quality that makes it 'sticky', i.e. enticing viewers to visit the site regularly (Tulathimutte 2016: 272). She and Will achieve stickiness through 'Lifecasting': 'Real life from the seated perspective. Getting paid to do interesting things. Like a reality show, but *real*' (59). Other than short 'blackouts' for performing basic biological functions, the couple record the entirety of their days to produce regular streaming content for Sable. This self-surveillance is extreme, yet plausible due to the horizon of expectations produced through the culture of surveillance capitalism. As Lyon (2018) writes, 'surveillance is enabled not only by technical and political means but also by the enthusiasm, ignorance, and sometimes reluctant cooperation and even initiative taking of the surveilled' (29). Vanya rationalises Lifecasting as a unique

[8] Surveillance capitalism emerges as Google and other large corporations monetize already existing surpluses of behavioural data to replace investment (Zuboff 2019: 63–97).

means of using new media to regain control over her image, showing '*real*' experience of a person with mobility impairment.

Vanya's self-surveillance intensifies when she applies an image-recognition algorithm that measures 'movement, faces, contrast' and quantifies the ineffable 'interestingness' that attracts regular viewers (Tulathimutte 2016: 272). As their Lifecasting continues, Vanya comes to internalise 'the swoons and crests of her web analytics, which function as line graphs of her mood', the algorithmic measuring devices of the site producing an instrumentarian impulse that shapes her content for Sable, and by extension her behaviour (277). The couple adapt their bodies in order to meet the quantifiable ideal of the algorithmic gaze, taking on 'the biorhythms of the New Media elite'. From Will's perspective we see how, to increase their time spent streaming, he innovates ways to transform his little leisure time into 'speed-orgies of vice and chore, doing squats with a toothbrush in his mouth and rinsing with bourbon' (272). Here, *Private Citizens* demystifies the particular model of disability Vanya seeks to exemplify with Sable by representing the ways that algorithmic governmentality can exert power over its subjects' bodies and shape their behaviour.

This reflects the key role that algorithms, often hidden by platforms as trade secrets, play in intensifying surveillance capitalism. In 2017, Jessica Kellgren-Fozard, a vlogger on fashion, disability and LGBTQ issues, discovered videos featuring her wife had suddenly been labelled not 'advertiser friendly' and were 'demonetised'—stripped of advertising placements and therefore revenue for the creators. She appealed to YouTube and the videos were remonetised, however the platform did not disclose any reasoning behind the initial decision, leaving her to wonder whether her 'disabilities or gayness' had provoked it (Kellgren-Fozard 2017, n. pag). YouTube moderates content using algorithms whose processes it guards from public view, often changing criteria without informing users. Bishop (2018) notes that this asymmetrical surveillance can produce 'a discriminatory visibility hierarchy' that privileges 'content aligned with advertisers' demands and desires in ways that run contrary to participatory and open conceptions of the platform' (70). Moreover, since such algorithms are programmed by human engineers, they inevitably reproduce prevalent cultural biases (Pasquale 2015: 21). Kellgren-Fozard's case demonstrates

how platforms' algorithms impose instrumentarian surveillance, implicitly nudging disabled users into removing certain socio-political content from their narrativizations of disability in order to meet the demands of advertisers.

Despite her focus on self-branding and 'real' content, Vanya's primary product is not so much herself or Sable's content, but rather guaranteed access to an untapped market of consumers with specific desires. She tells investors '[t]here's a tremendous built-in vertical: my market opportunity research shows that seventy-seven percent of *all* people with disabilities are frustrated with the lack of online community, and these are *tech-savvy* users' (Tulathimutte 2016: 45–6). To corner this untapped disabled userbase, she eschews reductive conceptualisations of disability in Sable's presentation, telling investors that '[t]he tent is as big as it gets: The hearing and vision impaired. Little people. MD, MS, CP, CF. The whole autism spectrum. Wounded veterans, paraplegics, diabetics' (2016: 46). Rather than simply designating bodies disabled, Vanya's disability surveillance works through a potentially infinite multiplication of categories through which to classify bodies.

Under surveillance capitalism, 'your body is reimagined as a behaving object to be tracked and calculated for indexing and search' (Zuboff 2019: 242). Surveillance capitalist corporations construct profiles of their users that they claim exist as meta-data 'aggregated across large numbers of individual users' rather than linked to specific users (245). Nonetheless, classifying disabilities functions to extend surveillance of behavioural data into entirely new vectors. Take the following 'vertical' from Google's AdWords marketing lists for consumer targeting: '642 /Health/Health Conditions/Neurological Conditions/Learning & Developmental Disabilities/ADD & ADHD' (J. Ryan 2019: n. pag.). Each element in this string can conceivably branch elsewhere, providing further specificity and targeting potential. Whenever a user visits a webpage that subscribes to Google's 'real-time bidding' platform, the numerical ID (in this case '642') is included along with others in a 'bid request'—as are the user's IP address, geolocation, and other metadata. The recipient of the bid request then decides whether to place an ad on behalf of a client based on that metadata.

Many social media platforms impose subtle forms of body normativity by inferring disabled identities from user activity. Ostensibly, there is no designed way to

tell Facebook that you have a disability (other than perhaps using its accessibility tools). Moreover, following civil rights complaints concerning racial profiling, the current terms of service prohibit advertisers from 'wrongfully' targeting or excluding specific groups.[9] Nevertheless, Facebook's Custom Audience parameters allow micro-targeting of users who express 'interest' in keywords like 'wheelchair' or 'national disability insurance scheme', or have 'Disability' in their 'job title'. As with Google, these words are categorised in verticals under 'interests' and 'employment' rather than 'demographic', ostensibly detaching them from a user's body as metadata about 'interests'.[10] Tellingly, however, Facebook does not list these keywords under potential 'exclusions' from seeing an ad. Such a precaution gestures to the continued potential for these keywords to categorise and target bodies rather than disembodied 'interests'.

In *Private Citizens*, Sable exists as a platform for acquiring users' consent to opening new branches for verticals identifying disability. It is designed to attract a pointedly 'disabled' variant of the ideal online consumer described by Jenkins (2006) as 'active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked' (20). It is therefore in Vanya's interests to ensure that her audience remains on-topic regarding disability. Its content serves to attract and monitors a cohort of regular users, or what Smythe terms an 'audience commodity' (see Fuchs 2012): a coherent and dependable convergence of emotionally engaged, socially networked, and—Sable's competitive edge—identifiably *disabled* users. Maintaining this coherence requires repressive practices of disability surveillance. Vanya promises investors that 'Sable will fight negativity with automated content filtering, crowd moderation, and aggressive brand management [...] It's about driving expectations for community engagement' (Tulathimutte 2016: 45). Holding this contradiction between openness and control through surveillance proves more difficult in practice. As Will moderates the community's message boards,

[9] See '3. Discriminatory practices', *Facebook*. Available at https://www.facebook.com/policies/ads/prohibited_content/discriminatory_practices [last accessed 21 June 2019].

[10] This can be observed by creating a 'Custom Audience' for an ad in Facebook's Ads Manager. Facebook's own information about creating custom audiences can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/business/help/744354708981227 [last accessed 28 July 2019].

the free-indirect narrative observes that 'if [Vanya] was trying to impress [Will] with the Sable community's cohesion, the moderating queue achieved exactly the opposite' (275). His job is to surveille the users, deleting off-topic discussion—including, but not limited to, spam and bigotry—to maintain the 'cohesion' of the audience commodity.

Vanya finds the broad definition of disability in Sable's branding threatens the coherence of the audience commodity she promises investors: 'Some members aren't even really disabled they're just *old*' or have 'these *temporary* disabilities. I mean, obesity? Give me freaking break […] I want young, cool, engaged, *legitimately* disabled influencers who'll bring in other active registered goddam *users*!' (Tulathimutte 2016: 277). Vanya's frustration indicates her internalisation of surveillance capitalism's instrumentarian logic. Although she attempts to challenge stereotypes in the content of Sable, Vanya nonetheless appeals to established hierarchies of ability to maintain disabled bodies into a scarce resource, an idealised audience commodity. The demands of surveillance capitalism subvert her stated aims to transcend the limitations of socially constructed ideas of disability, since she relies on forms of disability surveillance that maintain a limited concept of disability as a vector for generating revenue.

Through Vanya and Will's storyline, *Private Citizens* launches a critique of surveillance capitalism and the Silicon Valley ideologies used to justify its instrumentarian logic. The novel suggests that such a logic incentivises modes of disability surveillance that ensure data about users' activity matches the narratives used to pitch the website and its audience commodity to investors and, presumably, advertising clients. Such practices are not neutral or a-normative reflections of the world, since data about user behaviour must always be repackaged into coherent, recognisable narratives to sell.

Narrative Prosthesis

The algorithmic gaze that performs the rote tasks of online surveillance on platforms translates bodies, inferred by way of their behaviour as platform users, into 'data-doubles' (Haggerty & Ericson 2000: 606). Lyon (2010) describes such doubles

as a 'surveillance satire': 'the solidity of the human body dissolves into data particles, detached from the whole and subject to instant reassembly as profiled and projected parodies' (333). It is only through its recorded difference to others' that one's body become visible in surveillance capitalism. This logic resembles Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) notion of 'narrative prosthesis' in literary fiction: the way that stories rely on impairment and disfigurement as symbolic devices, 'detail[ing] "crippled" differences faithfully while simultaneously metamorphosing those differences into social satires' (5). The relationship between narrative and disability has long been one of dependence: disability is often defined as a 'lack' or an 'excess' and 'all narratives operate out of a desire to compensate for a limitation or to reign in excess' (4; 53). Surveillance capitalism similarly depends on the network of differences produced by disability surveillance in order to commodify users' bodies. Both novels and online platforms detail impairments in order to translate them into narrative functions, characterising disabled bodies through certain codes from which 'meaning' is easily retrieved in other contexts. The final section of this article examines how *Private Citizens* both criticises and reproduces such procedures.

Vanya's use of new media to prove the exchange value of the disabled body in a surveillance capitalist system reflects the value that Will's misogynistic inferiority-complex assigns to Vanya's body.[11] When Will first meets Vanya, he is 'so drunk' that he does not notice her wheelchair until after he has kissed her and taken her by the hand, at which point she 'didn't get up, but instead hung on and [...] rolled' (Tulathimutte 2016: 11). His reaction is simply to think '*Perfect*' (11). This account upends the familiar trope of the 'first encounter' between a non-disabled individual and a disabled individual in which 'disability cancels out other qualities, reducing the

[11] *Private Citizens* has more to say about race beyond the scope of this article. Will believes that women ignore him due to his race and agonises over how to challenge stereotypes about Asian men without internalising racist norms by consciously avoiding them. Under the gaze of Lifecasting viewers, Will's self-consciousness reaches exaggerated levels of paranoia and he attacks a man on a bus who he believes to be harassing a young Asian woman. In the ensuing fray, his trousers are removed, and his penis exposed to the Lifecast—much to the glee of its viewers, who share memes and remix videos of the incident. This incident therefore effectively reverses the objectifying gaze he had directed at Vanya and other women via digital media.

complex person to a single attribute' (Thompson 1997: 12). For Will, Vanya's beauty cancels her other qualities; her disability, meanwhile refracts this emphasis to render her attractive-yet-attainable to him as a self-perceived 'beta male'. Will registers her disabled body as a data point to interpret through a hierarchy of normative feminine beauty standards, readjusting her 'value' to him accordingly. Will's anxious male gaze exerts practices of disability surveillance that apportion Vanya's disabled body a value relating to her status as an abstracted 'woman-commodity' (Irigaray 1985: 173).

This valuation derives from Will's practices of technological production. We learn that, before meeting Vanya, he had collected a vast collection of downloaded pornography. The narrative describes 'the man-hours it'd taken to download it; to create file tags and XML-formatted scene markers; to regularize the filenames and formats; to fill gaps in photo sets and find hi-res scans of DVD cases, front and back' (Tulathimutte 2016: 109–10). This extensive labour extends into mapping his social life, particularly his relationships with women: he creates a spreadsheet of friends, most of whom are 'women who'd rejected him, implicitly or otherwise', with information on 'the date of his encounter, approximate date of rejection, and her height, age, race, ethnicity, and estimates of income, weight, IQ' (55–6). Will's 'man-hours' spent systematising information about women foregrounds how sexism further frames Vanya's impairment.

Despite assigning Vanya an attainable value, Will remains paranoid about her leaving him and attempts to control her. He receives 'push notifications on [Vanya's] social networking activity, search alerts in her name, an RSS feed on her blog. It was as preoccupying as porn, but with no finish' (Tulathimutte 2016: 130). His surveillance of Vanya therefore reflects his consumption of pornography. We learn that he is especially drawn to '[t]he moment at the beginning of a gonzo scene where the actress switched her focus from the camera to the other actors, and audience became voyeur' (112). This voyeurism informs his behaviour towards women both on and offline. He has 'been trained to assume ['hot girls'] looked down on him', so finds it 'hard to hold eye contact with [them]'. His low-self-esteem then develops into a 'loserly imperative to get as near as possible to hot girls and stare at them and be useful to them and get their approval had never withered' (224). Will's habit of watching

women, including his use of digital tools for tracking Vanya, maintains what Mulvey (1975) describes the 'an active/passive heterosexual division of labour' implied in the male gaze (12). His practices of digital surveillance restore his position as the masculine viewing subject and Vanya as the feminine object of his gaze.

By representing Will's misogyny, the narrative exposes overlaps between the male gaze and disability surveillance. Vanya's beauty is integral to her business as 'face' of Sable. To shape her 'abnormal' body to be the hyperfeminine object of a male gaze, she appeals to the concept of the 'ideal': a 'mytho-poetic body that is linked to that of the gods [...] [and is] not attainable by a human' (Davis 1995: 24–5). Through Will's perspective, the narrator describes her as embodying classical aesthetic ideals: 'soft and sylph-like and porcelain', 'noble, like a statue of some heroic dog, reflecting decades of trained poise', 'like Roman architecture, all grand arches and cunningly supported domes' (Tulathimutte, 2016: 243; 43; 53). Her carefully styled hair, clothes and body make Will feel 'second-rate' (41). She carefully controls her image, 'groom[ing] until she came to resemble her smiling photo on the About page, an attractiveness unto abstraction' (251). Will can find no photographs of her before her extensive cosmetic surgery—'Nose, lips, boobs, bob fix, browbone, Lasik' (328). In this sense, Vanya's efforts to embody a positive and ideal disabled subject are also conservative, relying on regressive conceptualisations of femininity to challenge ableism.

Both Vanya and Will reconstruct the paraplegic body as the ideal object of the active/male and passive/female split reproduced in the male gaze. People with disabilities have long been excluded from cultural ideas around sexuality (Finger 1992). Because 'there are strong links between the assumed passivity of disabled people and the assumed passivity of women', representations of disabled women exaggerate patriarchal conceptualisations of feminine sexuality as submissive (Oliver 1990: 72). Paralysis among women especially is 'pictured easily as sexual passivity or receptiveness – an invitation to sexual predators' (Sibers 2012: 45). Will's thoughts during sexual intercourse with Vanya reinforce the objectification of her body, leaving open the question of whether she can enjoy their sexual activity or 'whether it was

only tedious appeasement.' Although Vanya insists that she 'get[s] off on watching'—potentially upending the male gaze—Will's perspective continues to suspect that sexual activity to be devoid of any pleasure for her, framing her as a submissive object of his gaze for him to take advantage of (Tulathimutte 2016: 49).

Through thematically linking Vanya's digital labour to pornography, the novel reflects artist Ann Hirsch's assertion that 'whenever you put your body online, in some way you are in conversation with porn' (Chan, Farkas, Hirsch & Kinsey 2012: n. pag.). Will takes this a step further when he converts online information about Vanya into a three-dimensional computer-generated image making 'homemade Vanya porn. From this template, it was easy to generate more' (Tulathimutte 2016: 325). Through his spreadsheets and pornography archive, Will desires to encounter women not simply as objects but as what Yuk Hui distinguishes as 'digital objects': bundles of metadata that do not only orient towards the past in recording prior cultural memories but are future-oriented, materialising sets of relations that can be manipulated in the future (Hui 2016: 242–3). As a result of Will's manipulation of her virtual presence, Vanya's disabled body is translated into a digital object—or data double—that is infinitely mutable and subject to his control.

Despite demonstrating an awareness of how Vanya's body is read through Will's male gaze, *Private Citizens* takes for granted an ableist interpretation of her impairment. Will remains somewhat conflicted about whether he is taking advantage of Vanya yet thinks '[w]hat could be more mature, more *considerate*, than objectifying yourself to meet the vile hard-charging demands of mainstream penetration?' (Tulathimutte 2016: 48). This recalls Vanya's pitch to Sable investors, where she asserts that the tendency towards 'group therapy' in existing disabled online communities alienates able-bodied people and is therefore 'the biggest threat to mainstream penetration' (45). The narrative associates Vanya's supposed self-objectification for Will with a self-objectification she performs for Sable viewers. However, this critique assumes the patriarchal reading of the paralysed woman as submissive and endangered in order to frame surveillance capitalism as demeaning. It is therefore an act

of narrative prosthesis, a recording and a satire of the disabled body that transfers a symbolic meaning into new contexts.

Narratives detail and invoke disability to materialize certain themes, often social satires, within a narrative. A classic example of this narrative prosthesis provided by Mitchell and Snyder (2000) is Oedipus's lameness and eventual blindness, which tangibly ground the eponymous hero's hubris in his physical body (10). *Private Citizens* alludes to and relies on this exact narrative prosthesis to accentuate Will's reckoning. His visual impairment after the botched cosmetic surgery is framed as a result of the blinkered entrepreneurial zeal of Vanya, who even states earlier in the novel—while comparing one-off views and returning users on Sable—that 'eyeballs are cheap!' (277). Becoming visually impaired also purges Will's misogynistic and neurotic gaze by dismembering it (his eyes are literally amputated to prevent infection). This is presented as a salvation from Vanya, with Will asking at the novel's denouement: 'how did I never get bored of looking at [Vanya]? As long as she was hot I could tell myself anything' (Tulathimutte: 353). The narrative thereby invokes visual impairment to ground Will's exodus from surveillance capitalism in bodily reality. It presents his 'blindness' as a severing not only from Vanya's overbearing ambition but also from the toxic sociocultural milieu of Silicon Valley more broadly. Disability-as-lack serves as a symbolic solution to the central excess in Will's plotline: his inferiority complex and voyeurism.

Although it replicates longstanding tropes regarding visual-impairment and paralysis, *Private Citizens* often displays an alertness to the fact that Vanya's mobility impairment is defined by the reification of assumed bodily norms in the social construction of space that exclude difference (Saltes 2018: 82–3). Narrativizations about disability must necessarily confront social stigmatisation. Quayson (2007) argues that narratives display an 'aesthetic nervousness' when confronting disability, a 'suspension, collapse, or general short-circuiting of [their] hitherto dominant protocols of representation' (26). This occurs because literary representations of disability tend to oscillate between deploying it as a symbol and referencing the 'social hierarchization and closure' that interpretations of disability produce in the real world (23). Disabilities may initially enter narratives as symbols, but the abstract significations of

these symbols soon hit up against the more concrete requirements of detailing how that disability exists within that represented world.

Private Citizens draws attention to how Vanya's mobility impairment is less a property of her body than the social environment. Robbins (2007) argues that literary references to infrastructure gesture to the 'public' (26). However, the mobility infrastructure of *Private Citizens*' San Francisco must always be supplemented by Vanya's wealth or personal relationships, therefore gesturing to the private. At the Sable launch, '[a] fleet of full-accessibility party buses greeted them at the harbor and shuttled them to the live-band karaoke at the Marriott' (Tulathimutte 2016: 267). Elsewhere, Vanya is made dependent on Will's body to supplement a lack in mobility infrastructure: 'he wiped the street grime off Vanya's wheels and piggybacked her up stairwells' (249). Here, the novel's social satire is targeted at a material deficiency in the capitalist city, rather than a perceived deficiency in Vanya's body.

Elsewhere, the novel details Vanya's personal mobility infrastructure in such a way that associates her personal wealth with her disability: 'the automatic door to Vanya's apartment opened with a motor hum'; 'no impediments except the squat coffee table with its stack of tortoiseshell coasters. Everything was reachable via lazy Susans and swivelling bookshelves on motorized wall runners, the curtains remote-controlled. The handrails in the bathroom were the apartment's only conspicuous accessibility features' (Tulathimutte 2016: 42). If, as Robbins (2007) writes, '[i]nfrastructure is a heritage of which we are usually unconscious until it malfunctions', the narrative's detailed focus on Vanya's chic mobility infrastructure makes it conspicuous, both as a comment on her wealth and as a positioning of her as outside, or as always already a malfunctioning (32). The narrative employs modes of disability surveillance in detailing her mobility impairment, drawing broader satirical signification out of Vanya's bodily difference to the other characters.

As a result of this exaggerated individualism, Vanya is characterised as unlikeable. She dismisses as defeatism any suggestion that there are some structural obstacles she has not had to encounter, and attributes her success to her individual spirit: 'I'm a self-made entrepreneur! […] Privileged, god! I'm a disabled woman!' However, ironic allusions to her economic and racial privilege abound. She 'bemoaned her

college summer internships as modern slavery ("Though slaves didn't have to make up rent")'. She calls Will 'lucky' because he is 'exempt from both white guilt and racial profiling' yet expresses disbelief at being searched by the TSA herself: 'They think *I'm* a terrorist? *Kind* of ridiculous' (Tulathimutte, 2016: 277; 61; 134; 131). Her racial and class privilege is imbedded in her attitude towards self-presentation, which provokes her to ask Will to change his Thai surname and physical appearance 'to be more conspicuous and memorable', stating that '[c]hoosing your own name is empowering' and later insisting '[t]he real issue here isn't race, it's fashion, which is about expression and self-determination. Identities don't happen to you, you create them' (133; 328). The privilege inherent in this statement is revealed when she texts soon after: 'cost shouldn't be a factor when it comes to self-actualization' (330).

Vanya's entrepreneurial zeal becomes the target of narrative prosthesis towards the end novel's conclusion. Will—now blind—discovers that Vanya has entered his home unannounced and realises that she must have entered via 'the back stairwell, which had no stairlift. She must have dragged herself up' (Tulathimutte 2016: 346). While such stubbornness suggests care for Will, she can only express this by promising that he can 'still work for the company' and 'inspire people with [his] story—a recently vision-impaired man relearns the ropes' (346). When Will rejects her, we read that Vanya 'lowered herself to the floor, and he heard her crawling away one hand after another, her body swishing behind her. The stairwell door clumsily opened' (348). This detailing of Vanya's bodily movement, rarely if ever applied to other characters, marks her body as 'abnormal' in its 'clumsiness'. Furthermore, the marked absence of Vanya's wheelchair in this scene is implied to stand in for what her single-minded entrepreneurialism has cost her. Her focus on Sable's success has driven away Will, who once carried her up the stairs that she must now move 'clumsily' down. The text therefore reproduces the cultural construction of the disabled body as fundamentally 'lacking' in order to materialise ideological deficiencies in an individualist worldview.

At several key points in the narrative, *Private Citizens* demonstrates an alertness to the discrimination against and marginalisation of people with disabilities.

Nonetheless, in terms of its narrative development it uneasily relies on narrative interpretations of disabled bodies as deviations from a norm in order to elaborate a satire of Silicon Valley that likens a lack in an individualist ideology to a lack in the body. Positing the co-dependence of its four protagonists as its positive alternative, it pointedly excludes Vanya from this relationship by framing her body as lacking Will's help in order to criticise her self-perceived independence. However, the depiction of Sable challenges some of this narrative prosthesis from within. Vanya's efforts to launch Sable suggest that certain economic systems incentivise practices of disability surveillance that do not register on a conscious level. Vanya inadvertently internalises the instrumentarian logic of surveillance capitalism and begins commodifying herself and her audiences according to certain representations of disability at odds with their own experience.

Both the novel and online platforms spin narratives built from established practices of measuring and recording bodies according to norms. But a novel like *Private Citizens* bares its own aesthetic nervousness and opens itself to critique through the contradictions this produces, online platforms repress any aesthetic nervousness of their own by obscuring their methods of collecting behavioural data about users and inferring their social identities. This contrast reminds us that surveillance capitalism, disability surveillance, and surveillance more broadly, are not simply problems of form—of restrictive data displacing complex narratives—but are also material conflicts over ownership and access to apparatuses that record and interpret data. Improving narrativizations of disability is not a project of telling more positive stories but of dismantling the broader socioeconomic system within which today's technologies record and narrativize data.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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