



Outfacing the “In” Face: The Posthuman Wound and the Defacing of Relationality in Joma West’s *Face*

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I INTRODUCTION

Published in 2022, Joma West’s debut novel *Face* depicts a world where the merging of the digital, science, technology and biology evokes a post-digital ecosystem (Peters et al. 2021) in which relationality, human agency, subjectivity and embodiment seem fragmented. *Face*’s fragmentary aesthetics invites a critical posthumanist evaluation of the techno-cultural configuration and its impact on the material-discursive narratives of human essence in a biotechnological and digitalized panopticon.

In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles formulated the implications of the cyborg and the dualist separation of information from the body. In Hayles’ early analysis of the posthuman, this uncoupling

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allowed for “the construction of a hierarchy in which information is given the dominant position and materiality runs a distant second” (12). In the reconfiguration of information as central to human experience, and in this case, digitizing and genetically engineering life, there is a danger of dehumanizing experience and, thus, of disembodiment under biopolitical, technocratic dominion. However, as Stefan Herbrechter explains, “pragmatically, technology is also always part of a process of material embodied adaptation, a kind of ‘biopower’ in the Foucauldian sense” (28). In this manner, critical posthumanism advocates for the rematerialization of the human subject in a responsive and open environment without ignoring repercussions on humans of digital and technological advances. The undoubtedly far-reaching changes that come with the coalescence of the organic and the inorganic are what define the posthumanist deconstruction of the humanist subject (Hassan 845; Badminton 9; Barad 130), particularly in our technologically driven society. Following traditional humanism, the transhumanist telos confers the ultimate transcendence of the mind via technological enhancement by reducing the organic (i.e. the body) to a supplementary part (Hayles 12), and to some extent articulating it as detrimental in the search for human perfection/sublimity.

Joma West’s debut novel *Face* (2022) depicts a near-future dystopia where biodigital and bioinformational forms are regulated by surveillance technologies. Etymologically, *face* in its Latin origin means appearance, form, figure or visage (Hoad). Forms and appearance in *Face* are masqueraded and biopolitically suppressed from physical touch and natural affective responses by an elite societal group called the monitors. In this organic control, the integration and assimilation of biodigital technologies in the lives of the characters are enforced via, among other things, an implanted recording system (AR implants). These implants monitor their face-to-face and digital interactions. This, in turn, entraps characters in constraining social norms that determine one’s status based on “facevalue” (West 64) that is conditioned by biogenetical engineering and “faceplay.” Even though encounters in the novel take place in “the Out” (physical world) and “the In” (digital platforms and confession booths), they both hinder the showing of one’s “true” face (68), thus fragmenting experience. *Face* depicts a society that reformulates social interactions, moving away from human closeness, relationality and natural biological reproduction towards technologically driven eugenics and restrained affective actions.

The society in the novel is divided into menials, who are bred in farms to produce a workforce of servants, and bioengineered humans born via studs that are classified according to their digital and organic “facevalue.” These two collectives are kept under control by the so-called monitors, a higher class that lives separately from the others. Unlike the monitors, who are allowed physical contact, the members of the other two social groups are not allowed proximity to others in the form of touch, care, emotions or sex. The story follows the life of Jake, a menial who struggles with his need for body proximity with his owner, Madeleine. The Burroughs, Madeleine, her husband Schuyler and daughters Reyna and Naomi are a top-tier family that is highly socially ranked. Naomi’s questioning of the status quo contrasts with Madeleine and Reyna’s full immersion in the system and the intent of two other characters, Tonia and Eduardo, to improve their social status. Each one is introduced in separate chapters describing mainly the same encounters but presented through the eyes of one single character, allowing thus explorations on subjectivity and social encounters.

The present analysis examines the posthuman disruption or wound caused by the distancing of bodies and their behavioural control where their face and digital information reduce them to mere datified objects in *Face*. Drawing on Braidotti’s concept of the posthuman “as materially embedded and embodied, differential, affective and relational” (69), the lack of affective openness for sentient embodied selves is analysed. West constructs a fragmentary narrative to reclaim an embodied relational experience away from the transhumanist framing of enhanced humanity via technology and body–distance discourse. In doing so, human categorization is examined in terms of the effects on material-discursive embodiment, which plays a key role in presenting the body as an interface between social and digital surveillance and regulation whilst leaving behind “intra-active” affective relations (Barad 2007). Finally, the chapter relies on Donna Haraway’s concept of “response-ability” as the call for receptivity and reaction in order to facilitate change and variability in posthuman encounters, to examine the novel as a critique of digital dependence and elite use of technology.

2 THE HUMAN SUBJECT AND THE RELATIONAL EMBODIED SELF

The notion of human subjectivity has always been central to cultural studies, philosophy and psychology. Challenges in defining the human subject are directed by the paradoxical concept of the living body, affected both by internal perceptions and responses to experience and external conditions. Following the “paradox of subjectivity” (Husserl 1970), the subject is understood both as subject and object in its inescapable relational quality. In addition, for one to identify oneself as a subject, one must feel a sense of agency, conscious experience and recognize one’s corporeal limits in a materialistic framework. Furthermore, embodiment is constructed by one’s conscious experience of internal and external stimuli. In the process of this conscious experience, emotions, feelings, desires and beliefs arise from organic and environmental information. In this responsive act, interoception (i.e. internal sensations) and exteroception (how the body responds to the external stimuli) are key in influencing the human subject experience.¹ Interoceptive sensations are linked to affect and, thus, to emotions (Barrett 2017) and are key for consciousness (Edelman and Tononi 2000). If there are disruptions in the embodied sense of an individual, that is, in the interaction with one’s environment and one’s internal perceptions, fissured displacement may well end up occurring.

In *Face*, biology and the digital merge in transforming experience into a performative act where the face/figure is a mere interface to produce a digital–social constructed subject. West’s bodies are the medium for regulation, experimentation and genome control, which raises ethical concerns about the “subhuman” (West 147) label that is assigned to the menials, as well as about most characters’ data and behavioural control. Bodies are societally constructed as transducers from matter to information. However, following Hayles, the body must be understood as a necessary medium for information to be material-discursively distributed and processed. Particularly, the focus is on the dematerialization of the subject. In the novel, digital technologies are technocratic tools that shape biogenetics and wipe off social interactions in their most fundamental embodied relational connection of emotion and physicality. For instance, natural nurturing bonds, such as within families, are invalidated. Thus, Reyna expresses her unwillingness to call Schuyler her dad as it “sounds so low

¹ See Craig (2015) for more on interoception and exteroception.

level [...] practically menial [since] you *are* merely an acquaintance” (108; emphasis in the original). Characters’ bonds are reconfigured to frivolous commercial value where their worth is established by their digital and biological face and where “coupling” is seen as a vehicle “to boost [one’s] static profile” (West 17). In these interactions, affect and body contact are torn away from what one would identify as biological ways of interacting and influencing one another’s world. However, a new episteme of human life is present. Experiences are reframed in an automator of Foucault’s “normalizing judgment” (177) and in what Gilson calls “wilful ignorance” (313) of vulnerability. Foucault defines normalizing judgement as the process in which members of society become involved in the “punishment” of others if they do not follow the societal norms designed by power regulations and surveying tools. Additionally, Gilson states that through power constructions towards invulnerability, wilful ignorance only silences how one is open and affected by others. Therefore, both notions are tantamount to maintaining non-transitory or static bodily encounters in a perpetually monitored society that eradicates openness and dynamic relationality. The following pages examine *Face* through the lens of fragmented embodiment and explore how the concealment of affective relationality discloses disruptive notions of human subjectivity and the sense of self under surveillance and behavioural control.

3 FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE, EXPERIENCES AND SUBJECTIVITY

Drawing attention to fragmentation as the result of the societal representation in the work of fiction raises questions on what it may mean to be human in a restrained and performed experience. West’s novel invites the reader to deconstruct the encounters via its fragmentary chapters, placing the focus on the fragment’s etymology as “the wound” to explore needed “response-ability” (Haraway 2016). Thus, the fragmented narrative mirrors the fragmentation of the self described in the novel.

The novel’s fragmentation also shows modernist traces. Gasiorek characterizes the modernist forms as “deploy[ing] multiple viewpoints, emphasiz[ing] the subjective nature of experience” and “disrupted narrative chronology” (6). The fragmentariness of the narrative is observed in the non-linear development of chapters. Every chapter depicts a particular character’s inner appreciation and sensations of a singular social

encounter. The narrative strategically enables a re-evaluation of the readers' fragmentary reading process and their preconceptions of the social interactions that are described. In each chapter, the reader discovers the real emotions and thoughts behind those encounters and behind the characters' body performativity, reinforcing the idea that embodiment shapes the mind. The organic only shapes the encounter as a constrained data interface to the extent of becoming "disposable bodies" (Braidotti 15) if they are not socially regulated. In this vein, the fragmentary narration of experience evokes the "posthuman disembodiment" (see Wolfe 2009; Hayles 1999) that occurs when organic relational and affective openness are reduced to static technological and social forms. Indeed, "the In" resembles the fragmentary digital information that appears to disintegrate or deteriorate the organic sensing subject.

However, the novel's paradigmatic fragmentation does not inescapably mean the loss of the subject or the digital panoptical destruction of the collective agent. On the contrary, it advocates disruptions, incompleteness, transience and impermanence in what Deleuze and Guattari have called a process of becoming. Taking this process as the affective site where subjects and objects meet in transitory spatiotemporal encounters and transform the individual's subjectivity, it becomes evident that the control of real affective expressions obstructs embodiment.

Text construction, related to the presentation of dialogical and body encounters in the story, is unassembled and incongruent to the characters' emotions and affective response, and it is left for the readers to assemble. To ensure that readers make sense of these unassembled segments, character interpretation becomes West's main instrument to facilitate a reflection on the fragmentary experiences of the characters.

Furthermore, the subject is in the inter-face, by which it is meant that the subject is present in between the digital and organic masks (i.e. faces). That is, the real subject is positioned *inter* all the staged faces produced in the encounter with others (digitally and organically). This evokes critical theories of the human function in the Fourth Industrial Revolution through their loss of the face (Levinas 1969) to become an interface (Floridi 2014) in open techno-digital entangled networks.

In a Deleuzian "society of control" (4), the narrative constructs traditional institutions (family, social meetings, medicine, and so on) as a "perpetual training" (6) of the body to restrain and discipline its interactions. This training shows the face as grounds for control of the body in the fear of becoming exposed. That is, the face in the novel is not the encounter of

the “living presence” (Levinas 66) but rather an exposed or postured one. In the Levinasian sense, being-for-the-Other is an interdependency of vulnerability where the subject’s encounter with the face of the other allows an ethical response of care. This encounter allows subjectivity to arise from the acknowledgement of the other and the affective dynamism that emerges. Moreover, the fragmentary narrative shows the characters’ open wounds, which “are ethical precisely because they are relational apparatuses allowing the principle and concerns of ethics of form and ethics of affects to meet” (Ganteau 11). In the novel, private human experience is constantly recorded and characters seem to respond to this society in a way that evokes Gilson’s wilful ignorance as a search for invulnerability, actually making them more fragmentary and vulnerable. Emotions, which are the natural response of the body in shaping the mind (i.e. embodiment), are tell-tales of individuals and, therefore, in the fear of being discovered, characters conceal them with betablockers, digital masks and empty social interactions. The characters’ disruptive condition is enhanced by the instruments of power that cause, among other things, the aforementioned wilful ignorance. As Reyna puts it, “people had to believe in the lie, even when they knew it was just a lie” (West 154). In the fear of being exposed or opened to others,

‘face’ meant so much more than just how a person looked. It was about every aspect of a person’s representation of themselves to the outside world. Facial expression had to be self-regulated at all times. And so, she learned that it was much easier to keep communication restricted to the digital world where ‘face’ was never seen in real time or transitory, but was simply a carefully curated collection of “snapshots, witty quips, cryptic clues, ‘reactions’, the absence of ‘reactions’, presence, and absence.” (West 154)

The interest here lies in that by shaping interactions as closed and non-transitory, subjects’ embeddedness, affect and embodiment are disrupted. Individuals’ interactions, thoughts and behaviour are recorded and, thus, following Zuboff’s interview on surveillance capitalism, “private human experience [is seen] as free raw material for translation into behavioral data” (in Laidler). In turning facial expressions into less of a representation of inner responses, social interaction is deprived of a narrative of affect and turns into societal control. In deleting any emotional giveaway, behaviour control falls into collective uniformity and customization and, consequently, disintegrates the subject’s experience.

“The In” is regulated by the monitors where everything is recorded and information is filtered. The use of the digital world also relates to Gilson’s concept of the “ideal of invulnerability” (313) in the manner of the inability to be affected emotionally or as a sentient body. Faces on “the In” become illusionary examples of the transparency and porosity of identity. In the process of becoming digitally transparent or porous, the significance or implications of normalizing this exposure are ignored. That is, deprivation of their private identity is, thus, boxed into annulation or strictly protocolled confession booths. The digital platform is a tool for the individual to hide their vulnerability (physical or experiential). In the same vein, “the In” is used in two ways, one as a monitored simulacrum where individuals post spillikins of performed experiences (while brands invest in them if their visibility is high) and for the confession booths, where individuals can use avatars to protect their identity while they share their emotional distress. The objective of confession booths is in some way to release those emotions, since “people are afraid to show their true faces, but they can’t hide their feelings and thoughts forever. They need to let them out. Confessing helps move” (West 29). After confessing, people felt “empty [as] something good. Empty is a fresh day with a fresh face” (117), which reinforces an idea of disembodiment.

Notwithstanding, in *Face*’s society, where individual roles and freedoms fall under deterministic paradigms, characters only find a sense of liberation through digital interactions. It gives them a sense of relief to evade external reality and discover digital responses to their posts. As Reyna claims, “it’s better in than out” (West 35). Communication in the same household is made through AR implants, for example. Shame from having organic responses is to be mediated through “the In,” on confessional booths that are either on automatic AI response or via humans running them who can only interact by following strict protocols.

The wound caused by disintegration may become an opportunity to unify and relate to the whole, as fragments entail an essential inherent incompleteness, engaged in the process of becoming. However, in *Face* the process implies even more fragmentation, which can be seen in the brand/image, static staged experiences, the elimination of emotions during face-play (digital and social interaction) and the distancing of family and social relations (superseded by commercial ones).

As mentioned above, the fragmentary narrative provides a reflection on two main forms of fragmentation: the fragmented self and the fragmented society. Aside from monitors, figures who are somewhat apart from the

bio-techno-cultural society and who only intervene when someone poses a threat to the status quo, citizens are divided into two groups of bio-digital-informational determined humans: those who can socially climb up and the slave-like menials. The menials, considered “subhuman” (West 147), are trained to serve the general society. Top-tiers can own them, while lower categories can rent them. Menials are the *homo machina* and can be reconfigured if they start to malfunction. Revealingly, their vulnerability, which is caused by their discursive and biopolitical alterity, is driven by societal constraints rather than organic differences since both social groups are made of the “same material” (West 104). As Morton, Naomi’s teacher, says, “we’re the same species and yet they’re born differently, raised differently, educated differently” (112). The distinction is made by cultural constructs of power. Menials are trained not to think or look at their owners, and they are believed to “lack a full range of emotions and are unable to problem-solve in a creative manner” (127). Therefore, society in the novel evokes Foucault’s disciplinary powers and Deleuze’s society of control. *Face* includes the three instruments necessary in a society of discipline: hierarchical observation; normalizing judgement and examination, where individuals turn into objects of self-regulation; and external observation.

Despite their differences in power, body distance is the norm for both social groups, however. Body distancing recalls Deleuze’s definition of “controls [as] a modulation” (4), which highlights the shift from discipline and confinement to a more fluid and continuous form of control that operates through data, technology and flexible environments. In its simple articulation, this modulation takes the shape of surveilling omnipresence and self-regulated control on corporeal and emotional behaviour. As one of the monitors in the novel states, “you’d be surprised by how many people do our job for us” (West 53).

Reactions to skin-to-skin contact or even the idea of sex are defined as primitive. That being so, sexual intercourse for procreation or pleasure is banned. Thus, self-touch (i.e. masturbation) is also prohibited and mostly seen as a morally inferior defect in menials. Interestingly, however, Naomi thinks that menials’ proneness to masturbation is actually an attempt to gain control of their body, a form of ownership rather than a need for physical self-gratification. This information is only accessible to Naomi when she takes on a confession booth and realizes that masturbation is one of the most common causes of distress among menials. In general terms, body contact under any circumstances is rejected, as seen when Eduardo

“held the baby close and, if it wasn’t for the plastic papoose that kept her shielded from him, he would have appeared horrifying—touching her skin to skin” (West 25).

Emotions are part of the language of the body. By impeding recognition of physiological needs and communication, the characters’ subjectivity is shattered. As Antonio Damasio puts it in his study of reason and emotion, “a roughly and incompletely composed happy facial expression [leads] to the subject’s experiencing ‘happiness,’ and angry facial expression to their experiencing ‘anger,’ and so on” (147–148). However, in *Face*, real faces are banned from being shown in public, causing “fear, disgust, anger” (West 185) if they are. For this reason, Reyna attempts to control her facial gestures even if it takes “all of her control to keep her face smooth and unaffected” (163). Her expressions are carefully manufactured to be acceptable both in the digital world and in physical social encounters. Evoking what Byung-Chul Han calls “the society of transparency,” the characters’ physical reality is forced to transform itself into informational data under surveillance and control. In the novel, exhibiting one’s staged experiences demonstrates a demanding need for excessive exhibition or hypervisibility of dissected and staged images.

Fragmentation also affects the human subject that is entangled in the digital and physical world but where matter takes less importance than digitalized exposures. The digital panopticon shows nothing else but the characters’ shards of subjectivity. Incongruences in their inner sensations and external, normative, manufactured stances make the reader ponder what an embodied self and a human subject may be. The problematic of fragmentation raises questions about where the connection between the parts is and how it relates to possibly stipulating where subjectivity stands in a behaviourally controlled physical and digital environment, proving reality as both relational and fragmentary. Schuyler, who has reached the highest societal rank, is eager to feel the openness of bodily and affective responses with others, but most of the characters are unable to search for this dynamic relationality without falling into societal disgrace. In this way, the novel opens a path to re-examining human embodied experience in a biotechnologically networked world. Relying on John Law and Annemarie Mol’s views of society’s pluralism and the existence of “different worlds that overlap and co-exist,” the narrative opens a space to reflect on the need to attend to multiplicity and how this process “brings with it the need for new conceptualizations of what it might mean to hold together” (10). Considering the entanglements of the digital-material-discursive

environment in the novel, the narrative claims openness from the given elite epistemological and ontological discourse. Thus, following Law and Mol’s views, Lisa Blackman believes that “these new conceptualizations might draw life from the very concepts and explanatory structures that distribute suggestibility as a phenomena [sic] that is both inner and outer, psychic and social, and material and ephemeral” (43). *Face* presents a fragmentary world that reflects on the fissures of the self while revealing a yearning for proximity in Levinasian terms (becoming one through a dissolution of otherness), which in the text is through physical and affective touch.

4 MODES OF FRAGMENTATION AND DISLOCATION OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Fragmentation is commonly associated with vulnerability since its etymology includes concepts of broken, shattered or torn forms. Vulnerability has the Latin etymological origin of *vulnus*, meaning wound, and thus can be applied to concepts of continuous openness/exposition to being hurt. In this section, it will be contended that just as fragmentation is contradictory, vulnerability follows suit in its positive and negative connotations. Following Roxana Baiasu’s claim that vulnerability can be linked to its quality of “openness which is understood not only as exposure to being wounded but also as openness to transformation and change” (254), dichotomies on fragmentation of the subject will be discussed.

Openness of the subject implies allowing affect to be exposed, which Deleuze considers inherent in the process of encountering others. As Anderson et al. state, vulnerability is “a capability for an openness to mutual affection” (8). Baiasu discusses vulnerability’s openness using Heidegger’s concepts of understanding, affect and discourse in openness. For Baiasu, “communication is possible through a shared understanding and shared affective state” (258). In the novel, faces are vulnerable windows into characters’ “primitive” emotions and sensations. Controlling that exposure is associated with perfection and invulnerability. Individuals move away from their private social spheres which are essential for embeddedness, embodiment, affective intra-independence and relationality in order to societally protect themselves. The narrative, thus, drives attention towards an intrinsic sense (ontologically, epistemically and ethically) of vulnerability. By doing so, the embodied self is shaped by a disruptive

experience that affects subjectivity. Through masquerading their inner responses and affects, the body is being prevented from exposing its active perception, reception and involvement in the world in a free and conscious sharing of experience with others. As Schuyler ponders about how Tonia must feel after he discreetly touches her hand: “She’d looked at him without emotion and yet she must have felt what he felt?” (West 237). In another section, Schuyler wonders if Reyna “*is [...] playing face, or is she unsure of how to start talking freely?*” (241; emphasis in the original).

Affect shapes subjectivity by means of creating a unique separate experience, but, at the same time, it is also “porous” and open to being affected by others (human and nonhuman). In the face-to-face encounter, the affected subject reacts and takes action for the shared external. According to Barad, intra-action is the constant flow of material and discursive information in each encounter of the subject with the external world. She emphasizes the idea that agency is not pre-existing but is born in intra-action within a relational space. In this relational encounter, the other projects/transforms one’s subjectivity. However, in *Face’s* society, one “must never let anyone see that you are grieving” (West 206), for instance. In the novel, characters lack porosity, and what Barad identifies as intra-action since facevalue implies that “the best face is no face at all” (55). Consequently, characters do not care or consciously determine emotional connections in their own embodied experience.

The narrative opens a window for observing the characters’ need for proximity and openness, as mentioned above. The novel ends with Schuyler going with Eduardo and the baby in search of making real connections and physical contact. Similarly, Tonia is also shown to yearn for connection, for example when she describes how Eduardo “reached out to her, his hand open, close to her elbow, and, for a moment, she willed him to move that extra millimetre, for his fingers to brush her skin. Closer. Closer. Closer. But his hand was still, open, and then closed and retracted. The touch never came, and Tonia felt relief. She smiled” (West 18). Tonia would like to touch him when she observes that “his jaw was hard and she wished she could put her hand on it, to smooth that hardness away” (21) in what seems a natural affective response of care. This example brings to mind Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus’s definition of critical posthumanism as a “caring paradigm after all but also a paradigm for care” (109). In this lack of caring, *Face* highlights a societal fear of showing one’s face, body closeness and real responsive interactions, which impedes any ground for relationality or an ethics of care.

The double understanding of vulnerability enhances the impact of both forms of fragmentation—the negative fragmentary exposition caused by wilful ignorance and surveillance, and that of positive fragmentation needed for affection and touch—on one’s sense of wholeness and subjectivity. Positive fragmentation is the open wound that relies on external relationality and embeddedness. Fragmentation as to piecing together relates to skin-to-skin contact; if touch is considered a metaphor in the novel, following Mark Paterson’s definition of touch “as experiential framework and conceptual resource” (147) or as “a model for sympathy, of literally feeling-with” (147), then *Face*’s narrative construction provides a reflection on relational dependence. According to Salzman-Erikson and Eriksson, touch is, thus, proximity and empathy and “feelings are bound in and intertwined with actual touching” (848). Paterson maintains that “feeling-with” involves “another tactile body, wherein the tactile and the emotional arise within each other. Feelings get communicated in the act of touching” (152). In *Face*, by blocking this relational communicating presence through the banning of touch, the subject becomes isolated from what holds it together: lived experiences and the co-presence of contact and affect. Touch is a risk phenomenon that can reveal affect and, thus, this risk becomes an exercise of power to the novel’s behavioural control society, so that showing your real face implies a social downgrade. Therefore, touch in the novel is described as repulsive and disgusting for the characters, and avoiding it shields oneself against vulnerability.

Disgust is linked to a physiological response (nausea) and has the effect of distancing yourself from what arouses it. Even though it is generally considered a response to protect the body, some theorists believe that it goes “beyond the physical body to emphasize the self [...] whose vulnerability to invasion and degradation is at issue when disgust arises” (Miller 4). Disgust is considered as “interpersonal and self-protective” (4), fostering a reaction towards others. In the light of external risk, this abhorrence becomes a symptom of the imposed totalitarian regime in the novel and the individual’s preventive response to maintain social stability. Thus, when Schuyler wants to “show [his] real” self, which he defines as “liberating” in “want[ing] to make a real connection” (West 161) with his daughter, it only causes her to close off. Reyna does not want him to look at her while speaking, and she is horrified by such an open and honest confession. He confesses that he wanted a child because it was the only way to start real experiences, real connections: “I felt your skin against mine and I realised it was the first time I had ever touched anyone” (West

162). Reyna is drawn to revulsion as she “fought a gasp, fought the urge to be sick” (162). In this honest encounter, Reyna feels that “he ha[s] transformed, from the unfathomable, cool man she had always known into something weak” (162), and after that, she cannot help but look at him in “fear, disgust, anger” (247).

Valerie Curtis, a behavioural scientist known for her work on disgust, has determined that “sometime in our evolution towards human ultrasociality disgust took on an extended role—providing a motive to punish antisocial behaviour and to shun the breakers of social rules” (3478). Consequently, disgust is also a moral emotion that affects social behaviour, which in the novel is seen in the rejection of touch. As Jake, the menial, confesses after masturbating and having thoughts of touching Madeleine, “the fear of being found out made his desires feel dirtier. He was sick” (West 28). Indeed, as argued above, open natural responses, as well as body contact, emotional reactions and sexual encounters are seen as primitive and animalistic. These constitute the vulnerability of “faulty humans” (147). Touch is, thus, problematic in the novel because it evokes inhumanity and disgust. In its societal ethical construction, disgust is an exercise of power while, at the same time, it is a purely personal and unique message of the embodied self. Disgust in the metaphorical sense is present as a foundational rejection of the “feeling of impingement upon and proximity” (Paterson 171). Jake describes an instance when Schuyler’s face was “relaxed into raw ‘Schuyler’ [...] It was the first time Jake had ever seen someone show their ‘true’ face. Schuyler was magnetic and repulsive, and Jake couldn’t look away” (West 68). The binary combination of material–discursive intersection is seen when Tonia listens to her inner corporeal needs but abjects them with disgust as a pragmatic/social form of survival: she “closed her eyes and imagined herself crossing the distance between them and pressing against him. She could almost feel his heart beat next to hers. She shuddered and, standing, stumbled over the bathroom” (20).

Furthermore, Erinn Gilson understands ignorance as a form of closure, in particular, “closure to being affected by others in ways that one cannot predict or control, and which challenge and destabilise one’s socially established sense of self” (74). In the novel, in avoiding or eliminating body relationality, there is a lack of open affective response, which translates into a disembodied and fragmentary experience. In the fragmentary and synthetic interactions, rather than relying on embodiment and relationality, individuals’ lived experiences are restrained or numbed by drugs (betablockers), digital text and the averting of touch.

The society portrayed in *Face* moves away from Braidotti’s definition of the posthuman as affective, relational and materially embedded since the characters are all mass-produced in a normalized form of humanity, and as Gilson states, “[t]he body is the most manifest locus of affectivity” (83). In the novel, this is illustrated through the fragmentary narrative where “tamed” bodies do not coincide with the actual corporeal affective reactions of characters. Embodiment is rejected, reinforcing a dualistic body–mind distinction where the body is to be a controlled, static and sealed entity. Characters such as Reyna expose but also exhibit activities and experiences that would be defined as entertaining on “the In.” The aesthetics of banal pleasure posted online propose a sense of experience that (as Reyna says) “made sense, even if the sensation didn’t” (West 169), which highlights the contradictory stance of the sentient body obstructed by body-distancing in the narrative. More importantly, however, the fear of not being of social interest or connected to others drives characters to avoid body exposure or touch. In this process, “the In” becomes a resourceful tool for protecting one’s self and abiding by its static dynamics, which allows it to move away from vulnerable corporeality and its effects. Further, “the In” relaxes Reyna’s “sense of control” (182). As she states, “the best thing about being on the In was the fact that you could control the environment around you. It was always better In than Out” (123). Yet, interestingly, she also questions “[h]ow many of her In actions really belonged to her” (123). The way faces are treated is as mere self-constructs of data that are subordinated by overseeing surveillance and control of the system that instigates body distance and lack of physical and emotional touch/caring.

Body responses of fake interactions and inhibited emotions in the encounter with the other translate into painful bodily responses. For instance, when Eduardo and Tonia announce publicly that they want to have a baby, Tonia’s “face ached” (West 26) in her attempt to appear happy about the event. In a conversation with Naomi, who begins to question the humane use of menials, Dr Vidya Wójcick, owner of the best baby designing company, thinks that it all comes from our fear of “ourselves and of each other and of the whole world” (62) and that is why “we try to control other people” (62). As Vidya continues, “on the most innocuous level we do it with our faces. Manipulating what people think of us by showing them what we want them to see and making it as difficult as possible for them to see through our masks” (62–63).

The narrative also brings the reader to attend to the ordinariness of events, of what we today consider a basic sense of our daily lives and connections. *Face* presents family intimacy as empty of ethics of care or affectivity and/or interactions, where “there was no love lost when a child left the parents” (West 32). In line with Alice Bennet’s views, the narration directs readers’ attention toward how the digital surveillance surroundings are distracting and alienating us from everyday life and others. The pursuit of invulnerability in the hope of eliminating weaknesses or bad emotions drives the focus away from everyday entanglements of life. Real connections/interactions expose one’s vulnerability in terms of the demand for relationality and affective response. That is why intimate spaces in the novel, such as the privacy of family households, are described as “lifeless.”

The posthuman wound becomes a painful disruptive experience for the subject that narratologically speaking provides hope of recognizing the relationality, embodiedness and embeddedness of the human subject. West is able to cause a sense of interconnection through an aesthetics of the fragment owing to a critical posthumanist perspective that understands the “interrelational” subject as constituted by its connection and necessity of others. Notwithstanding, the novel is open-ended with an unclear message of whether the system will eventually begin to crack towards a closer sense of proximity and unrestrainedness or not. However, via openness, embodiment and self-awareness, West projects a further sense of relationality in which the subject and the object are dependent on each other.

5 CONCLUSION

The dystopian society that *Face* depicts allows readers to dive into a fragmentary world where techno-digital embeddedness facilitates social and individual control. Through nonlinear fragmented narratives, the fragility but also the essentiality of the relationality of individuals are presented as key for subjectivity and agency. Even though West said that she wanted the novel “to feel kind of like doom. Scrolling, where you look at the same comments over and over again from different people. They’re different, but it’s essentially the same information [...] a kind of tedium that I wanted to replicate” (in Brown), *Face* does not present a tedious fragmentary world but an opportunity to explore instances of the emotional and organically wounded individuals under surveillance and body-distance control.

The novel’s fragmentary portrayal does not seem to set the boundaries for individuals’ experience as encapsulated or within-oneself but rather to

acknowledge the subjects’ fragments as incomplete or nonlinear, presupposing the need for connections to the other fragments to elicit a sense of self. Ultimately, fragmentation and wholeness are not mutually exclusive but rather intertwined, which points to influenceability and openness as a way forward.

To conclude, in the novel, aspects of materiality bring concerns about care, body proximity, emotions and embodiment in lived experiences. These ideas are raised through the use of different narrators for the same events on the one hand, and through the characters’ postured faces online and their efforts to control any facial expressions in the physical world, on the other. By doing so, the narrative invites readers to reflect not only on the fragmentary status in (post-)human interactions but also on their relationality. Indeed, the ultimate source of embodiment, awareness and emotional attendance is through the lived experience of the living body. As Braidotti states, materially embedded, embodied, relational and affective beings present truthful and caring environments for one’s own self and others. In the openness of showing one’s true face and vulnerability, one can acknowledge one’s fragmentary unity to others and, thus, experience embodied subjectivity in affective modes of response-ability.

Acknowledgments The Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation under grant PID2022-137627NB-I00 supported the writing of this work.

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