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Reading Novels, Reading Networks: Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*, Social Media, and the Digital Literary Sphere

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This article examines the theme of social networks in Mark Z. Danielewski's serial novel *The Familiar*, as well as the social networks involved in the work's reception, as a means of assessing the contemporary novel's imbrication in social networks and social media. It contributes to critical discussions about *The Familiar*—and to broader conversations about the novel in the social media age—on two fronts. First, it analyzes Danielewski's diegetic social networks. I argue that, in *The Familiar*, the planetary social is largely represented as a source of anxiety, as the existential threat of violence is amplified and perpetuated through social media. Yet the novel also explores how social networks offer the potential for resistance and protection from such violence. Second, the article describes how Danielewski's real-world socially networked communities have impacted the interpretation of his writing. The analysis centers on the Facebook "Reading Club" dedicated to *The Familiar* and on the online discussion, conducted through WordPress, wherein students and faculty at multiple universities blogged about *The Familiar*, Volume 1. The WordPress discussion pushes the classroom into the blogosphere, troubling distinctions among academic interpretation, social networking, and public discourse. The Facebook group harnesses the conventions of both social media and book clubs, demonstrating how academic-adjacent interpretation may flourish in contexts not typified by such reading. At stake is a more nuanced understanding of the power and potential violence of communities constituted through social media; of the novel's ability to represent and theorize such communities; and of the ways that reading communities' emergence across social media has problematized longstanding conceptualizations of contemporary reading culture as characterized by a series of divisions (such as that between amateur and professional readers).

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Since the novel's inception, novelists have intervened in debates about the relationship between the individual and the collective—the family, the nation, the world. What, then, is the role of the novel in the era of social media, when digital platforms shape community formation on- and offline? This article examines the theme of social networks in Mark Z. Danielewski's serial novel *The Familiar*, as well as the social networks involved in the work's reception, as a means of assessing the contemporary novel's imbrication in social networks and social media. That we live in a network society, as Manuel Castells declared in 1996, has become both a mundane aspect of life and a flourishing subject in academic fields including sociology, media theory, and literary criticism. Patrick Jagoda describes networks as “a dominant episteme and ubiquitous form of our time.”¹ Networks have been variously characterized as politically utopian or dystopian, inextricable from the social, and a key aesthetic category.² Recent theorizations of power and connectivity are fundamentally entangled with the concept. In analyzing *The Familiar* in the context of social media, my aim is to pinpoint one element of network culture: the links connecting novels, social media, and reading practices.

The bulk of criticism on *The Familiar* to date has focused on its scale, its use of the printed page, its remediation of television, and its serialization. A question that frequently surfaces in this scholarship is how one should approach reading this novel: Like a TV show? Like a puzzle? With what background material or informational resources? This line of questioning inevitably leads to consideration of *The Familiar*'s difficulty and its collaborative interpretation. Danielewski has actively promoted platforms for analyzing his works online, including discussion forums, a coordinated discussion of *The Familiar, Volume 1* across multiple university classes, and Facebook book clubs. As Thomas Mantzaris and Katerina Marazi write, “a significant aspect of the enterprise” of *The Familiar*'s publication is “that of transforming an individual act of reading experience into a collective process of co-producing and co-reflecting on the narrative.”³ I view this collective reading, which largely takes place via online social networking, as an extension of the novel's thematic investment in social media.

This essay contributes to critical discussions about *The Familiar*—and to broader conversations about the novel in the social media age—on two fronts. First, I analyze Danielewski's diegetic social networks. I argue that, in *The Familiar*, the planetary social is largely represented as a source of anxiety, as the existential threat of violence is amplified and perpetuated through social media. Yet the novel also explores how

¹ Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics*, 221.

² See, for example, Galloway and Thacker, *The Exploit*; Latour, *Reassembling the Social*; Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics*; and Levine, *Forms*.

³ Mantzaris and Marazi, “Seasoning the Novel,” 314.

social networks offer the potential for resistance and protection from such violence. Put another way, while *The Familiar* dramatizes the perils of digital networks, it also demonstrates how they allow vulnerable individuals to form protective communities, forging surprisingly powerful connections out of weak ties. Jagoda has shown that novels and other narrative works can provide crucial insights into the network imaginary.⁴ *The Familiar* exemplifies how a novel might be an aesthetic form particularly suited to theorizing social media, as it layers the narrative structure of myth onto the viral logic of social media.

Second, I describe how Danielewski's real-world socially networked communities have impacted the interpretation of his writing. Examining the discourse and practices of these online reading groups, I build on existing critical work on the digital literary sphere, a term introduced by Simone Murray to describe the "rich seam of online biblio-enthusiasm" that emerged as literary culture migrated from print and broadcast cultures to the Internet.⁵ My analysis centers on the Facebook "Reading Club" dedicated to *The Familiar* and on the online discussion, conducted through WordPress, wherein students and faculty at multiple universities blogged about *The Familiar, Volume 1*. These two cases are newer additions to Danielewski's online reading communities, so they present the opportunity to extend earlier research on the MZD Forums, the online discussion board that Danielewski founded in 2000. Additionally, they occupy opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of the reading cultures and social networks they represent. The WordPress discussion pushes the classroom into the blogosphere, troubling distinctions among academic interpretation, social networking, and public discourse. The Facebook group harnesses the conventions of both social media and book clubs, demonstrating how academic-adjacent interpretation may flourish in contexts not typified by such reading.

At stake is a more nuanced understanding of the power and potential violence of communities constituted through social media; of the ability of the novel genre to represent and theorize such communities; and of the ways that reading communities' emergence across social media has problematized longstanding conceptualizations of contemporary reading culture as characterized by a series of divisions (such as that between amateur and professional readers). I am thus in dialogue with scholarship about the ways that the novel genre is enmeshed in what Amy Hungerford calls "contemporary literature's social worlds."⁶ Tim Lanzendörfer and Corinna Norrick-Rühl argue that "the term 'novel' is best perceived as a node in the novel network of

⁴ See his *Network Aesthetics*.

⁵ Murray, *Digital Literary Sphere*, 2.

⁶ Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, 4.

actors, objects, ideas, and markets,” “a hub or a hinge in any number of otherwise discrete networks” including publishing industries, medialogical contexts, and readers.⁷ Attending to the social networks within and surrounding *The Familiar* can expand the ways we understand novels’ networks, and social networks, in the twenty-first century.

Planetary and Predators: Social Media in the Network Novel

Media are a salient feature of *The Familiar*, from the novel’s bookish materiality to its remediation of serialized television. As Sascha Pöhlmann describes, *The Familiar* “constructs a storyworld that is fundamentally a digital culture in the global Internet age.”⁸ Although social media feature prominently in *The Familiar*, Danielewski’s depiction of this aspect of the media ecology has received less critical attention than other media elements. Much of the extant research on the impact of media culture on fiction concerns literary works published in 2010 or earlier—literary works, in other words, that were written either before or coincident with the rise of social networking via social media. I define social networking as the use of digital platforms to connect, collaborate, communicate, or otherwise create social spaces and interactions. Although social networks as a sociological concept predate digital networking, Scott Selisker observes that social networks are “increasingly ... instantiated digitally through the new forms of *social media*, sites like Friendster, MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter.”⁹

The first social media site is usually considered to be SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997. Social media rose exponentially between 2000 and 2010, however, with Friendster (2002), MySpace (2003), YouTube (2005), Facebook (2006), Twitter (2006), Tumblr (2007), and Instagram (2010). The first five volumes of *The Familiar* are set between May and September of 2014 and were published between 2015 and 2017. Danielewski’s serial novel may speak to more established sub-fields like “the contemporary novel” or “the novel in the digital age,” but *The Familiar* is more precisely a social media novel, written and set during a time when Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are a decade old, and when youth culture is produced through platforms like Snapchat (and later, TikTok).

Social networking is an integral part of what José van Dijck characterizes as “a new infrastructure for online sociality and creativity.”¹⁰ According to one report, there were

⁷ Lanzendörfer and Norrick-Rühl, “Introduction,” 7, 12.

⁸ Pöhlmann, “Fictions of the Internet,” 364.

⁹ Selisker, “Social Networks,” 211. Selisker’s analysis focuses on social media during the decade of their emergence (2000–2010).

¹⁰ Van Dijck, *Culture of Connectivity*, 4.

3.8 billion active social media users in 2020—nearly half of the global population.¹¹ Social networking has profoundly reconfigured sociality and daily habits, two areas where the novel has historically had much to say. The novel is no longer a privileged form for imagining the social: its competition with other fictional and print genres has given way to vying with film, television, and videogames. Cultural critics are as likely to look to television programs like *The Wire* to discuss the network imaginary as they are to novels.¹² At the same time, the novel's history gives it a vested interest in examining the shift to the era of social networking. As social media and network culture more broadly have made “connection ... less an imperative than ... an infrastructural basis of everyday life,” the novel is strategically positioned to examine the uses and effects of social networking.¹³

One strategy by which contemporary novels bear witness to the impact of social networking is via what Jagoda terms “the network novel—a late twentieth-century genre that reworks and intensifies the cultural concerns regarding a world interconnected by communication and transportation networks, and made unprecedentedly dependent upon an informational economy.”¹⁴ While Jagoda charts the network novel as a trend in the 1990s, Selisker argues that “networks become a major figure through which fiction during [the period between 2000 and 2010] considers the mitigation of, and new structures of, individual and collective agency.”¹⁵ Such novels—think David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* or Jennifer Egan's *The Keep*, or, as a precursor, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*—represent huge, often global networks that span time and place, interrogating the network as a structure of social organization. Another strategy is to center social networks thematically. In Kevin Nguyen's *New Waves*, for instance, the protagonists meet through one social networking site and work at another, and social media becomes the primary venue for forming intimate connections as well as for memorializing the dead.

The Familiar employs both approaches. Where *House of Leaves* focuses on families in domestic spaces and *Only Revolutions* sets a paired couple against the backdrop of the nation, *The Familiar* explores “planetarity”—the interlinking of networks upon networks of people across the world.¹⁶ In their book on the planetary turn in critical theory, Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru differentiate planetarity from globalization:

¹¹ Koetsier, “Why 2020 is a Critical,” n.p.

¹² See, for example, Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics*, chapter 3, and Levine, *Forms*, chapter 6.

¹³ Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics*, 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁵ Selisker, “Social Networks,” 217.

¹⁶ *The Familiar, Volume 1*, 33. Additional citations from *The Familiar* will appear parenthetically in the text, abbreviated as TFv1, TFv2, etc.

“there has been a paradigmatic translation of world cultures into a planetary setup in which globalization’s homogenizing, one-becoming pulsion is challenged by *relationality*, namely, by an ethicization of the ecumenic process of coming together or ‘worlding.’”¹⁷ Such worlding is for Danielewski, as for Elias and Moraru, tied to the relationship between humans and the “planet as world ecology”; but most germane to my analysis is the notion of the ethics of relationality.¹⁸ For Danielewski, this ethics plays out through *The Familiar*’s formal structure. Representing the complex, interconnected networks that make up the planetary social, the novel is composed of nine interlinked narratives, each from the perspective of a single character and written in a distinct font and voice.

As Inge van de Ven writes, “*The Familiar* dramatizes a social network”—one, I would add, that maps onto, and stands as synecdoche for, planetarity.¹⁹ At the hub of this network narrative is the story of Xanther Ibrahim, a precocious twelve-year-old who rescues a strange, uncanny cat. Combining Xanther’s narrative with those of her parents, Astair and Anwar, the Ibrahim family becomes one small network. Others expand the novel’s scope beyond this Los Angeles household. *The Familiar* follows fellow Angelinos Luther Perez, a gang member; Shnorhk Zildjian, a taxi driver; and Özgür Yildirim, a police officer. The remaining narrative strands extend across the United States and the world. Cas Stern is a computer programmer on the run with her partner Bobby, travelling through American cities. Isandørno is a hitman working in Mexico. Jingjing is a recovering drug addict in Singapore, who assists the healer Tian Li.

Part of the pleasurable challenge of *The Familiar* is puzzling out how and why the nine narratives echo and intersect. These individual nodes, to borrow more networking terminology, become more closely connected as the first five volumes progress: by the end of *Redwood*, for instance, Shnorhk drives Jingjing and Tian Li to meet the Ibrahims. To some degree, then, *The Familiar* renders networks as legible objects. Whereas networks are typically construed as an aesthetic form at or beyond the limit of representation, the promise that the networks of *The Familiar* will converge and become comprehensible is one way that a linear, finite (if large) narrative text may make “networks ... sensible and accessible.”²⁰ At the same time, however, *The Familiar* also gestures towards the sublime scale of planetary networks. These nine character strands may coalesce into some knowable or stable formation, but each character is also situated within many other networks—classmates, coworkers, gangs, musical

¹⁷ Elias and Moraru, “Introduction: The Planetary Condition,” xi-xii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xvi.

¹⁹ van de Ven, *Big Books*, 143.

²⁰ Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics*, 21.

groups, friends. The Greek-Chorus-like Narcons often provide biographical details of the peripheral people who touch the lives of the nine central characters, marking the vastness of planetary networks. No network in *The Familiar* is static, as Danielewski traces the movements of people, cargo, and information travelling across the globe. The best model for networks may be Shnorhk's reverence for "Traffic," which is a "religion for Shnorhk: how people move and relate" (TFv1 407).²¹

That planetarity is inseparable from digital networks is evident from the proliferation of social media in this novelistic world. Astair and Xanther watch Tai Chi videos on YouTube, police officers and criminals monitor each other on social media, and Cas searches "sites from Reddit to Facebook to Parcel Thoughts, Google of course, BitTorrent, [and] MMOGs like WOW" (TFv1 149). The outlier in Cas's list is Parcel Thoughts, a fictional social networking app that is a prevalent link among the narratives. Luther's gang members use it to coordinate criminal activity, while Bobby and Cas use it to communicate with their fellow fugitives. Parcel Thoughts has different zones or settings: the "Solosphere," where users post their own thoughts in isolation and relative safety; the "Amicasphere," where users communicate with selected friends; and the Noosphere, including "friends of friends of friends," which Xanther considers to be "the least safe" sphere (TFv1 335). It also includes features like the "Horrosphere," where school bullies distort photos of Xanther and her friends so that their faces look mutilated (a fictional riff on Snapchat filters).

This tension between friendship and horror exemplifies the ambivalence of social networks in *The Familiar*. Parcel Thoughts is a microcosm of social media, exposing both the perils of digital networks and the ways they may join vulnerable individuals together into powerful communities. Such protection is necessary because violence is an inescapable part of this world, spanning the entire Earth and all of human time. Death and war are described as "our common horrors," which "not even all of time will end" (TFv1 16, 17). Violence, Danielewski implies, is as present in the online harassment Xanther experiences as it was in the prehistoric past. The motif of violent predators hunting their prey permeates the novel. School bullies are predators, or "preds," in Xanther's parlance. Xanther is bullied online and offline. As danah boyd argues in her study of teenage social media users, "technology can amplify existing dramas" among teens and "can also create new mechanisms for meanness and cruelty to unfold."²² The

²¹ While Shnorhk is referring to automobile traffic, "traffic" may also refer to the messages that circulate in information networks.

²² Boyd, *It's Complicated*, 140. Boyd is generally critical of claims that there exists an epidemic of cyberbullying, arguing that such accounts tend to conflate what she considers true aggression with teasing, performative "drama," and other negatively charged social interactions among teens.

violence preys on the bodies of Xanther and her friends ranges from the symbolic (the photoshopped distortions of their faces in Parcel Thoughts) to the physical (bullies beating Xanther so seriously that her parents considered home-schooling her) (TFv1 128). These incidents parallel the violence of the global drug trade, the murders that Özgür investigates, and the Armenian genocide, which Shnorhik helps to document. The existential cruelty of the violence in this world is shown in how consistently it is levied against those who are the most powerless and innocent. Isandòrno's employer The Mayor callously murders an infant by throwing it into a deep fryer, and baby animals are hunted for sport. Like Xanther's epilepsy (which she imagines to be a predator stalking her), violence is a perpetual threat.

Violence, then, is not caused by social networks, according to *The Familiar*; it is a fundamental facet of human life. Yet Danielewski suggests that because social media are so interwoven with contemporary life, they amplify violence. As Zeynep Tufekci has written, refuting the doctrine of digital dualism, "the Internet is not a world" unto itself, separate from offline life; "it's part of *the* world."²³ Danielewski's formulation of planetarity rests similarly on the inseparability of online and offline social networks. This interconnection is evident in the novel's depiction of real-world events as well as fictional ones. For instance, Xanther recalls feeling deeply disturbed by the death of James Foley, the journalist whose beheading by ISIS was recorded and uploaded to YouTube in 2014 (TFv3 797). When Danielewski mentions the 2014 mass killings that took place in Isla Vista, California, the narrative notes that the news reports contain a "transcript of [a] YouTube post" featuring the murderer's racist, sexist screed—another example of how the horrific violence of the real world may be mediated through social media (TFv2 518). In the fictional world, too, predators use social media. The Caged Hunt sequence describes a video of hunters callously executing animals, the text framed by a YouTube-like video interface, suggesting that the recording has been shared online. Additionally, both Luther and the school bully Dendish use Parcel Thoughts to coordinate and perpetrate their violence.

The Parcel Thoughts logo is a "black-ribboned-black-box icon" (TFv1 334). It depicts a gift but perhaps also a cage or Pandora's box. That it is a black box is significant, aligning the app with the general principle that modern technology operates as a series of black boxes whose workings are hidden from users. Parcel Thoughts depicts social media as both ubiquitous and mysterious. It reifies its users and subjects them to violence, but its machinations are hidden from them. It is the work of this novel, in part, to make such machinations visible—metaphorically, but also literally. The word

²³ Tufekci, "The Social Internet," 14.

“signiconic”—Danielewski’s coinage for the combination of linguistic (“sign”) and visual (“icon”) elements in his work—joins “planetarity” and “violence” in the section headers of *TFv1*. *The Familiar*’s planetary networks and threats of violence mimetically manifest for the reader through Danielewski’s many signiconic features, from the inclusion of visual representations of the media platforms the narrative describes (e.g., the cellphones and text messages of Parcel Thoughts users) to the calligrammes of predators and prey whose hunts close each volume.

There is much we might say about Danielewski’s use of the signiconic. The point I note here is that it drives home the idea that both violence and digital networks are ever-present and inextricably interconnected. Even the natural world is inflected by elemental, technologically mediated, and signiconically represented violence. Nature (which is for Danielewski, as for Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “red in tooth and claw”) takes form through the visual iconography of volume 2. That volume is subtitled *Into the Forest*, a space represented pictorially for the reader across several beautiful and arresting series of pages. The forest is created out of hashtags and at-signs, the visual vocabulary of social networking. In this imagery, Danielewski solidifies his portrayal of social networks as the often-ominous environments that surround everyone, quietly but persistently mediating the experience of planetarity.

Viral Power: Weak Ties, Memes, and Myths

The Familiar balances this dystopian vision of networked planetarity with the hope of more utopian social arrangements. In this world where *predator* and *prey* are the guiding binary opposition, social networks create a third term: *the pack*. If there is a chance of safety, it lies in numbers—especially in coalitions of vulnerable, isolated individuals. It is true that the novel features many close connections: supportive friends, friendly colleagues, and the Ibrahim family as a network hub. Yet Danielewski seems most interested in the ways that social media might connect dissimilar and unrelated people into a new planetary sphere of sociality—a sphere that could resist violence and instead offer custody (a word that is another of *TFv1*’s section headers). The novel’s protagonists are strikingly lonely. Xanther is outcast and bullied, having only recently bonded with friends who support her. Özgür “never belongs” (*TFv1* 161). Cas and Bobby try to keep off the grid, as their circle of friends is picked off one by one; their antagonist goes by the pseudonym Recluse, implying his rejection of sociality. By the fifth installment of *The Familiar*, however, these individuals are increasingly situated within loose but formidable networks. These networks provide power and protection.

Many studies of social media have concentrated on the closeness of online ties and the extent to which they map onto offline social connections: “In the offline world,

people who are ‘well connected’ are commonly understood to be individuals whose connections are gauged by their quality and status rather than their quantity. In the context of social media, the term ‘friends’ and its adjunct verb ‘friending’ have come to designate strong *and* weak ties, intimate contacts *as well as* total strangers.”²⁴ In sociologist Mark Granovetter’s influential argument in “The Strength of Weak Ties,” weak ties are those between dissimilar individuals: “the stronger the tie connecting two individuals, the more similar they are, in various ways.”²⁵ Granovetter argues that weak ties are more effective than strong ties in disseminating information. It is precisely weak ties in *The Familiar* that activate supernatural power. The three most powerful characters are drawn together despite having little in common: Tian Li is an elderly, Asian healer; Cas is a middle-aged programmer of Native American descent; and Xanther is a white girl on the brink of teenhood. Social media networks tend to encompass either people who already have close ties in their offline life (such as Xanther and her friends sending Parcel Thoughts messages) or people who join an online community based on common interests (such as the reading forums dedicated to Danielewski’s works). Cas, Xanther, and Tian Li are tied to one another nonetheless: Cas scries Xanther in her orb, and when Xanther and Tian Li finally meet, supernatural phenomena occur.

Familiarity here is less to do with genetic kinship, shared interests, or physical proximity than with common humanity—and, particularly, humanity as it exists on the margins of power. We might consider the strength of weak ties in *The Familiar* to be two-fold. Following Granovetter, the weaker ties generate the most power, as characters are drawn together despite having little in common and coming from disparate backgrounds. Additionally, these ties form between marginalized characters: other characters perceive them as physically weak (Tian Li’s fragility, Cas’s pain, Xanther’s epilepsy), and they occupy marginalized social positions due to factors including gender, age, and race. In this way, *The Familiar* challenges representations of networks more typically seen in American and Anglophone fiction, where, Selisker argues, characters who are othered are frequently depicted as intermediaries (edges, in network parlance) for characters with greater social privilege. Bringing the Bechdel Test into dialogue with network analysis, Selisker writes that “[i]f we consider that female characters are often intermediaries between male characters ... [w]e could then visualize the actor-network of a text in which intermediary female characters could be accurately represented not as nodes in their own right but as mere edges between

²⁴ van Dijck, *Culture of Connectivity*, 13.

²⁵ Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” 1362.

the male nodes.”²⁶ In *The Familiar*, it is those characters who might easily have been edges in other literary contexts who form the nodes—indeed, the hubs (i.e., the most heavily connected nodes)—of this networked world. To return to the work’s title, the Oxford English Dictionary states that common definitions of *familiar* include “a close friend or associate” and “a spirit, often taking the form of an animal, which obeys and assists a witch or other person,” as well as that which is known or “part of one’s everyday knowledge.” *The Familiar* also evokes a now-rare, historical definition: “a subordinate,” as in “a servant of a person of high rank.”²⁷ Such structurally subaltern people are the ones who channel power in *The Familiar*’s social networks.

This phenomenon is most evident in the Xanther “cosplayers,” the brigade of young girls, ranging in age from about eight to about thirteen, who begin to appear across the different narratives.²⁸ Their style replicates Xanther’s appearance: black braids, black shorts, pink Converse shoes, pink tee-shirts, and white stuffed animals attached to their shoulders, emulating Redwood’s habitual perch on Xanther. Danielewski makes it clear that the Xanther cosplayers, although all “dressed like Xanther,” are otherwise quite diverse: a “young black girl,” “a little Latina girl,” an Asian girl, a girl wearing a hijab, etc. (TFv3 104, TFv2 497, TFv4 406, TFv3 593, TFv5 744). Dissimilar in their racial backgrounds but self-fashioned to appear the same, the cosplayers blur the line between strong and weak ties, similarity and difference. The flip side of familiarity is uncanniness—the strangeness of finding connections at once close and distant, like Freud’s *unheimlich* experience of seeing his face in the mirror and momentarily not recognizing it as his own.²⁹ Xanther’s experience of this uncanniness is fleeting, as she “turns too late, just catching through the plate glass [of a restaurant window] a girl scurrying away, about her size, wearing black and pink too and with long braids” (TFv3 104). For the reader, however, as for other characters in the novel, the uncanniness accumulates with each mysterious apparition.

These girls possess a degree of visibility and power not typically accessible to children and “tweens,” especially in the case of those who are not white. When Luther

²⁶ Selisker, “The Bechdel Test,” 511. Selisker argues persuasively that “we might also relate the Bechdel Test’s focus on network position to other categories of minority character inclusion. The female character isolated near the center of a network often serves as a prop for a central male character’s self-actualization, and this can also be the case with a black character.... Likewise, the recent #NotYourAsianSidekick Twitter hashtag also pointed out how popular texts use the mere presence of a minority character as a guarantor of cool, authenticity, or cosmopolitan-ness. Unsurprisingly, such characters are often flat and occupy instrumental positions of isolation near the character network’s center” (Ibid., 515).

²⁷ “Familiar, n., 2.a., 3.a., 5.a., and 1.a.”

²⁸ TFv4 406, TFv3 500. When Luther points out the girls, his associate Chitel suggests that they are “Cosplaying maybe?” (TFv2 497).

²⁹ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 248.

sees two of the girls, it “[makes] his skin crawl,” and when Astair tries to run after two girls, “they disappear at once into the shadows” as if by magic (TFv2 497, TFv3 593). While the girls’ full significance is still unclear by the end of volume five, an interaction between Cas and one of the girls reveals that they belong to some kind of resistance network:

“We’re with you,” the black child whispers.... “We all thought we’d lost you,” the girl finally sputters. “What’s your name?” But the girl just shakes her head. “I’m not supposed to answer that. And you’re not supposed to tell me yours.” “Then what’s that on your shoulder?” Cas asks. It looks like some sort of stuffed animal, pale, just peeking out from behind a black braid. “Really?” The toe of her pink Converse starting to tap the road. “How can you not know that?” (TFv4 62)

The girl is part of an entourage, including police officers, that rescues Cas and Bobby. The exchange strongly implies not only that Xanther will continue to play a significant role in the future plot but also that Cas’s connection to Xanther is instrumental to this agenda. Again, as weak ties converge, strength consolidates. To return to Selisker’s point that socially marginalized characters have tended to serve as “mere edges” between the nodes of hegemonic subjects in fictional networks, in *The Familiar* such characters create an alternative network. Official channels of power may be largely foreclosed for them, but the connections they form become increasingly potent. In this network, it is hegemonic subjects like police officers who are the edges.

If on the one hand the anonymity of the Xanther cosplayers, like the use of pseudonyms by Cas “The Wizard” Stern and her crew, harkens back to the early days of online networking, on the other hand the Xanther cosplayers embody the virality of social media in the twenty-first century. Astair ponders how “social media had given everyone a taste of fame” (TFv5 755). Xanther becomes inadvertently famous when her encounter with Satya, an escaped lioness, finds its way onto the news, but the Xanther cosplayers seem less like a consequence of Xanther’s microcelebrity and more like a meme.³⁰ At least one reader has attempted to create an actual Internet meme based on the cosplayers: a post in the subreddit for *The Familiar* (r/TheFamiliar) featured a collection of stock photos of objects like pink Converse and a white stuffed kitten, titled “Xanther cosplay starter pack.” While I have not been able to track down the image’s origin, the sole comment on the Reddit post states that the image had previously been

³⁰ While Xanther does not seek viral fame, she experiences microcelebrity, a term coined by Theresa Senft to describe the phenomenon of online celebrity with the emergence of stars on platforms like YouTube. See her *Camgirls*.

shared on Danielewski's Facebook page.³¹ The Xanther cosplayers perform and embody the viral logic of memes.

Several critiques of *The Familiar* have latched onto its enmeshment in social media culture. Tom LeClair writes that "spending so many pages on a cat and its effects will test the patience of many who don't watch cat videos on the Internet."³² Another review disparages the mixing of popular culture and high culture, characterizing the novel as a sop to "online fandom": "it reads as if Danielewski ran the metrics on top-viewed subreddits and tried to connect to his target audience in as many ways possible."³³ In addition to problematically dismissing online culture wholesale, such reviews miss the point: *The Familiar* is about the connectivity and virality of sociality as it is formed through social media. In its representations of social media platforms, of the violence and power that may inhere in social networks, and of the way virality may create identification and similarity out of differences, *The Familiar* illuminates what we might call the social media imaginary.

Danielewski also makes the case that one reason novels can engage with and theorize this imaginary is that myths, stories, and other narratives operate in structurally similar ways to social media. *The Familiar* incorporates extant mythology, with Xanther as a modern-day Persephone who eats pomegranate ice cream and attends a ballet titled "Hades" (TFv2 320). It also invents its own myths: about a society in the distant future that sends a message back in time to try to prevent its destruction; about Redwood, who is apparently an incarnation of the primal, animalistic power unleashed by malevolent future forces; and about the Narcons, metafictional artificial intelligences who seem to be creating the narratives.³⁴ When Tian Li meets and begins to mentor Xanther, she tries to explain these stories: "Once a upon a time," Tian Li begins, attempting to pin down the vastness of epic myth with the language of fairy tale (TFv5 457). The impossibility of this task is evoked by the page design, with its blended snippets of text in English and Chinese characters overlapping and fading into illegibility.

Yet myths have a kind of viral logic: they make the quotidian recognizable and significant, repetitions of divine or epic motifs. Echoes become the disembodied presence of a tragic, unrequited lover; the sun is a shining chariot. This point is visible

³¹ "Xanther Cosplay Starter Pack," n.p.

³² LeClair, "Familiar Core," 9.

³³ Alford, "The Familiar Volume 1," n.p.

³⁴ While beyond the scope of my argument here, Danielewski appears to be building a literary universe connected by an overarching mythos. To give just two examples, the VEM corporation is referenced in works including *House of Leaves*, *Only Revolutions* and *The Familiar*, and Redwood is mentioned in *House of Leaves* as well as being the title of Danielewski's first story.

in Redwood, a presence that manifests in felines from Satya the escaped lioness to the giant, tiger-like beast that stalks prehistoric people in the volumes' opening vignettes. *The Familiar* does not so much pander to people who “watch cat videos on the Internet” as adopt the viral logic of social media, cat memes and all. Given the fame of Internet meme cats such as Grumpy Cat, Keyboard Cat, and Nyan Cat, the fact that Danielewski has described the novel with the deceptively simple line “It’s about this little girl who finds a little kitten” positions Redwood as similarly familiar and epic.³⁵ Xanther’s cat becomes, as Astair says of the cat’s name, “[m]ythic even in its reality” (TFv5 758). As with cats, so with social connection: as each feline figure appears to tap into the power of a mythic beast, the practices of daily life, from sharing a meal to being bullied at school, are refracted into a mythological struggle between care and violence. Even the meme-ishness of the Xanther cosplayers seems to connect to cosmic power: because Tian Li is also described wearing pink with her hair in braids, and because the cat used to ride on *her* shoulder, Xanther herself replicates Tian Li’s appearance (TFv3 434, TFv1 102). Motif becomes myth and meme. Danielewski adopts formal and operational aspects of social media to write a myth that is, in part, *about* social media—about the ways that communities form, weak ties create strength, marginalized people gain power, and violence might be met with planetary care.

Socially Networked Reading: Literary Difficulty and Collaborative Interpretation

Thus far I have concentrated on social networking within the diegetic world of *The Familiar*, but social media have also been integral to the project’s reception. In addition to maintaining a personal social media presence and interacting with readers through traditional channels such as book tours and interviews, Danielewski has cultivated online platforms where readers connect to discuss his writing. In 2000, the year *House of Leaves* was published, Danielewski established the MZD Forums (<https://forums.markzdanielewski.com/>). Within a decade, more than twenty-four thousand members had registered to use the site. Bronwen Thomas notes that, “for comparison, a fansite for *Dune*, the cult fiction by Frank Herbert, boast[ed] 1,215 registered users.”³⁶ At the

³⁵ Danielewski, “Danielewski Returns,” n.p. This reading of social media via myth-making, and vice versa, is in keeping with *The Familiar*’s blending of highbrow culture and popular culture. Just as lyrics from 2Pac and Lady Gaga jostle with lines from Hegel and Emily Dickinson in its epigraphs, Internet cat memes are of no less mythological significance in *The Familiar* than is the story of Persephone. “Danielewski is the rare contemporary author whose work is both deeply experimental and reasonably popular,” and he strategically layers the kinds of references one might expect to find quoted in avant-grade high-modernist works with those one might expect to find quoted on Instagram or Twitter (Letzler, “Familiar, Vaguely Familiar,” 8). If one function of literature is to mythologize the present, mythic themes need not confine themselves to only a single cultural register.

³⁶ Thomas, “Trickster Authors and Tricky Readers,” 91.

time of this writing, the sub-forum for *The Familiar* has over 2,800 posts. While dwarfed by the number of posts in the *House of Leaves* sub-forum (over 56,000), this is still an unusually high level of reader engagement.³⁷ While the MZD Forums are the most established space for the collective discussion of Danielewski's work, Danielewski has also set up discussion groups on Facebook. In July of 2017, he launched The Familiar Book Club there. The group made its way through the first four volumes of *The Familiar*, reading one per month in anticipation of volume five's release on Halloween of that year. Other public discussions of Danielewski's work take place in fan-created venues, such as a dedicated Wiki site (https://the-familiar.fandom.com/wiki/The_Familiar) and a subreddit (r/TheFamiliar).

The launch of *TFv1* also precipitated a public-facing, invitation-only discussion. Danielewski invited faculty (including myself) at a handful of universities to share advance copies of *One Rainy Day in May* with their students and to have their classes participate in a collaborative blog. My students at Weber State University, along with students taught by Rita Raley at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Amy J. Elias at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville; Alison Gibbons at De Montfort University; Kate Marshall at the University of Notre Dame; Treena Balds and Colin Milburn at the University of California, Davis; and Lindsay Thomas at Clemson University, exchanged ideas and questions about the text through a dedicated WordPress site (<https://thefamiliar.wordpress.com/>). The students blogged between January and April of 2015, generating more than 200 posts and nearly 300 comments, covering topics from typography to genre fiction to posthumanism. WordPress has recorded more than 20,000 visitors to the site.

Mantzaris and Marazi argue that “[a]pproaching *The Familiar* as a social or collective experience leads us to reconsider conventions of literary production and reading practices as well as inviting us to explore the nature and operations of these newly formed ‘imagined’ communities.”³⁸ Danielewski's reading communities both conform to and challenge existing theorizations of twenty-first-century reading culture. Reading communities have a long history, from book-of-the-month clubs to Oprah Winfrey's hugely successfully television book club. This history usefully unsettles what Elizabeth Long identifies as “the ideology of the solitary reader”: although solitary readers have often been romanticized, from medieval Christian art representing contemplative male scholars to nineteenth-century paintings of women “narcissistically absorbed” in novels, focusing on such images “suppresses recognition

³⁷ For instance, the forums for Steven Hall's best-selling novel *The Raw Shark Texts* (rawsharkttexts.com), which also trades in puzzles and cryptic allusions, currently have around nine hundred posts discussing that novel.

³⁸ Mantzaris and Marazi, “Seasoning the Novel,” 314.

of the infrastructure of literacy and the social or institutional determinants of what is available to read, what is ‘worth reading,’ and how to read it.”³⁹ For contemporary groups like Oprah’s Book Club, “reading is a *social* act in which talking about a book together is one of the preconditions for pleasurable reading.”⁴⁰

Socially networked reading—that is, collective or collaborative literary interpretation and book-related conversation that takes place across social media—productively disrupts the overvaluation of solitary reading. David Dowling argues that “Internet culture has spawned ... [a] new form of immersive radial reading as witnessed in the heterogeneity of readership on such platforms as BookTalk.org, LitLovers: A Well-Read Online Community, and onlinebookclub.org.”⁴¹ The social cataloguing website Goodreads, for instance, which “hosts over twenty thousand book clubs,” bears the slogan “reading is more fun when shared”—a slogan, Lisa Nakamura notes, that “emphasizes ... [the] pleasures of readerly sociality.”⁴² Communities centered on individual authors are a rarer but steady feature of online reading culture since the 1990s. Such communities include fandoms and groups whose emphasis is primarily analytical. For an example of the former, the Ladies of Lallybroch group devoted to Diana Gabaldon’s time-travel romance *Outlander* series leans less towards explicating the *Outlander* books than towards posts about Scottish culture, news articles about Gabaldon, and other content of interest to the fandom. An example of the latter is the group Infinite Summer, which formed in the wake of David Foster Wallace’s death to read *Infinite Jest* in the Summer of 2009. Infinite Summer included guides to shepherd the forum conversation and commentary by academics and journalists. All of these examples demonstrate the ways that “[r]eading, often seen as a private act, has become inflected by the Social Web.”⁴³

Danielewski’s socially networked reading communities are an important element of his literary entrepreneurship. Broadly speaking, such communities may help to generate and sustain interest in a writer’s work: online platforms may leverage “community feeling” as a marketing strategy, drawing together “people ... [who] perceive themselves as belonging to a community of readers and writers” in order

³⁹ Long, *Book Clubs*, 11, 6.

⁴⁰ Collins, *Bring on the Books*, 108.

⁴¹ Dowling, “Escaping the Shallows,” para. 21.

⁴² Murray, *Digital Literary Sphere*, 155. Nakamura, “Words with Friends,” 240. The readerly exchange and enthusiasm generated by such platforms is also commodified in digital literary culture. Goodreads is not only a forum for avid readers of literature: it is an asset owned by Amazon. As Nakamura writes, the “tight integration of readerly community with commerce is an absolute given, an indispensable feature of reading in the digital age” (*Ibid.*, 241).

⁴³ Barnett, “Platforms for Social Reading,” 2.

to target them as consumers.⁴⁴ Active engagement of a reading audience is crucial for serialized fiction like *The Familiar*. Although one publishing study recommended “that publishers should conceptualize their books like successful TV shows, to create book series and to further binge-reading,” Danielewski ultimately had to suspend *The Familiar* due to insufficient sales.⁴⁵ He announced (on social media) that the project was paused indefinitely: “[u]nfortunately, I must agree with Pantheon that for now the number of readers is not sufficient to justify the cost of continuing.”⁴⁶

Danielewski’s cultivation of socially networked reading communities cannot be reduced to an economic framework, however. Nor can it be fully explained as authorial interest in connecting with devoted readers. To understand Danielewski’s reading communities only as marketing gimmicks or reader outreach is to overlook both *The Familiar*’s deep thematic investments in networked sociality and the ways that his work has mobilized an unusually dedicated and analytically oriented readership. The guiding assumption, stated repeatedly by his readers, is that Danielewski’s works are sufficiently difficult and complex as to require collective reading. *The Familiar* is the apotheosis of this perception: Barnes and Noble publicized the novel’s launch with an article titled “How to Prepare for Mark Z. Danielewski’s *The Familiar* Vol. 1,” and the university WordPress reading group featured a post called “How to Read This Book.”⁴⁷

The perceived difficulty of Danielewski’s works stems from their scale and density: Danielewski’s novels, “with their dizzying and highly eclectic range of references and complex narrative structures, seem to necessitate endless rereading, and lend themselves to the kind of collective activity and ongoing unravelling that discussion forums facilitate.”⁴⁸ Danielewski’s own metafictional explication of some of his works’ details is testament to this necessity. In *House of Leaves*, Johnny Truant meets the band Liberty Bell, who hand him a copy of *House of Leaves* and explain to Johnny (and the reader) about the novel’s secret codes. Johnny reflects that “it takes some pretty impressive back-on-page-117 close reading to catch” the acrostic code “AWOMANWHO WILL LOVE MY IRONIES,” a significant phrase seeded into the middle of a paragraph on that page.⁴⁹ A few things are noteworthy here: the novel’s assertion that its mysteries will not be revealed to those who approach it casually; Danielewski’s assumption that even attentive readers will benefit from his pointing out the more stealthily hidden

⁴⁴ Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, 74.

⁴⁵ Lanzendörfer and Norrick-Rühl, “Introduction,” 6–7.

⁴⁶ Danielewski, “It is with a Heavy Heart,” n.p.

⁴⁷ Somers, “How to Prepare”; Raley, “How to Read This Book.”

⁴⁸ Thomas, “Trickster Authors and Tricky Readers,” 89.

⁴⁹ Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 514.

codes; and the scene's modeling of collaborative reading as well as close reading. The members of Liberty Bell "had spent many hours with complete strangers shooting the shit" about the manuscript, a group effort that anticipates the novel's real-life socially networked reading.⁵⁰

The Familiar's scale increases the need for collaborative reading because it makes the task of interpreting the novel more daunting. "Even though this novel is so large," wrote a student on the WordPress discussion board, "I don't think it would be crazy to focus in on every word Danielewski has written. His work is clearly meant to be analyzed with extreme detail."⁵¹ In an essay reflecting on the blogging experience, one of my students similarly wrote that she turned to WordPress whenever she "felt Danielewski's text was too big of a puzzle to handle" on her own: "As a reader, I don't have the energy necessary to go out and google all of the hidden 'Easter eggs' ... if I want to make it through the dense narrative without giving up and skipping ahead."⁵² *The Familiar's* serialization further increases this sense of scale. Lindsay Thomas characterizes *TFv1* as "a lot to take in": "the extravagance of it all comes not only from the novel's elaborately nested structure and its excessive literariness but also from the proclamation that this volume is *just the beginning*."⁵³ "*The Familiar* is precisely so demanding because of its reliance on long-term character arcs," which can be hard to keep track of across the multiple volumes.⁵⁴

Another obstacle is the proliferation of languages. As well as having to adjust to each character's typographical idiolect (Astair's parentheses, Shnorhk's staggered columns, etc.), readers encounter text in Arabic, Spanish, Turkish, Mandarin, Russian, other languages, and computer code. In some cases, one can turn to Google Translate or a dictionary. In a post on WordPress, Rita Raley responded to expressions of student frustration with the reminder that "[i]f the source of frustration is the polyphonic, multilingual aspects of the novel, then the primary strategy should be dictionary work" and that "[t]here is no way around it: for jingjing's chapters, most readers will have to sit with a dictionary (or two) of Singlish."⁵⁵ This approach is modeled diegetically: when Xanther asks Anwar's colleague Talbot about the etymology of the word *paradise*, he replies, "I bet Mr. Google knows" (*TFv1* 379). But how is a reader to Google text printed in an alphabet she cannot read? The Narcons would be an obvious source of

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Tilbene, "A Familiar Energy?," n.p.

⁵² Shared anonymously, and with permission. I am grateful to my former students for their willingness to allow me to share their insights.

⁵³ Thomas, "Why We Read Novels," 387.

⁵⁴ van De Ven, *Big Books*, 146.

⁵⁵ Raley, "How to Read This Book," n.p.

help, and they do sometimes provide these glosses. Operating in a register between scholarly annotation and reader's guide, the Narcons give background information and highlight significant details. Yet many phrases go untranslated. In response to Tian Li's speech, which is written in Chinese characters, a Narcon flippantly interjects, "Really? Not your Google bitch" (TFv1 104). Even if a reader wanted to ask "Mr. Google," she might find herself unsure how to enter the non-Roman characters into the search field.

Readers seeking a complete explication must turn to speakers of the languages that they do not speak. Such collaborative reading mirrors Danielewski's process in creating the novel. In addition to working with his creative team Atelier Z, soliciting cat photographs from readers, and incorporating images posted to Flickr, Danielewski consulted with a number of people on translations and other matters. The fact of this collaboration is not itself remarkable: novels are rarely produced in a vacuum, despite what some more author-centric models of publishing may purport. Rather, what is noteworthy in the case of *The Familiar* is the extent of Danielewski's collaboration, the ways *The Familiar* makes this collaboration explicit, and the ways this authorial collaboration anticipates collaboration among the novel's readers. As van de Ven writes, "*The Familiar* necessitates a collective intelligence[,] ... call[ing] for analyses from many different angles and areas of expertise."⁵⁶

Between Professional and Popular Reading: *The Familiar* on WordPress and Facebook

Danielewski's socially networked reading communities occupy a middle space between the popular reading of book clubs and the so-called professional reading of academic criticism. Jim Collins's influential scholarship on popular reading charts a shift beginning in the 1990s towards an "extensive redefinition of what constitutes a quality reading experience."⁵⁷ He contends that reading tastes came to be shaped by corporations like Amazon and public figures like Oprah Winfrey rather than by the academy. With the rejection of academia came a privileging of the individual reader, valuing self-actualization through reading over literary analysis. In Collins's diagnosis, the consequence is that popular reading largely moved away from middlebrow fiction towards "the literary novel" and "the appreciation of top-shelf fiction," but this reading emphasizes how one's engagement with literature may result in self-help, self-betterment, self-knowledge, and self-expression.⁵⁸ Thus for Collins, Oprah's Book Club (the most famous example of popular literary culture in the last half-

⁵⁶ van de Ven, *Big Books*, 158.

⁵⁷ Collins, *Bring on the Books*, 18.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

century) combines the techniques of “reading for bibliotherapeutic reasons and reading for a class.”⁵⁹ This ethos is not limited to the American context. In a study of British reading groups, Jenny Hartley describes the Radio 4 Bookclub as “[t]he UK’s answer to Oprah” and quotes host Jim Naughtie’s statement that the club facilitates “a readers’ conversation, not a critics’ conversation.”⁶⁰ The guide posted on its website features discussion questions largely based in readers’ subjective impressions (“[D]id you love it, loathe it, or remain indifferent?” “Do you want to read more by the same author?” etc.), with comparatively little attention to textual interpretation.⁶¹ The end-goal is friendly conversation and self-cultivation through the consumption of quality literature, in terms explicitly posed against those of academic criticism.

Across Danielewski’s social networks of readers, however, textual analysis remains the primary emphasis. This is most obviously evident in the cross-university WordPress discussion. One of the rationales for this project was for “students ... to help shape the critical reception” of *The Familiar*, “complicating the distinctions between ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ readers.”⁶² Students were encouraged to regard their contributions as resources for future readers. Following an assignment prompt created by Lindsay Thomas for her Clemson class and also used in my course, student blog posts were graded on criteria such as analytical insight, clarity, and the interpretation of concrete examples. Distinctions between professional and amateur readers were further complicated by the fact that faculty had no privileged access to the text. While some participating faculty may have quickly read through their advance copies prior to teaching it, others (myself included) chose to work through *TFv1* simultaneously with our students. We shaped and reshaped our pedagogical agenda as we progressed through the text, relying neither on foreknowledge of the novel’s narrative arcs nor on the kinds of extant criticism on a given work that we might usually consult in the process of lesson planning.

After the experiment, students wrote essays reflecting on the experience, including discussing the WordPress platform, the experience of reading collaboratively, and what the students learned that they would have missed had they read the novel on their own.⁶³ In these reflection essays, my students were conscious of having to negotiate between the norms of social media and those of the university. While all of my students approached their blog posts with thoughtfulness and rigor, some expressed pleasure at what they

⁵⁹ Ibid., 100.

⁶⁰ Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, 5.

⁶¹ Flynn and Guttridge, “Running a Club,” n.p.

⁶² “About,” n.p.

⁶³ My thanks to Lindsay Thomas for her permission to share details from these assignment descriptions.

considered to be the more conversational nature of blogging, while others felt pressure to anticipate the public reception of their writing. One student, for instance, reflected that because “a blog is typically written in an informal, conversational way,” this more casual mode of discourse “inspired [her] to ask many questions” and better “explore parts of the novel [she] was confused about.”⁶⁴ Another felt compelled to formulate his posts more carefully than he would have for a standard class assignment: he “felt [he] was representing [his] university” and “was part of something larger than [his] letter grade.”⁶⁵ The boundaries between classroom and social media were porous. Students were free (and encouraged) to post about *TFv1* on their own personal social media; at the same time, WordPress posts habitually referenced discussions the students had in their classes. A few of my students attempted to remediate the conversational flow of a face-to-face class via a podcast for one of their contributions. As these examples demonstrate, even when a social networking site like a WordPress blog is employed for the direct purpose of academic literary analysis, the resultant community formation, discourse, and interpretations are not of a monolithic character. Professional reader/amateur reader is the dichotomy that often crops up in critical work on reading culture, but this socially networked reading demonstrates how the kinds of critical analysis associated with literary criticism may be channeled by so-called amateur readers, meshing the analytical goals of academic interpretation with the discursive norms and social habits of non-academic social media use.

I am reminded of the questions Hungerford poses in her introduction to *Making Literature Now*: “What if literary culture is thriving but is simply not shared, or shared only within tiny social networks, or shared between so few people spread so far apart socially or geographically that its tangible presence as a shared culture is impossible to sense? What if such reading is, first and last, a private act—untraceable, undocumented, and unspoken—and not the foundation of a public culture at whatever scale?”⁶⁶ Sites like the MZD Forums and the WordPress blog make some of these networks and acts of reading visible. They demonstrate how private moments of reading may enter into a shared space of collaborative interpretation. As one of my students put it: “The globalization of the discussion allowed for vast differences in understanding of the text. I am not the type of reader that believes that there is one *true* interpretation of the text, or even that the author is the ultimate authority on the meaning of the text, so the different ideas presented on the discussion board were fascinating to me.... The

⁶⁴ Shared anonymously, with permission.

⁶⁵ Shared anonymously, with permission.

⁶⁶ Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, 9.

well-evidenced arguments certainly impacted the way I understood [TFv1].”⁶⁷ Thus, as Murray writes, “online readerly interpretation is not formed in relative isolation and then communicated, but is itself formed dialogically.”⁶⁸

One might expect Danielewski’s Facebook reading groups to conform more closely to the norms described by Collins. The Facebook groups for *House of Leaves* and *The Familiar* do contain more casual and personal content than is the case with the WordPress blog and the MZD Forums, where “users behave rather like literary critics, favouring close reading and engaging in interpretative work.”⁶⁹ Posts to the Facebook group for *The Familiar* show a wider range of variation, alternating among interpreting the novel, sharing photos and related memes, and posting events and articles featuring Danielewski. To drill down into this content, in April of 2021, I surveyed the posts added to the group over the previous year.⁷⁰ Out of 106 total posts, the largest category (with over thirty posts) related to analysis of the novel (explicating allusions, discussing themes, asking for help with details, sharing resources, etc.). With twenty-four posts, the second largest category was personal content, as users shared “shelfies” (i.e., photographs of their bookshelves), pictures of their cats, tattoos and artwork inspired by *The Familiar*, and photographs of themselves wearing items from Danielewski’s shop. Sixteen concerned administrative or logistical issues, such as posts advertising group events, and fifteen featured cat memes or other *The Familiar*-adjacent humor (such as a comic about typography). Danielewski’s account posted four times during this period, including a Valentine’s day quote about love from Anwar, and, in what becomes a rather lovely meta-moment as I type this, a link to the CFP for this special issue.⁷¹

Despite this range of content, posts made to the Facebook group are far more likely to be analytical than bibliotherapeutic. The group for *The Familiar* participates in what Dowling calls “the latest wave of online reading communities [that] has harnessed hypersocial participatory Internet culture for sustained focus on long immersive

⁶⁷ James Prince, shared with permission.

⁶⁸ Murray, *Digital Literary Sphere*, 154.

⁶⁹ Thomas, “Trickster Authors and Tricky Readers,” 99.

⁷⁰ My counts in this paragraph refer to new posts rather than to comments made on those posts. While this period includes the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore may not be wholly representative, there was consistency across content categories. This period also marked five years since *TFv1* was published, so it may be more indicative of future directions the group will take than would the posts contributed in the years when new volumes were still being published.

⁷¹ The remaining posts featured content related to Danielewski (such as interviews), as well as miscellaneous content such as off-topic recommendations and posts expressing the hope that the series will continue.

works.”⁷² This is goal-oriented reading. Danielewski’s readers share their thoughts on the text for many reasons, but chief among them is the desire to more fully unpack the novel’s complexities. The Facebook group has even adopted standardized tags on posts (e.g., “TFcharacterJJv1 p. 100” for a post about the epigraph for Jingjing’s narrative on page 100 of *TFv1*), metadata that allows for easier reference. While frequently conducting literary analysis, the Facebook group does not simply replicate the professional reading of academia. The posts are generally not academic in tone: allusions are unpacked and narrative arcs theorized with exclamation marks and wow emojis. In this way, the Facebook group stakes out a middle space for literary interpretation, rhetorically couched in non-academic registers but involved in similar interpretive work.

When Danielewski announced that *The Familiar* was on indefinite hiatus, he praised the “intense readership” his novel had generated.⁷³ His characterization of these readers as “bright, ambitious, inspiring, inquisitive, rare, energetic, involved, [and] brave” usefully complicates the popular reading/academic reading dichotomy.⁷⁴ In Danielewski’s socially networked reading communities, engaged readers complement the analysis published by academics in traditional outlets of literary criticism. Indeed, these spheres overlap: academics both lurk in and contribute to online reading groups from the MZD Forums to Facebook, and many have written about the online reception of Danielewski’s writing, at least in passing, in their published work. Readers who hail from outside of academia employ the techniques of literary interpretation in their posts, too. The line between “professionals” and “amateurs” is further destabilized by the fact that the reading guides accompanying each volume of *The Familiar* were drafted in part using questions contributed by literature professors. They prompt readers to consider issues including seriality, symbols, the relationship between *The Familiar* and *House of Leaves*, archaeological history, the concept of entanglement, and the drawing together of narrative arcs.⁷⁵ For comparison, when Oprah Winfrey published a section in *O Magazine* titled “How to Read a Hard Book” for her Book Club, the advice offered by the contributing professors was largely *not* to do with pushing into the novels’ depths or grappling with their textual nuances. Instead, these professional readers suggest, one can just “[g]o with it” while reading *Moby-Dick*, “[r]ead fast” in order to make it through Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*,” and “stop thinking and let yourself feel” in order to read Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*.⁷⁶

⁷² Dowling, “Escaping the Shadows,” para. 3.

⁷³ Danielewski, “It is With a Heavy Heart,” n.p.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Danielewski, “The Familiar, Volume 5 Reader’s Guide,” n.p.

⁷⁶ Sanburn, “Moby Dick,” n.p.; Clements, “In Search,” n.p.; Pike, “The Man Without,” n.p.

Danielewski has said that readers “need a lot of skill” to approach his work and that he creates demanding literature aimed at “people who are good readers, who spend a great deal of time reading difficult books and can make their way through hard texts.”⁷⁷ I do not take this to be an elitist denigration of casual reading in the vein of Jonathan Franzen’s famous rejection of Oprah’s Book Club (in which he positioned himself as belonging to a besieged, difficult, “high-art literary tradition”) but rather an attempt to make space in the digital literary sphere for readers who want to pursue the immersive pleasure that may accompany deep, sustained literary analysis.⁷⁸ After all, the Facebook groups are also fan communities. Readers’ relationships with these novels do matter, but, instead of using a novel as a jumping-off-point for solipsistic self-actualization, individuality is cultivated through an engagement with the worlds of Danielewski’s fiction. Facebook group members proudly post tattoos with quotes from *House of Leaves* and share photographs of their cats (often perched next to a pile of Danielewski’s books). This sharing is an expression of individuality—look at *my* cat, *my* shelf, *my* tattoo—channeled through the language and motifs of Danielewski’s novels.⁷⁹ These readers use Danielewski’s work as an opportunity to find meaning in their own lives, but they do so in ways informed by, and expressed through, their understanding of his text.

In this sense, the Facebook reading groups function like the Xanther cosplayers. Each cat photograph shared is a repetition and amplification of *The Familiar*’s feline motif. As *The Familiar* riffs on the centrality of cats to Internet meme culture, online readers forge an identification with the novel by aligning their own cats with this fictional universe where any cat might be an avatar of Redwood. Reciprocally, the fact that Danielewski reached out to readers on social media to solicit photographs of their cats, which were then incorporated into the printed book, demonstrates the complex interconnections between this novel and its online reading communities. In *The Familiar*’s narratives, its socially networked reading, and even its material existence as a print artifact, meaningful networks emerge as disparate nodes and weak ties are linked.

* * * * *

⁷⁷ Danielewski, “Book Presence,” 149.

⁷⁸ Jonathan Franzen, quoted in Collins, *Bring on the Books*, 105. For a thorough discussion of the Franzen versus Winfrey conflict, see Collins, *Bring on the Books*, 104–114.

⁷⁹ One might trace the history of such self-fashioning-via-literary-photography at least as far back as 1856, when a young woman posed for a daguerreotype portrait with her copy of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. See Ed Folsom, “The Sesquicentennial.”

Danielewski has stated that “the reader [of *The Familiar*] is very much like Xanther” in that, “[l]ike Xanther has this cat in her hands at the end of the book, the book is like the cat in people’s hands.”⁸⁰ This connection is effected by *The Familiar*’s typography, which positions the reader within Xanther’s mental state: when Xanther struggles to process the scale of raindrops and the resulting questions they raise for her, the field of the page similarly becomes a visual cacophony. The reader must navigate and make sense of this signiconic downpour (which recalls Guillaume Apollinaire’s famous “Il Pleut” calligramme), as if experiencing Xanther’s overwhelm. Taking Xanther’s story as an allegory for reading *The Familiar* reinforces the necessity of collaboration that I have argued is an essential facet of the novel’s narrative argument and its online reception alike. Devastatingly, Xanther worries that she is culpable for her own seizures, which she views as a failure of managing “an overwhelming amount of information in the brain” (TFv1 350). Seizure-inducing levels of information are directly linked to reading through the specter of “Bookstore Girl,” who had a fatal seizure in a bookstore. Xanther obsessively tries to determine which book triggered Bookstore Girl’s seizure, so as to avoid it “at all costs” (TFv1 256). Xanther is a self-described “pretty crappy reader”; and she adds—looking at a collection of bumper stickers, in a moment that feels like metafictional commentary on the difficulty of *The Familiar*—“and that’s for normal stuff. Nothing like this crazy mess” (TFv1 53).

Xanther may consider herself a “crappy reader,” but her salvation may lie in the fact that she is not a solitary reader. Hartley argues that “literature has some dire warnings” for the latter: “Frankenstein reads on his own late into the night for years on end; the result is a monster, who in his turn finds education, consolation, and enlightenment by being part of a reading circle at one remove. He listens from the cottage outhouse to the books which the exiled Felix and his family read aloud.”⁸¹ We might add Johnny Truant and Zamapanò to Hartley’s list of cautionary tales—but not Xanther. Anwar reads aloud to her, and they seek information together, reading online resources: “she and Anwar Wiki a lot, ... going ‘deep’ or ‘thick’ on something, anything, trying to answer as many questions as possible” (TFv1 57). Xanther also collaborates with her friends, over Parcel Thoughts and in person. When they weigh in on what Xanther should do about Bookstore Girl, one suggestion is *more* reading: finding “another book [that] might cure her” (TFv1 257). Unlike Bookstore Girl, she will not be alone.

When it comes to novelistic difficulty and scale, then, it is not only that one best approaches fiction like *The Familiar* by multiplying the efforts of skillful individual

⁸⁰ Danielewski, “Rewriting the Novel,” n.p.; Danielewski, “The Rumpus Interview,” n.p.

⁸¹ Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, 152.

readers by the scale of social media—although I think this is also true—but that *The Familiar* becomes a project about the planetary and the networked by becoming a focal point around which readers congregate online, and by bringing representations of those real-world social networks into its pages. Like Cas’s orb or Redwood’s cry, *The Familiar* is a catalyst that unites people across the world to work towards shared aims. The existence of parallels between communities *within* the novel and online interpretive communities centered *around* the novel is less a satisfying coincidence than a consequence of how Danielewski has mobilized this project to think through the ways that communities form in the age of social media. As a student wrote in his blogging reflection: “[m]y own generation is so used to the concept of the internet that we sometimes overlook the fact that it is truly a globally public plane.... The [WordPress] discussion ... demonstrated how far these concepts can reach and the different realities of the text based on the views of each person.”⁸² Departing from the traditional book group, where “the group itself is a micro-neighborhood” based in “direct contact” and “face-to-face communication,” Danielewski’s readers meet online, as they have done since the twenty-first century began.⁸³ The global scope of this readership is another manifestation of networked planetarity. Novels have always charted the networks of the social. *The Familiar* demonstrates that is no less the case, and no less vital, in the age of social media.

⁸² James Prince, shared with permission.

⁸³ Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, 14.

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