

Narrated Counter-Narratives and Assumed Grand Narratives about Contemporary Work: Halle Butler's *The New Me*

Virginia Pignagnoli

Volume 13, Number 1, 2024

Special Issue: Considering Political Counter-Narratives

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115723ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115723ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Centre for Digital Scholarship, University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1925-0622 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Pignagnoli, V. (2024). Narrated Counter-Narratives and Assumed Grand Narratives about Contemporary Work: Halle Butler's *The New Me*. *Narrative Works*, 13(1), 52–66. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115723ar>

Article abstract

This essay provides an analysis of a post-postmodernist novel, Halle Butler's *The New Me* (2019), whose political message is conveyed by the audience's reconstruction of an authoritative, grand narrative about work as a source of personal fulfilment, which intersects with the main storyline. This authoritative, grand narrative not only informs the narrative communication but also provides the necessary cultural background for Butler's novel to express its political message—that is, the countering of a normative view about work dynamics in today's precarious landscape. The audience's recognition of the interplay of the fictional narrative with a larger one in the background allows the narrative communication to realize its act of "countering." This essay thus builds on the theory of co-construction (Effron et al., 2019) and counter-narrative approaches (cf. Hyvärinen, 2021; Lueg et al., 2021) to argue that Butler's novel creates an interplay between the grand narratives about work now—including the "treatment of labour as a calling" and the myth of meritocracy permeating post-recession U.S. society—and the counter-telling and resisting actions the characters in this narrative do to attend to political change.

This article is free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings © Virginia Pignagnoli, 2024

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>



SPECIAL ISSUE:
CONSIDERING POLITICAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES

**Narrated Counter-Narratives and Assumed Grand
Narratives about Contemporary Work: Halle
Butler's *The New Me***

Virginia Pignagnoli
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
virginia.pignagnoli@uab.cat

This essay provides an analysis of a post-postmodernist novel, Halle Butler's *The New Me* (2019), whose political message is conveyed by the audience's reconstruction of an authoritative, grand narrative about work as a source of personal fulfilment, which intersects with the main storyline. This authoritative, grand narrative not only informs the narrative communication but also provides the necessary cultural background for Butler's novel to express its political message—that is, the countering of a normative view about work dynamics in today's precarious landscape. The audience's recognition of the interplay of the fictional narrative with a larger one in the background allows the narrative communication to realize its act of "countering." This essay thus builds on the theory of co-construction (Effron et al., 2019) and counter-narrative approaches (cf. Hyvärinen, 2021, Lueg et al., 2021) to argue that Butler's novel creates an interplay between the grand narratives about work now—including the "treatment of labour as a calling" and the myth of meritocracy permeating post-recession U.S. society—, and the counter-telling and resisting actions the characters in this narrative do to attend to political change.

Keywords:

co-construction, post-postmodernist fiction, counter-narratives, assumptions, work

INTRODUCTION

As Roland Barthes famously put it, “the narratives of the world are numberless” (1966). Yet, some “narratives” in the public sphere become “kind of cultural script[s] that emplot and frame unfolding events, stand[ing] in for the *authoritative* source of knowledge” (Dawson, 2022, p. 72; emphasis added). Indeed, some stories a culture tells to make sense of the world and itself (cf. Hayles, 1995, p. 113) become grand narratives (or scripts), sedimenting and functioning as “cultural background” (cf. Bamberg and Wipff, 2021) for the numberless narratives of the world. Novels, for example, may engage with these grand narratives, but not necessarily in an explicit way: grand narratives are often assumed (cf. also Hyvärinen, 2021) and later reconstructed through narrated and unnarrated moments thanks to which these underlying scripts emerge. This essay provides an analysis of a post-postmodernist novel, Halle Butler’s *The New Me* (2019), whose political message emerges through the narrative co-construction thanks to the audience’s reconstruction of an authoritative, grand narrative about work as a source of personal fulfilment emerging and intersecting with the main storyline.¹ This authoritative, grand narrative not only informs the narrative communication, but provides the necessary cultural background for Butler’s novel to convey its political message, that is, the countering of a normative view about work dynamics in today’s precarious landscape.

The audience’s recognition of the interplay of the fictional narrative with a larger one in the background allows the narrative communication to realize its act of “countering.” This essay thus builds on the theory of co-construction (Effron et al., 2019) to investigate how audiences reconstruct from the author’s blueprints not just a storyworld that expresses a certain critique emerging through narrative progression—and, in particular, the thematic component (cf. Phelan 2017)—, but a narrative strand that constitutes the contextual narrative the novel aims at countering. The blueprints of this contextual storyline emerge together with the main narration. Yet, for the countering act to be successfully communicated, the audience needs to assume the existence of the contextual narrative and to engage in co-constructing it alongside the main narrative co-construction. Because “the process of co-building a particular narrative storyworld (re)constructs authors’ and audiences’ ideas of reality, so the actual world is constructed along *with* the

¹ Post-postmodernist fiction describes the poetics that, since September 11, 2001, is succeeding postmodernism, and it is characterized by the foregrounding of a sincere, rather than ironic, mode, an interest in intersubjectivity, relationality, and the political (cf. McHale 2015; Kelly 2016; Konstantinou 2017; Pignagnoli 2023b).

storyworld(s)” (Effron, et al., 2019, p. 335; original emphasis), acts of counter-narration result especially effective to attend to political change.

The act of counter-narration is a way to resist “‘master-narratives’ or dominant discourses” (Hyvärinen, 2021, p. 27). Moreover, as Antoinette Fage-Butler remarks (2021, p. 87), counter-narratives can be political when reflecting “the concerns of the non-mainstream, the under-represented, the subaltern (Milner & Howard, 2013; Simmons & Goldberg, 2011), performing the important function of validating an alternative “counter-reality” (Delgado, 1995, p. 64). As I will show, Butler’s novel creates an interplay between the “master-narratives” about work now—including the “treatment of labour as a calling” and the myth of meritocracy permeating post-recession U.S. society—, and the counter-telling and resisting actions the characters in this narrative do. Thus, on the one hand, *The New Me* can be inscribed in the strand of new political novels of the twenty-first century interested in addressing urgent, political matters (cf. Alber & Bell, 2019; Irr, 2013;). On the other hand, the political message is realized in the act of countering the received cultural views on current work issues (e.g., see Weeks, 2011) hinted at in the narrative. Storyworld’s blueprints (cf. Herman, 2009)² are functional to the act of narrative co-construction—which is defined as the collaborative processes of imagining or building both storyworlds and the actual world (Effron, et al., 2019, p. 333). Yet, not all these blueprints are necessarily narrated, and some can be evoked, assumed, or inferred.

THE NEW ME AND THE BLUEPRINTS FOR COUNTERING DOMINANT VIEWS OF WORK NOW

Partly an office novel, partly an exploration of ennui, partly an anti-work novel, *The New Me* employs multifocality to highlight the futility of the characters’ actions within a system that values work at the expense of their individuality. Indeed, the main storyline tells of Mildred (Millie), a thirty-years-old woman who struggles with one temporary job after another, unable to find purpose in what she does, until she is fired, and her depression aggravates. Thus, although published before the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent, related phenomenon called the “Great Resignation” (Jorgenson & Klotz, 2021), the narrative certainly resonates with the questions raised by the trend of people who recently decided to *quietly quit* their jobs (cf. Constantz, 2022; Newport, 2022). As Michael Cholbi points out,

² As David Herman’s puts it, “storyworlds can be defined as the worlds evoked by narrative; reciprocally, narratives can be defined as the blueprints for a specific mode of world creation” (p. 105–6).

“much of the skepticism surrounding the value of work is not skepticism about the value of work per se but skepticism about the value of work in present day social conditions or skepticism about the veneration of work found in the ‘Protestant work ethic’ (Weber, 1904–05) or in work-centered societies” (2022, n.p.). And *The New Me* expresses this scepticism by creating a storyworld intoxicated by work, i.e., a narrative in which work is both “unreal”—right at the beginning, the character narrator Millie describes a scene in which her co-worker is explaining something from her “real, nonwork life” (2019, p. 1)—and too real, as the protagonist struggles to fit her scepticism into her daily life.

While the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Better Life Index lists “Work-life Balance” among the “essential topic in the areas of material living conditions and quality of life” (n.p.), what this novel thematically critiques is the lack of balance between the “amount of time a person spends at work,” and the “amount and quality of leisure time” (OECD, n.p.), so much so that a conflict at work could affect, like in the following quote, the “entire narrative” of someone’s life:

John had spent the day at work and was having some minor conflict with a coworker, which was transforming into a drama that shaped not only his days but *the entire narrative of his life*. This coworker was lazy and was making John look bad, or that’s how he felt, and he was unsure of whether he should confront the coworker or learn to manage his expectations. John went to bed thinking about this conflict, and there were five minutes every morning where he did not think about the conflict, but then it sprang again to his mind, defining his day (Butler, 2019, p. 149; emphasis added).

John’s work life absorbs his personal life, preoccupying him well beyond his work hours. As this example shows, the novel’s critique of the difficulties concerning the separation of work and leisure time in contemporary U.S. society is based on the assumption that such separation exists; or should exist. In other words, Butler’s narrative becomes an act of countering the pre-existing, cultural script according to which contemporary work in the U.S. allows such separation in a successful manner.

This critique is never addressed directly but emerges throughout the narrative progression (cf. Phelan, 2017) through blueprints of evoked, assumed, and inferable actual-world, normalized narratives. For example, the initial

situation sees some women, “in the windowless back offices of a designer furniture showroom,” standing:

in a circle, stuffed into ill-fitting black jeans, grey jeans, olive jeans, the ass cloth sagging one inch, two, below where the cheeks meet. They don’t notice this on themselves, but they notice it on each other. They wear cheap suede ankle boots and incomprehensible furry vests that flap against them as they talk, pushing their voices out an octave too high, lotioned, soft, gummy hands gesturing wildly. One of them wears a topknot, another checks her pedometer (Butler, 2019, p. 1).

Through Millie, the main homodiegetic narrator and focalizer, audiences co-construct a realistic storyworld, with characters ordinarily interacting with each other in the break room of a showroom office in Chicago. Millie’s narration in this excerpt assumes audience members will be able to accept that situation as an extremely common one: a “cliché” (Butler, 2019, p. 2). This (projected) assumption is important to reconstruct the novel’s storyworld as similar to the actual world where *cliché* office scenes like this one are the norm. So, the assumption contained in the opening paragraph—that these kinds of co-worker dynamics in the office are so common that they have become cliché in the actual world—reveals an existing, normalized narrative about what is considered ordinary vis-à-vis current office dynamics.

Moreover, because Millie expresses disillusionment regarding her job, which consists of answering phones and assembling “packets of junk mail” (Butler, 2019, p. 9), audiences can reconstruct her character as countering the “normality” of assumed narratives about work now, like seeing one’s occupation or career as a source of fulfilment in someone’s life. On the one hand, Millie says she has agency concerning her work choices: she is “drawn to temp work for the slight atmospheric changes. The new offices and coworkers provide a nice illusion of variety” (Butler, 2019, p. 22). But immediately after she mentions how her temporary work agency is encouraging her about the possibility of a permanent position, something she both want and fear. While for Millie, “so far perm hasn’t come,” the stability she longs for is not trouble-free either. Indeed, she wonders how she “would have to behave, how many changes [she] would have to make, to tip [her]self over the edge into this *endless abyss of perm*” (Butler, 2019, p. 3; emphasis added). Her temp agent assumes Millie’s goal is to get a permanent contract, but Millie thinks about the possibility in terms of dread (an endless abyss). Again, the act of countering

emerges from the assumption that one's evolution in terms of job's aspiration is permanent employment, a received cultural norm that is projected thanks to the narrator's preoccupation over her future.

When the narrator is not Millie, it switches to extradiegetic and focalizes through different characters (as seen above with John), whose lives are similarly affected by work issues in various ways. For instance, there is Karen the receptionist who supervises Millie's work and decides to fire her under the impression this might eventually grant her a promotion, which she aspires to as a way to feel better about herself. Then, there's Sarah, Millie's friend, who envies her because her parents provide for her when she is in-between jobs, while she is stuck with a job that she hates but she cannot afford to leave; as she points out, "I'm exhausted when I get home, and I can't afford to leave this job right now. Not everyone can afford to just do that" (Butler, 2019, p. 60). Another switch that focalizes through Elodie emphasizes the pressure to perform and over-work:

All fucking week she'd been processing invoices and transferring data from the old system to Design Smart, watching tutorials online but fucking it up anyway. She'd told Holly it would take a few weeks, and Holly had given her that managerial look of disappointment, so she said she could have it done by next Wednesday. (Butler, 2019, p. 57)

Not to disappoint her supervisor, Elodie plans to finish her assignment in less time than what she would actually need, even if that means to give up to her free time or to affect her health.

In a further switch of focalization depicting a similar situation, stress prevents Jessica from enjoying her free time on the weekend: "Jessica repeated to herself that she didn't feel guilty for skipping out on her friends to stay home, get high, and eat with abandon. This was a conscious choice she was making, not some weird antisocial reaction to stress and pressure" (Butler, 2019, p. 58). As all these examples show, Butler amply employs multifocality to present a narrative in which the characters feel stuck doing meaningless actions, in their jobs, or as a consequence of their jobs. The events told are very ordinary—and repetitive. Audiences co-build Millie's storyworld through these narrated repetitions and the mimetic recognition of an uncertain and precarious adult life. It is not incidentally that Jia Tolentino calls Butler's a "work of millennial literature" and suggests Millie belongs to "a generation that has no expectation that a job will ever be secure" (2019, n.p.). In such a context, Millie experiences depression—"my reasons for

getting out of bed are absent,” she reports (Butler, 2019, p. 67)—blaming herself. But the presence of the many other characters sharing similar frustrations with their jobs and careers suggests readers to interpret Millie’s problems as systemic.

Metafictionally hinting at issues of tellability (what makes a story worth telling), Millie compares the uneventfulness of her days with the fact that in her favourite TV show, the characters “never watch TV, they never check their email without event, they always worry about something real, always have a problem that needs to be, and can be, solved” (Butler, 2019, p. 70). In *The New Me*, instead, the repetitive actions, the meaningless dialogues, and the frustration that the characters endure on a daily basis expressed through the multiplicity of voices and focalizations contribute to question those ideas of productivity and self-realization embedded in U.S. culture that, despite their supposed centrality in people’s life, are not easy to tell. Indeed, Liam Connell refers to the “difficulties of representing the idea of work in fiction,” because “the accurate depiction of workaday activities requires lengthy passages of undifferentiated prose” (2022, p. 212). Significantly, by employing the present tense when the narrator is Millie, the repetitive actions, the commuting, the answering of the phone with a standard line, the superficial conversations in the office, acquire unexpected urgency. But these difficulties are also traceable in the distinction Millie calls attention to between work and “real life” (see above), which might prompt some readers to ask, “What kind of life is it—if it’s neither real nor worth telling about?” By providing the space to ask such questions, Butler’s narrative becomes an act of countering the pre-existing cultural script that venerates work in contemporary U.S. society, regardless of personal contingencies.

Thus, Butler’s use of multifocality provides a sense of a counter-narrative that is widely shared among the various characters and, by including monotonous descriptions and uneventful accounts, she foregrounds the irony that something so central in people’s life—i.e., the time spent working or in work-related activities—is largely untellable.³ These activities for instance include job searching, something that Millie finds complicated because, she admits, “I look for something else I could do for work but feel unqualified for everything interesting and repulsed by everything else” (Butler, 2019, p. 174). Underlying Millie’s dissatisfaction in her effort to find a new occupation are echoes of celebrated American beliefs such as that “you can make it if you try,” which are here countered by the fact that Mille *is* trying, but she does not seem to make it. Indeed, because

³ As Georgakopoulou et al. remarks, “tellability should be viewed as covering which stories can be told, distributed and become available in specific cultural and communicative contexts” (2022, p. 149).

“over the last several decades, the idea that the money we make reflects the value of our social contribution has become deeply embedded,” as Michael J. Sandel points out, Millie feels “an appropriate amount of defeat” (Butler 2019, p. 139) when she’s eventually fired. As she remarks:

When I was a child, my mom used to tell me that life was like a game, and sometimes you had to do things you didn’t want to do in order to do the things that you did want to do. I always thought this was strange advice. I only ever had brief and fleeting ideas for things that I wanted to do, but mostly I felt *completely overwhelmed by possibilities*, and then just went down the list saying no, no, no, not that, not that, until I was playing this idiot’s game of racking up things I was doing that I didn’t want to do in service of some imaginary thing I might one day stumble upon” (Butler, 2019, p. 84; emphasis added).

The critique to motivational views associated with hard work to achieve a dream career is realized not just through the narrator’s explicit frustration towards these unattainable goals, but also thanks to how Millie’s narration evokes received narratives of social constructs such as the American Dream. As sociologist Anthony Giddens pointed out:

Work strongly conditions life chances, in Weber's sense, and life chances in turn is a concept which has to be understood in terms of the availability of potential lifestyles. But work is by no means completely separate from the arena of plural choices, and choice of work and work milieu forms a basic element of lifestyle orientations in the extremely complex modern division of labour. (1991, p. 82)

Millie expresses delusion because “to speak of a multiplicity of choices is not to suppose that all choices are open to everyone, or that people take all decisions about options in full realization of the range of feasible alternatives” (Giddens, 1991, p. 82). And yet, narratives as cultural scripts implying that, by working hard, people are able to build the life they intend to (see also Berlant, 2011) add to the contextual background against which post-postmodernist novels such as Butler’s construct counter ones so as to expose their inadequacy. The advice Millie’s mother gives her is consistent with the widespread misconception that assigns greater power to

personal will than to contextual circumstances, and assumes that personal will always prioritizes professional growth. But Millie cannot fit such linear trajectory and is left with a sense of defeat. Thus, to co-construct the novel's storyworld readers are invited to notice not just Millie's actions (or lack thereof) with regard to her job(s), but to place those actions in a wider context evoked by the narrator's reporting and interpretations.

WRONG PREMISES, UNATTAINABLE PROMISES

Today's work ethic, according to journalist Sarah Jaffe, is one "where we're expected to enjoy work for its own sake" (2021, p. 19). Because of this, "the idea that work should be a source of fulfillment has become common sense in our world, to the extent that saying otherwise is an act of rebellion" (Jaffe, 2021, p. 17-18). In *The New Me*, this "common sense" seems to be the underlying premise—what Margarida McMurry calls the silent assumptions—"taken for granted during the narrative communicative act" (Effron, et al., 2019, p. 338). Millie's lack of interest in her professional life, makes her feel inadequate and possibly influences her own depression. This means that the counter-narrative approach, as articulated by Matti Hyvärinen, positioning "stories within a larger narrative" (2021, p. 17) context is in dialogue with the idea that both author and audiences in the co-construction process employ silent assumptions linked to larger cultural beliefs. Audience members co-construct Millie's struggle with her job (or lack thereof) relying on the shared assumptions about a larger narrative context in which "society at large does recognize as important" (Lueg et al., 2021, p. 7) some versions of Jaffe's "labor-of-love" ethic. Her struggle, indeed, does not come (solely) from specific problems in her workplace, but from her difficulties to conform to this work ethic.

Certainly, the inclusion of the temp agency in the storyworld reveals the aim to represent office work as "crystalliz[ing] social anxieties about the declining link between work and security" (Connell, 2022, p. 215). But the fact that Millie cannot comply to the common sense of finding personal fulfilment in her job creates an impasse: a hope for the future disappointed by impossible change. Like the other characters in the novel, Millie does not have a work-life balance and, albeit desirable because necessary to give her financial security, a permanent job is described as an "endless abyss" (Butler 2019, p. 3), since she fears that her already limited freedom would become even more limited (see also Sykes, 2023). Yonina Hoffman suggests *The New Me* to be a novel of "bored workers" who live "their empty lives seeming traumatized, paralyzed, and uncertain" (2022, n.p.).

Characters like Millie are traumatized because they feel “trapped in their circumstances: they need the money, their coworkers are being laid off, and as they see it, having a bad job is better than no job” (Hoffman, 2002, n.p.). The inability to fit within the larger cultural narrative according to which Millie would enjoy work for its own sake produces a crisis, and a narrative that embodies a “marginalized view” (Lueg et al., 2021, p. 4): a counter-narrative.

While co-building this (political) counter-narrative, therefore, audience members are also co-building a master narrative, meant as an abstraction of a “cultural conventionality” (Hyvärinen, 2021, p. 20). That is, *The New Me* is a communicative act that counters an existing cultural (and economic) discourse, whose hegemony audience members perceive through the characters’ sense of powerlessness and defeat. But the co-construction of these hegemonic narratives emerging through counter-narration and silent assumptions also opens up “ontological crossovers” (Lanser, 2022, p. 293)⁴ toward the actual world where further clues of the normalized work ethic are disseminated. For instance, by analyzing the documents of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s “America Works Initiative,”⁵ it is possible to uncover assumptions and ethical underpinnings—such as the desire to fulfil the “American Dream”—shaping the “narrative” of the current labour shortage crisis in the U.S. (cf. Pignagnoli 2023a). In this case, an institution with “positional power” and “storytelling rights” (cf. Linde, 2005, p. 246) contributes to reinforcement of that master narrative. Narrative theory’s toolbox can be employed to unveil how the abstraction that characterizes master narratives can become more concrete as they are recognizable as stories “functional to the conservation of the power of the institution that promotes it” (Pignagnoli, 2023a, p. 163). To fully discuss master narratives of contemporary work is beyond the scope of this article but, as this example shows, some of the grand narratives about specific events or cultural norms do not acquire authority by chance and narrative theory can be helpful to identify the use of narrative techniques in non-narrative texts.

In narrative texts, on the other hand, understanding the influence of the assumptions behind these normalized ideas, which are meant to be criticized through counter-narration, helps reveal the process of co-construction. This is because “the co-constructed storyworld is largely the result of the combined effort of the author’s use of resources based on assumptions about the authorial audience’s and the actual audience’s perceptions of those assumptions” (Effron, et

⁴ According to Susan Lanser, ontological crossovers are “performed” when the audience draws “historical knowledge from make-believe” (2022, p. 293).

⁵ <https://www.uschamber.com/major-initiative/america-works-initiative>

al., 2019, p. 339). When audience members are told by *The New Me*'s narrator, "Work again, another fucking waking nightmare" (Butler, 2019, p. 49), they co-construct Millie as someone who is not particularly keen to go to work, but they might also perceive, in her discontent, a projection of a normalized way of building an adult life that clashes with her personality; for instance, she mentions being "chained" to her desk (Butler, 2019, p. 39). Afterall, Millie does recognize the advantages of "doing what we have to do to get by" (Butler, 2019, p. 77) and encourages herself to "focus on the benefits of a real job" (Butler, 2019, p. 78). But her fear of being stuck in the showroom as a receptionist forever makes her forget to shred some sensitive documents; a lack of attention that helps Karen pursue her plan to fire her.

Millie, however, doesn't perceive being fired as a "liberation" (Butler, 2019, p. 141). Her mental health deteriorates while she spends all of her days in her apartment, getting out only to buy alcohol, and "licking peanut butter out of three nearly empty jars" instead of eating proper food (Butler, 2019, p. 147). After being fired from the designer furniture showroom, she spends a week training in the call centre of a ballet theatre to sell season tickets, only to leave the building after her first call, as her boss yells at her and pulls her hair. Acknowledging her lack of "follow-through" (Butler 2019, p. 179), Millie tries to think of ways to adjust her behaviour in order to come closer to the assumed ideal of finding pleasure in work, "I try to assess the things that bring me pleasure, and how those things might bring me a fulfilling career. I think about how I spend my time. Where my interests lie" (Butler 2019, p. 180). However, she is unsuccessful in her attempt and although "the questions come naturally, as if supplied by the ether," the answer "sits in [her] empty skull: nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing" (Butler 2019, p. 180). Yet, the novel ends with her realization that her actions "would carry more permanence, could no longer be easily swapped out for something new" (Butler 2019, p. 188). That is, her choices will have more lasting consequences, and while this scares her, she also feels "release" by knowing that her options will be limited.

The ending is then set in an indefinite future titled "Later" and only briefly sketched. Millie is now a Junior Office Manager working in a cubicle next to a younger woman who sees her as a "cautionary thing, a reminder not to stay in the same job for too long" (Butler 2019, p. 189). Millie, however, seems moving and interacting in her new position not with despair, as in her previous jobs, but with acceptance. This means that the narrative's resolution (cf. Phelan, 2017) does not provide a viable alternative to the current understanding of the value of work *per se*. In other words, the act of countering characterizing *The New Me*, by offering a resolution that—like Millie—is unable to "follow-through" on its premises,

amplifies Millie's defeat. Yet, in this "defeat" lies a further blueprint countering the veneration of work in present day U.S. society: there is no fulfilment in Millie's "new" life, just acceptance.

Once again, the focalizing of another character judging Millie shows that in *The New Me* the critique of dominant beliefs around work now is conveyed by an expansive and generational portrayal. Because of the narrative multifocality and alternating narrators—as seen above, the heterodiegetic one appears in short vignettes focalizing on various characters with some loose connections to Millie—her loneliness and misery seem part of a bigger portrayal of similarly miserable people, whose lives' trajectories are completely hijacked by their jobs. While Millie identifies herself as the cause of her problems, spiralling into moments of self-hatred, audiences co-construct the narrative together with the voices accompanying Millie's main storyline. Less exceptional than the protagonist thinks, her experience cannot be a single individual's responsibility. Towards the ending, it becomes fully apparent that her own assumptions about her failures—the inability to find a stable job and to pursue it for the "promise of happiness" (cf. Ahmed, 2010) such achievement may offer—are "wrong." If these failures are shared across multiple characters, then the reasons cannot be solely personal. Millie's struggle thus becomes a sign of the effects the current spreading precarity and gig-economy practices have on the individual and Butler's narrative an act of countering a shared work ethos based on premises that, in most cases, cannot be fulfilled today.

CONCLUSION

Debunking the myth of work as a source of fulfilment, Butler offers a counter-narrative to the one that assumes her story to be simply one of failure. That is, embedded in Millie's work narrative are the silent assumptions of a master-narrative that still promotes the American Dream as an aspirational parable. The character narrator's depression and feeling of inadequacy are ignited by this underlying, unattainable premise, which readers are invited to acknowledge when co-constructing Millie's storyworld as the contextual background necessary to understand the protagonist's feelings and choices. In rhetorical terms, the thematic component (cf. Phelan, 2017) of the novel is highlighted by the blueprints of a master-narrative about contemporary work, which emerges through the act of countering deployed by Millie's actions and personal considerations.

Thus, this thematic component is connected to the message conveyed by Butler's novel, that the labour-of-love ethic (cf. Jaffe, 2021) is flawed; a message that acquires political resonance in the act of co-construction. Indeed, by employing

a character narrator so ill-fitted to comply with such an ethic, Butler draws attention to a social issue that not only affects Millie within the storyworld, leading her to constantly self-loathe. Rather, the counter-narrative projects readers into the actual world, where the common belief that people should find an occupation they enjoy is deeply ingrained in an economic system whose functioning has little to do with one's level of fulfilment in their job. Yet, post-recession U.S. economy appears absent from the cultural script that values work for its own sake. And although it also seems left out from Millie's counter-narration, the novel's multifocality hints at a systemic rather than individual issue, thus suggesting a political problem.

To conclude, through the analysis of Butler's novel, this essay demonstrates that co-construction theory and counter-narrative approaches can establish a productive dialogue. Audiences appreciate Millie's narration as an act of countering through the blueprints of assumed cultural beliefs. These assumptions are essential for the readers' co-construction of the storyworld and the actual world (cf. Effron et al., 2019), enabling them to assess the relevance of normalized cultural scripts in the background for the author's message within the fictional realm and beyond.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press.
- Alber, Jan, and Alice Bell. 2019. The Importance of Being Earnest Again: Fact and Fiction in Contemporary Narratives Across Media. *European Journal of English Studies*, 23 (2), 121–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2019.1640414>
- Bamberg, M. & Z. Wipff. (2021). Reconsidering Counter-Narratives. In K. Lueg & M. Wolff (Eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives* (pp. 70-82).
- Barthes, R. ([1966] 1982). Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives. S. Sontag (Eds.) *Barthes Reader*. Hill and Wang (pp. 251-2).
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Cholbi, M. (2022). Philosophical Approaches to Work and Labor. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/work-labor/> <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/work-labor/>
- Connell, L. (2022). Crisis, Labor, and the Contemporary. In P. Crosthwaite, P. Knight, & N. Marsh (Eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Economics*. Cambridge University Press (pp. 212-226).
- Constantz, J. (2022). 'Quiet Quitters' Make Up Half of the US Workforce, Gallup Finds. *Bloomberg*. Sept. 6, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-06/-quiet-quitters-make-up-half-of-the-us-workforce-gallup-finds?embedded-checkout=true>

- Dawson, P. (2022). 'What is 'The Narrative'? Conspiracy Theories and Journalistic Emplotment in the Age of Social Media. In *The Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory*. P. Dawson and M. Mäkelä (Eds.). Routledge (pp. 71-85).
- Effron, M., M. McMurry, & V. Pignagnoli. (2019). Narrative Co-Construction: a Rhetorical Approach. *Narrative* 27 (3), pp. 332–52. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2019.0019>
- Fage-Butler, A. (2021). Applying Foucault's Tool-box to the Analysis of Counter-Narratives. In K. Lueg & M. Wolff Lundholt, *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*, Routledge (pp. 85-97).
- Georgakopoulou A., S. Iversen & C. Stage. (2022). Quantified Storytelling: How the Tellable and the Countable Intermingle on Digital Platforms. In *The Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory*. P. Dawson and M. Mäkelä (Eds.). Routledge (pp. 149-163).
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford University Press.
- Herman, D. (2009). *Basic Elements of Narrative*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Hayles, N. K. (1995). Narratives of Evolution and the Evolution of Narrative. In J. L. Casti & Anders Karlqvist (Eds.), *Cooperation and Conflict in General Evolutionary Processes*, John Wiley and Sons (pp. 113 – 132).
- Hoffman, Y. (2022). Traumatized by Capitalism? Novels of Bored Workers. *Post45*. June 1, 2022. <https://post45.org/2022/06/traumatized-by-capitalism-novels-of-bored-workers/>
- Hyvärinen, M. (2021). Toward a Theory of Counter-Narratives. Narrative Contestation, Cultural Canonicity, and Tellability. In K. Lueg & M. Wolff Lundholt, *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*, Routledge (pp. 17-29).
- Irr, C. (2014). *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the 21st Century*. Columbia University Press.
- Jaffe, S. (2021). *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*. Bold Type Books.
- Kelly, Adam Maxwell. 2016. "The New Sincerity." In *Postmodern/Postwar—and After: Rethinking American Culture*, edited by Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden, 197–208. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 2017.
- Konstantinou, Lee. 2017. "Four Faces of Postirony." In *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen, 87–102. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Lanser, S. S. (2022). Social Justice. In L. R. Gammelgaard, S. Iversen, L. Brix Jacobsen, J. Phelan, R. Walsh, H. Zetterberg-Nielsen, & S. Zetterberg-Nielsen (Eds.), *Fictionality and Literature Core Concepts Revisited*. The Ohio State University Press (pp. 284-301).
- Linde, C. (2005). Institutional Narrative. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. D. Herman, M. Jahn, & M.L. Ryan (Eds.). Routledge (pp. 243-6).
- Lueg, K., A. Starbæk Bager & M. Wolff Lundholt. (2021). Introduction. What Counter-Narratives Are: Dimensions and Levels of a Theory of Middle Range." In K. Lueg & M. Wolff Lundholt (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*, Routledge (pp. 1-14).
- McHale, Brian. 2015. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Newport, C. (2022). The Year in Quiet Quitting: A New Generation Discovers That It's Hard to Balance Work With a Well-lived Life. Dec. 29, 2022, *The New Yorker*, accessed

- March 12, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/2022-in-review/the-year-in-quiet-quitting>.
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2020). How's Life: Measuring Well Being. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/how-s-life/volume-/issue-_9870c393-en
- Phelan, J. (2017). *Somebody Telling Somebody Else: A Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative*. The Ohio State University Press.
- Pignagnoli, V. (2023a). The Narrative of the Great Resignation and the Ethics of Positional Power in the Documents of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's America Works Initiative. In P. Adinolfi & C. Trincherro (Eds.), *Mistificazione e demistificazione: il linguaggio del potere dall'età moderna all'era della globalizzazione*, Bonanno Editore (pp. 153-167).
- Pignagnoli, V. (2023b). *Post-Postmodernist Fiction and the Rise of Digital Epitexts*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- Sandel, M. J. (2020). *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* Penguin.
- Sykes, I. (2023). Leaning in and Bouncing Back: Neoliberal Feminism and the Work of Self-Transformation in Otessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and Halle Butler's *The New Me* (2019). *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 25: 8, Article 6. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss8/6>
- Tolentino, J. (2019). Halle Butler's 'The New Me' Is an Office Novel for a Precarious Age. *The New Yorker*. April 8, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/15/halle-butlers-the-new-me-is-an-office-novel-for-a-precarious-age>
- Weeks, K. (2011). *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Duke University Press.

Virginia Pignagnoli is a Ramón y Cajal Fellow at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. She is the author of *Post-Postmodernist Fiction and the Rise of Digital Epitexts* (Ohio State University Press, 2023), and her articles have appeared in journals such as *Narrative*, *Poetics Today*, *Neohelicon*, the *European Journal of English Studies* (EJES), and *Enthymema*.