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Sykes, Rachel

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Reading for quiet in Marilynne Robinson's Gilead novels

Rachel Sykes, Nottingham Trent University

ABSTRACT: This essay argues that Marilynne Robinson's Gilead novels embody a quiet aesthetic of narrative that has emerged as a vibrant trend in the early years of the twenty-first century. Robinson's fiction is not driven by the narratological "noise" of action, event, and plot, but by the internal machinations of consciousness, a reinvention of modernist themes that is also a return. By reading for quiet in Robinson's work, this essay therefore demonstrates how the Gilead trilogy challenges the dominance of "trauma" narratives in contemporary American fiction and privileges the representation of quiet people, places, and states above the wider noise associated with Western culture.

KEYWORDS: Marilynne Robinson, quiet, contemporary fiction, philosophical quietism, *Gilead*.

BIOGRAPHY: Rachel Sykes is a Lecturer in English in the School of Arts and Humanities at Nottingham Trent University. She researches contemporary fiction, particularly the American novel and women's autofiction, and her first monograph, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel*, is forthcoming with Manchester University Press.

Marilynne Robinson's epistolary novel, *Gilead* (2004), opens in a moment of quiet. The text is a letter from the elderly Reverend Ames to his six-year-old son, Robby, for whom Ames is writing a personal history and "begats" (9). *Gilead*'s prose slows when Ames' final illness develops and it pauses when he pauses. Yet, despite the primacy of the Reverend's voice, the novel begins with Ames' silence. "You reached up," he writes, to the young son on his lap, "and put your fingers on my lips and gave me that look ... a kind of furious pride, very passionate and stern" (3). Robby's gesture may be small but it is rooted in a quietness that I believe is central to the development of *Gilead* and its partner novels *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014). By putting his fingers to his father's lips, Robby ends the need for speech and begins to communicate nonverbally, immersing father and son in a companionable and communicative quiet that lasts until the novel's final page. Their exchange is not silent, I argue, but quiet: a state that is better conceived as a mode of conversation than the complete absence of sound and an aesthetic of narrative that Robinson pioneers in her fiction.ⁱ

This essay defines quiet as an aesthetic of narrative driven by reflective principles through analysis of Robinson's Gilead novels.ⁱⁱ Reviewers often allude to *Gilead*'s "quiet,

modest” prose (*The Economist*), *Home*’s “quiet power” (Hitchens), and *Lila*’s “quiet, ruminative style” (Rahim). Indeed, the quiet of Robinson’s fiction has been referred to by many critics: novelist Ali Smith described *Gilead* as “careful” and “crepuscular” (26), literary critic David James called *Home* a “crystalline” (845) novel, and journalist James Wood suggested that Robinson’s fiction is “sanguine” and “deeply unfashionable” when compared to the work of her peers. Even Brett Easton Ellis, whose famously fast-paced and ultra-violent novels are characterised by an aesthetic loudness, praised the “meditative” prose of *Gilead* whilst admitting he couldn’t finish reading it: “[*Gilead*] doesn’t have that kind of propulsive energy going that I require ... [It’s] a very different experience from most contemporary novels. You have to get on its level”.

Contrary to Ellis’ suggestion, Robinson’s non-“propulsive” prose is part of a larger contemporary trend in which the interior lives of introverted, scholarly, and often reclusive characters are prioritised. Robinson’s *Gilead* novels, Geraldine Brooks’ *March* (2004), Elizabeth Strout’s *Olive Kitteridge* (2008), Paul Harding’s *Tinkers* (2009), Denis Johnson’s *Train Dreams* (2011), Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011), Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), Alice Munro’s *Dear Life* (2012), and Rabih Alameddine’s *An Unnecessary Woman* (2014) are remarkably diverse in style, content, and form but united, I argue, by the representation of quiet people, locations, and states. A burgeoning critical interest in quiet fiction is further reflected by the Pulitzer Prize committee’s tendency to reward quieter narratives; *Gilead*’s victory in 2005 was followed by Brooks’ *March* in 2006, Strout’s *Olive Kitteridge* in 2008, and Harding’s *Tinkers* in 2010. As much as a trend is apparent, then, readers are increasingly receptive to quiet fictions. In 2006, the republication of John Williams’ neglected novel *Stoner* (1965) received widespread attention for the “quietness” (Akbar) of its prose and, in 2014, critics hailed the English language translation of Karl Ove Knausgård’s *My Struggle* (2009-11) as a literary sensation for the author’s ability to sustain the reader’s attention through 3,600

pages in which “nothing happens. Really: nothing happens at all” (Brockes). My analysis of Robinson is therefore a representative case study of a trend in contemporary American fiction.

The first section of this essay situates quiet against what David Foster Wallace calls the “Total Noise” (110) of American culture and proposes four criteria through which I define a common aesthetic. In section two, I examine these criteria through a reading of *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*. I argue that a quiet text focuses first on a quiet character, second on a quiet location, third on interior life so that, fourth, the quiet novel rarely focusses on the comparatively loud narrative structures of action or event.ⁱⁱⁱ At its simplest, the Gilead novels are quiet because Robinson uses “quiet” terms to describe her fiction’s characters and locations. However, as a third and final section elaborates, Robinson’s prose also embodies an aesthetic that is calm, private, and peaceful before it is loud, public, and obtrusive. This section interrogates the value of quiet as a multi-faceted and under-interrogated contemporary state. As I argue of Ames in *Gilead*, Robinson acknowledges the danger of quiet modes of engagement with the present when quiet becomes a way for the privileged to disengage from the political world that surrounds them. This essay therefore discusses how quiet narratives examine, without celebrating, the place of quiet in a noisy world.

Quiet and the novel

To establish the importance of quiet to Robinson’s fiction, it is necessary to address several assumptions about the role of the novel in contemporary culture. Although there is, as yet, no definition of a “quiet aesthetic” and no body of work on “quiet fiction,” the neglected history of quiet narratives can be linked to a culturally inflected preference for drama and noise that, as Jeffrey M. Perl laments, “militates against peace and quiet” (14) in the intellectual life of the West. I am particularly interested in how the idea of quiet has been explored by novelists like Robinson at the beginning of the twenty-first century as we enter a period of what Jeremy Green describes as “late” postmodernism where fiction is forced to “encompass and distil” the

“strange and myriad forms” (4) of contemporary America. Literary criticism increasingly focusses on how the novel, in particular, can become bigger, noisier, and more diverse in order to maintain its dominance as a cultural form. Citing Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of literary polyphony, Ted Gioia argues that twenty-first-century fiction is characterised by a cavernous “new fragmented novel”; Mark Greif identifies the same trend as the “big, ambitious novel” in turn-of-the-century works by Jonathan Franzen, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and David Foster Wallace that “feel stuffed” and “overfull” (27) with information.^{iv} These are novels, in other words, of ever-greater ambition that seek to survey American experience in its breadth, totality, and volume but paradoxically limit the remit of contemporary fiction by overshadowing any text that does not fit their expansionist paradigm.

By comparison, quiet fiction empties the narrative present of its associative noise and sacrifices Lyotard’s “grand” narratives for “little” ones. The fiction of Marilynne Robinson stands against the work of novelists like Franzen, DeLillo, Pynchon, and Wallace who are often seen as the century’s key chroniclers because within a culture declared to be loud quiet is viewed as reticence, at best, and conservatism, at worst. We might think of DeLillo’s 1985 novel, *White Noise*, praised for its descriptions of a rampant American consumerism “awash with noise” and the “dull and locatable roar” (27) of industry. Similarly, Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2001) opens with an “alarm bell of anxiety” (3) that rings so loudly it creates a “kind of metasound whose rise and fall was not the beating of compression waves but the much, much slower waxing and waning of [the] *consciousness* of the sound” (4). Both Franzen and DeLillo link the noise of contemporary culture to a system of late capitalism in which teleological narratives of consumption and progress invade all conscious experience. In *The Corrections*, the alarm bell is triggered by “[t]he anxiety of coupons”, “expiration dates”, and “sixty cents off” (4) whilst the “white noise” of DeLillo’s title is “the intermittent stir of factories” and the ways in which noise contributes to the “extrasensory material” (484, 153, 482) of modern life. As the French economist Jacques Attali wrote in 1985, the year *White*

Noise was published, “Today, [noise] is unavoidable, as if, in a world now devoid of meaning, a background noise were increasingly necessary to give people a sense of security” (3). As a result, contemporary novelists often seem forced to represent and repeat the noise of industrial, technological, and consumer cultures, suffusing their prose with the background noise that Attali also claimed art can escape.

Critically, and as argued elsewhere, loudness gained cultural currency during the twentieth century as the loud of society became associated with the noise of “progress.”^v Modernism, Marshall Berman suggests, “nourished itself on the real trouble in the modern streets, and transformed their noise and dissonance into beauty and truth” (31). In response to the increasing loudness of the culture, art developed a vocabulary of radical political, cultural, and aesthetic forms to articulate the new sounds of modernity and by mid-century loudness was increasingly invoked as an aesthetic of protest.^{vi} In the latter half of the twentieth century, postmodernism’s concern for the breakdown of language began to conflate the qualities of quiet and silence and under this system of analysis quiet became associated with an enforced passivity, the absence of discussion, and the failure to object. Toni Morrison provides a notable use of the phrase, “*Quiet as it’s kept*”, to begin the narrative of nine-year-old narrator Claudia MacTeer in her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970): “*Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow*” (4). In this instance, “*Quiet as it’s kept*” is conspiratorial and intimate, a phrase that Claudia has overheard from her parents.^{vii} However, as the “*kept*” secret is quickly revealed to be the sexual abuse that Pecola suffers at the hands of her father, the phrase is also associated with the suppression of harmful information. Claudia’s quiet is not communicative and Morrison invokes quiet as a form of silence that suppresses the vulnerable and marginalises its victims as an expression of trauma.

The first task of a quiet aesthetic is therefore to explore the word’s etymology beyond the notional synonyms that characterise its use in contemporary culture. For example, quiet

has been a valued state of existence since antiquity and, in its earliest form, refers to a state of inner tranquillity that is free from mental or emotional agitation and undisturbed by external influence, action, or event.^{viii} Plato described the Greek concept of *sophrosyne*, denoting soundness of character and mind, as “a certain quietness” (204); Aristotle believed the quiet life to be a necessary condition for independent thought and the creation of art; and Euripides proclaimed that only “the genial, quiet life, / Ruddered by right-thinking, / Knows calm security” (478). According to Euripides, society’s activity and noise is distracting to the individual but personal quietude restores composure by reclaiming the mental space that reflection requires in the present. To be quiet is to be private and peaceful but most importantly quietness is a philosophically active state, an “energy and essence” (192) as Aristotle suggests in *Metaphysics* (350 BC) that strengthens the individual’s ability to exist and participate in society.

Throughout the twentieth century, as noise became associated with dissent, quiet lost its association with activity. In *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (2010), the first study of its kind and the only work of criticism to conceive of a quiet aesthetic similar to my own, Kevin Everod Quashie argues that black culture “is or is supposed to be loud, literally as well as metaphorically, since such loudness is the expressiveness that articulates its resistance” (11). For Quashie, quiet has the potential to express black subjectivity in a way that is “expansive, voluptuous, creative; impulsive and dangerous” (21). Yet, quiet’s expressiveness is hard to read: its patience is often mistaken for passivity and its lack of external movement often hides internal motion. The ideological tension between action and inaction that quiet embodies is further reflected by the ease with which contemporary critics conflate quiet and quietism. Initially conceived as a form of religious mysticism that embraces internal contemplation, quietism is most commonly used in the context created by the French Revolution when it became associated with inactivity and used as an expression of political abuse.^{ix} Of particular relevance to this essay and the aesthetic of fiction it proposes, literary

critics often use the term to accuse older schools of apathy. In 1998, Vincent B. Leitch described New Criticism as the inclination to combine “quietism and asceticism” (9); in the same year, narratologist Mark Currie called deconstruction a form of “political quietism” (4).^x Strands of radicalism that have lost their edge also stand accused. Feminist critic Martha Nussbaum described Judith Butler’s move away from “old-style feminist politics and material realities” as a brand of “hip quietism” that sacrifices integrity to enforce the status quo. Postcolonial theorist Edward Said criticised the later work of Michel Foucault for justifying “political quietism with sophisticated intellectualism” (245). Notably, critics rarely define what quietism means and its use as a term of accusation rests almost entirely on residual associations with inaction and passivity.

To describe a novel as quiet therefore carries inherent risks. Critics today often write from a defensive position as the global expansion of the Internet through handheld devices provides what Jeremy Green describes as “a foretaste of a future without books” (5) and a kind of “digital omniscience” that Douglas Rushkoff associates with the “schizophrenic cacophony” (75) of contemporary temporal disconnection. Amongst the “schizophrenic” noises of digitised cultures, which extend the alarm bell of *The Corrections* and the white noise of DeLillo’s fiction, reflection becomes not only rare but also mentally impossible. Indeed, it becomes rarer and, I argue, riskier to produce fiction that is aesthetically quiet within a culture that is so defined by its sources of overstimulation. Reading for quiet in Robinson’s novels is not meant as an attack on twenty-first-century modernity. Rather than typifying quiet as an exclusively positive quality, I want to explore the literary and cultural dimensions of the term beyond its popular conflation with silence. An interest in quiet people, places, and states does not absolve a character, author, or novel from the political quietism, apathy, or suffering implied by Toni Morrison’s use of the phrase, “*Quiet as it’s kept*”. However, the quiet that can be read in Robinson’s fiction is indicative of a much wider trend in contemporary American

fiction that conceives of quiet as a diverse state, privileges the lives of introverted and scholarly characters, and prioritises reflection as a contemporary object of study.

Robinson's quiet aesthetic: *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*

Marilynne Robinson's debut novel, *Housekeeping*, was published in 1980, a fragmentary and deeply meditative text that evokes what Katy Ryan describes as the "quiet insistence on the transience of all things" (349). The novel tells the story of Ruthie and Lucille Stone and the succession of female relatives who come to care for them in rural Idaho after their mother's suicide. By my definition, *Housekeeping* is a quiet novel because it centres on characters whose isolated lives "almost relieve them of the need for speech" (21). The novel was popular with readers and reviewers and awarded a PEN/Hemingway Award for best first novel. However, Robinson did not publish a second work of fiction for twenty-four years. In the interim, the author wrote and reviewed for *Harper's* and *The New York Times*, published *Mother Country* (1989), a controversial examination of the public health dangers of the Sellafield nuclear plant, and *The Death of Adam* (1998), a collection of essays that she described as "contrarian in method and spirit" ('Introduction' 1). Still, between 1980 and 2004 Robinson published just two short stories, 'Orphans' (1981) and 'Connie Bronson' (1986), which she had written in the 1970s and subsequently dismissed as "juvenilia" (Fay). When *Gilead* was finally published, Robinson's "quiet" career became a unique selling point. *Time* magazine reported that "[t]he anticipation of Robinson's follow-up has been urgent, loud and public", a statement that suggested the public demand for meditative fiction had grown and that Robinson's quiet fiction was in some way creating noise.

The *Gilead* novels complicate and expand *Housekeeping's* examination of quiet states through a cast of characters who live in or return to the fictional town of Gilead, Iowa.^{xi} *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila* focus on two Christian families, the Ames and the Boughtons, and narrative episodes overlap around 1956. *Gilead* was the first to be published in 2004; it is an epistolary

novel written from the perspective of Congregationalist minister John Ames in the months after he is diagnosed with heart failure (*angina pectoris*). The text of *Gilead* then lasts from the “fine spring” (9) of 1956 to the beginning of winter and, published just four years later, *Home* begins in the same spring and ends within a few days of *Gilead* when a “light frost” (*Home* 332) descends on the town. *Home* retells the events of *Gilead* from the household of Ames’ oldest friend and confidante, the Presbyterian minister Robert Boughton, whose daughter Glory is forced to return “home” at the age of thirty-eight to live “a quiet life in a quiet place” (16) and care for her elderly father. *Home*’s third-person narrative is often focalised through Glory’s perspective but her younger brother, John “Jack” Ames Boughton, is the black sheep and would-be “prodigal son” (*Gilead* 84) whose search for redemption structures both *Gilead* and *Home*. A third novel, *Lila*, then provides the history of Ames’ second wife and covers the longest period, beginning thirty years before *Gilead* and skipping between the poverty of Lila’s childhood in the 1920s, her early adulthood in a St. Louis whorehouse, her marriage to Ames in the 1940s, and the present moment in 1956. Through a closely focalised third-person perspective, Robinson revisits themes of drifting, transience, and gender identity last explored in *Housekeeping* but while the end of Robinson’s debut sees the Stones put “an end to housekeeping” (204), *Lila* depicts the opposite transition as the second Mrs Ames struggles to escape her vagrant past and make Gilead her physical and spiritual home.

Read together, the Gilead novels are quiet in aesthetically similar ways. *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila* focus on the same cast of quiet characters in the same rural location, retelling the history of Gilead from different but unanimously quiet perspectives. Read individually, however, each novel’s quiet is subtly different. *Gilead* is the first and quietest of the trilogy. This is due to many aspects of Ames’ situation, from the integration of all narrative incidents within one central fading consciousness to the love of quiet fostered by the religiosity and studiousness of Ames’ nature. *Gilead*’s religious content has been a major preoccupation for critics who have framed Robinson’s portrayal of Christianity as a largely benevolent force that

is “short on doctrine and long on wonder, mystery, and wisdom” (Douglas 339). Ames’ beliefs are important to a reading of quiet in the novel because they commit him to a lifetime of contemplation and daily attempts to understand “omniscience, omnipotence, judgment, and grace” (*Gilead* 147). That is, Ames is quiet by profession and by nature; he is not simply withdrawing as he nears the end of life but has always been comfortable viewing the world from a distance. He has a deep appreciation of reflective states, often sitting quietly with Lila to appreciate the “celestial consequences” (10) of life’s minutiae. Indeed, he considers the “quiet presence” (236) of Lila and Robby to be a reward for decades of loneliness following the death of his first wife and child in 1905. For forty years, the parsonage was marked by what Glory calls a “stricken quiet” (*Home* 82) that drove Ames to his study to “read out of loneliness” (*Gilead* 38). In the present, however, Ames seeks solitude because he loves the quality of attention that quiet brings, the “hoard of quiet” (151) that can be found in peaceful environments, and “the silent and invisible life” (19) that reflection reveals to him. Ames’ quiet is based in joy and *Gilead* is the quietest of Robinson’s novels because, as a narrator, Ames is largely unconcerned with the noise of the world and happy with the quiet of his own life.

Gilead’s epistolary form also structures the quiet of its prose. Janet Altman suggests that the aesthetic features of epistolary fictions rely largely “on the relationship of internal writer to internal reader” (144) and *Gilead* is technically quiet because the interiority of its narrative style provides little dialogue. When the novel begins, Ames’ letter has two primary functions: first, to record “the way I think” (35) and second, to write a history of his father and grandfather whose political disagreements during the Civil War and Reconstruction overshadow Ames’ intellectual life in the present. Ames believes that the letter will pass on aspects of his interior life to his son; including childhood memories, inherited stories, and a lifetime of knowledge accumulated by reading. He alludes freely to scripture, philosophy, and fiction and assumes a fluency in theological works that he is uncertain Lila, his “unschooled” (78) wife, will teach Robby. Ames’ letter can be read as a kind of inheritance that consolidates

the religious, studious, and familial quietness, love of reflection, and pleasure in meditation that he has learnt from his family but will not live to teach his son. For Lila, too, quiet is a favoured trait that is lost if it is not cultivated. In the third Gilead novel, Robinson reveals how much she understands the project of Ames' "begats":

And she would tell [Robby] he was a minister's son, so he might blame her because she couldn't give him what his father would have given him, the quiet gentleness in his manners, the way of expecting the people would look up to him. She couldn't teach him that. (*Lila* 255)

Both Lila and Ames believe the "quiet gentleness" of the Ames family will die with the Reverend but only Lila acknowledges the privileged position of men who choose to be quiet and expect others to listen. Aesthetically, *Gilead's* quiet is a product of Ames' character, age, religiosity, and studiousness as well as its epistolary form, and the integration of narrative incident within one central consciousness. However, *Gilead* is quieter than either *Home* or *Lila* because of the privilege and security that Ames inherits from the generations of quiet men who lived, studied, and worshipped in the parsonage before him.

Home retells a story already partially told in *Gilead*, recounting the difficulties of Jack, Glory, and their father, Reverend Boughton, as they attempt to live together after twenty years apart. *Home* also meets my conditions for a quiet aesthetic: Robinson focusses first on quiet characters, second on a quiet location, third, although to a lesser extent, on interior life so that, fourth, nothing really happens in the novel. All three Boughtons enjoy quiet activities: Boughton reads dense tomes of German theology, Glory studies her Bible every day, and Jack spends his evenings reading Karl Marx and W. E. B. DuBois. Like Ames, Boughton is old, infirm, and habitually contemplative, often "praying before the commencement of prayer" (71) and sleeping most of the day. However, *Home* lacks the interiority of Robinson's previous work and abandons the restricted perspective of Ames for a third-person narrative that is supplemented with long passages of description and dialogue. The novel is aesthetically louder than *Gilead*, first because the majority of the narrative takes place outside of

consciousness and second because the quiet of *Home* is troubled by negative affect, anxiety, and anger. Unlike Ames, Boughton is furious about the indignities of old age and feels trapped in his “empty and quiet” (7) house after the death of his wife. Jack is similarly heartbroken, returning to Gilead after a forced separation from his African-American fiancée, Della, and their young son, Robert. Even Glory, the only character through whom the narrative is focalised, feels forced into a caretaking role as the only single woman in a conservative Presbyterian family. Despite her Masters’ degree in English and years spent away from Gilead as a teacher, Glory bites her tongue “twenty times a day” (70), avoids intellectual debate, and is so quiet that sometimes her father forgets she is present. Glory’s quietness borders on silence, a state abided rather than enjoyed and one radically different from the communicative quiet Ames appreciates in *Gilead*.

Home therefore contains the briefest suggestion that quiet is gendered, even racialised. The struggle for civil rights is a driving force of the second Gilead novel, which picks up the discussion of segregation introduced in *Gilead*’s final pages. Throughout *Gilead*, the political backdrop of the 1950s is curiously absent and Ames’ only political declaration, “If I live, I’ll vote for Eisenhower” (*Gilead* 107), suspiciously empty. It is only at the end of *Gilead*, when Jack confesses to Ames that he wants to return to Iowa because of the state’s lack of anti-miscegenation laws, that Ames is thrown into a spiritual crisis and forced to address the political apathy that ensures his life is so untroubled by noise. *Home* then comparatively amplifies the political events excluded from Ames’ letter: Jack follows news on the 1956 civil rights demonstrations over segregation in Montgomery and argues with his father about the “provocation” (214) of non-violent protest. Jack’s quiet is characterised by an “incandescence of unease” (215) and although Robinson describes him as “quiet” (31, 37, 120, 133, 164, 196, 217, 256) more than any other character, his quietness is undermined by what he cannot admit: his relationship with Della and the existence of their mixed race son.

Indeed, *Home* is full of quiet people who endure rather than thrive in Gilead's quietness. Glory cannot confess to the failed engagement that brought her home and, as the Reverend grows weaker, he becomes confused, believing that his wife is still alive, their house full with the noise of eight children. He asks Glory why his children have become "so quiet!" (304) and mistakes the peace around him for a sign that something is wrong. Although they are quiet, therefore, the Boughtons are never peaceful and in *Home*, it is clearest that quiet is only valuable as an expressive state when it is chosen and not when it is compelled. As Kevin Everod Quashie suggests, quiet has the potential to provide a refuge for the "suppressed textualities" (15) of identity because the ideal of public selfhood is not available to everyone. However, Quashie underestimates the importance of audience: that is, in order for a quiet person to be heard they must encounter an active listener. At the end of the novel, the Boughtons' "unreadable quiet" (13) remains uncommunicative while Robinson's references to the political landscape of the 1950s hint at an African-American community, outside Gilead, who are denied the privilege of quiet altogether and must shout in order to be heard.

Lila, finally, offers a third interpretation of quiet. In many ways, it is the most ambitious of the Gilead novels, covering the longest timespan and the greatest geographical distance. Unlike the Ames and Boughtons in *Gilead* and *Home*, Lila has no family to tie her to one place; she spends her early life drifting with vagrants and criminals who cannot keep her safe or provide her with the education she craves. The novel's first line evokes the poverty Lila is born into: "The child was just there on the stoop in the dark, hugging herself against the cold, all cried out and nearly sleeping" (3). Lila is quiet in this instance because she is exhausted from shouting and Robinson notes that her family also "fought themselves quiet" inside the house. Everything about Lila's poverty is loud; her early years are composed of shouts, screams, and a "pounding at the screen door" that only subsides through exhaustion. On the novel's second page, Lila is rescued by the enigmatic Doll who commits them to a life of wandering in an attempt to escape the child's neglectful family and Doll's criminal past. But

Lila's life as a vagrant exposes her to many more locations in which quietness is inconsistent and unreliable. When Lila sleeps rough, every noise startles her: the crickets "so damn loud" (56), the rain "too loud" (60), and the people she travels with constantly noisy (59). The aesthetic qualities of loud and quiet are equally unpredictable to Lila and from the enforced "quiet" (189) of a St Louis whorehouse to the quiet people she meets in Gilead, Lila believes that quietness masks much louder realities.

The third Gilead novel is therefore reflexive about the principles of a quiet aesthetic and, to my mind, is about the difficulties of quiet as a mode of engagement in the present. If *Gilead* is the quietest of the trilogy and *Home* is the loudest, *Lila* narrates the transition from loud to quiet in which the future Mrs Ames learns that the "quiet of the world" doesn't always sound "like mockery" (112). Of all Robison's characters, Lila changes the most. She works as an itinerant labourer, cleaner, and unsuccessful prostitute; moves from a life of homeless poverty to the parsonage of Gilead; and, in the reader's eyes, evolves from the marginal and "gentle" soul glimpsed in *Gilead* (228) into the obstinate, difficult, and "hard woman" (51) of *Lila*. Slowly, she begins to embrace the quiet of her own character and finds pleasure in Gilead's "quiet evening streets" (122). Lila's arrival in Gilead does not "cure" her insecurities and she continues to occasionally dwell on the "roar and wrench" (112) of existence. However, as Sarah Churchwell suggests, *Lila* may be the least political of Robison's novels but it is "lit at moments by a visionary wonder" that make it the "most emotional". The quiet of Gilead and her relationship with Ames provide Lila with a feeling of security she has never experienced, leaving her open to and capable of a more peaceful relationship with both herself and others. "[H]ere she was," Robison writes, "in the Reverend's quiet house, as calm and safe as the good man could make her" (218). The relationship between Lila and Ames is a form of sustenance "like rest and quiet, something you live without but you needed anyway" (79-80) and towards the end of *Lila* the calmness of *Gilead*, which Robison problematises in *Home*, is reinvoked in the quiet aesthetic of the text.

The quiet of inaction

This essay has argued that Robinson's prose embodies an aesthetic that is calm, private, and peaceful before it is loud, public, and obtrusive and I want to conclude with analysis of the link between the quiet of Ames' character and his repeated political inaction in *Gilead*. As stated above, quiet can become a way for the privileged to disengage from the world that surrounds them and Robinson stops short of valorising quiet by illustrating its limitations as a mode of engagement in the present. For example, much of the quiet of Robinson's prose is linked to its temporal setting. All three Gilead novels are undated. 1880, the year of Ames' birth, is one of very few dates in *Gilead*. At the beginning of the novel, Ames states that he has lived seventy-six years in Gilead from which the reader can deduce he is writing in 1956. Ames' references to Spanish flu and Bud Fowler are similarly indirect: both appear without citing a year and the reader is only able to connect each event with its historical context through pre-existing knowledge or research. *Home* makes more explicit reference to the 1950s in which the novels take place. Here, Robinson alludes to contemporary adverts and films and Jack takes every opportunity to discuss "the troubles in the south" (*Home* 162) with his father: the murder of Emmett Till (163), the career of African-American baseball player Jackie Robinson (209), and the Christian "treatment of the Negro" (227).^{xiii} *Lila* then occupies a more ambiguous present than either *Gilead* or *Home* in which the American Dust Bowl of the 1930s is simply referred to as "the times they began to get caught in the dust" (16). Neither *Home* nor *Lila* state the year in which they are set and all three Gilead novels are curiously "out of time" according to journalist James Wood: temporally abstracted from both the 1950s in which they are set and the twenty-first century in which we read them.

The effect of this abstraction is to place the novels in an ambiguous present in which the political and cultural "now" is vague scenery to the emotional landscape of the characters. Michael Schmidt calls this aspect of *Gilead* "anachronistic" (559); Tessa Hadley describes *Gilead* as "old fashioned" (19); Susan Petit argues that the characters of *Gilead* and *Home* suffer

from a kind of “historical amnesia” (119) that papers over the injustices of the past and neglects the noise of the present. I contend that the atemporality of the Gilead novels is where a quiet aesthetic also resides. By focussing on the interior lives of quiet characters, who live in a quiet location, Robinson’s fiction is untethered from the representation of noise and exceptional or noteworthy event that typically constitutes a novel’s plot. These “historical” narratives are pointedly non-topical: Schmidt, Hadley, and Petit all acknowledge that the Gilead novels are set in the past but are not immediately identifiable with a particular moment and it is this aspect of Robinson’s prose that reviewers often describe as “quiet”. As this essay suggests, quiet represents life between events, shifting focus from louder instances or actions and reprioritising the subjective as a locus for experience. It is, in other words, a reflective engine of narrative that renders stories of forward movement less persuasive by valuing reflection as an active state of presence.

Yet it is worth reiterating that quiet is only valuable as an expressive state when it is chosen and not when it is enforced. The location of Gilead is the most unifying characteristic of Robinson’s quiet novels; it is what Joan Acocella describes as a “dusty, no-account little town”, a place where dogs take naps in the middle of Main Street and Ames can walk past every house in an hour (*Gilead* 71). Characters respond to the quiet of this setting in different ways. To the Boughtons, Gilead’s quietness is a “curse of sameness” (*Home* 293) but to Lila this tiny “no-name place” (*Lila* 213) offers an escape from her past. Again, it is the ability to choose a life in Gilead that makes its quiet a privilege. Ames is the town’s loyalist resident: he decides to stay long after his grandfather, father, and brother have all left and shows no interest in exploring the world beyond Iowa. However, even Ames comes to describe Gilead as a town of “no-account” and, after his confrontation with Jack, speculates that there could be “a hundred little towns like it” (*Gilead* 264). Gilead is therefore a device that further distances Robinson, her characters, and her prose from the political noise of the 1950s. As Ames gradually realises, Gilead could be any small town in mid-century America and, to varying degrees, the quiet

location of Robinson's fiction evokes an ambiguous past that is distant from both the politics of the 1950s and the 2000s in which Robinson is writing.

Yet, again, the quiet of Gilead has a political point and is more complex than a cursory reading indicates. In an essay on the forgotten history of abolitionism in the American Midwest, Robinson states that the "imaginary" town of Gilead is modelled on Tabor, a small settlement in southwest Iowa that was founded by the abolitionist preacher John Todd in the 1850s:

[Tabor] was intended to serve, and did serve, as a fallback for John Brown and others during the conflict [between anti-slavery and pro-slavery factions] in Kansas ... A more typical feature of the settlement was a little college, no longer in existence, which educated women as well as men. Some of these women travelled to distant countries, Korea, for example, to establish women's education there. History has ebbed away from Tabor since then, but it would be difficult to underestimate the impact of this one little settlement on American culture and world culture. ('Who Was Oberlin?' 180)

Gilead is not, then, one of a "hundred little towns" but a singular and historically important settlement that was established during a time of great abolitionist urgency in the pre-Civil War United States. Robinson stresses the forgotten intellectual history of the region, referring to the "little college" set up in Tabor that educated both men and women in order to spread their abolitionist philosophies to other countries. She is interested in Iowa as a site of intellectual and physical activity whose national and international importance has been forgotten. The history of Tabor, and therefore Gilead, is full of noise, action, and event and Robinson notes how the passage of time has subdued the political tenor of the region until the volume of its history is reduced to a whisper.

Gilead and *Home*, in particular, hint at the wider, historical noise that features heavily in Robinson's non-fiction, located just outside each character's experience of the present. Ames is the quietest of Gilead's residents, the most removed from his contemporary moment. Indeed, Ames' letter is a history of disengagement from contemporary events. He admits to burning a sermon about the influenza pandemic of 1918 in which he described the mass fatalities as an act of God rescuing young men from "committing murder" (48) in the war.

Similarly, Ames recalls how his grandfather took him to see Bud Fowler, the first African-American player in professional baseball, at Keokuk in 1885. Claiming to remember very little about Fowler himself, Ames gives the briefest mention to the introduction of “the Negro Leagues” (54), set up the same year to combat the exclusion of black players from major and minor league baseball, and claims to have lost interest in Fowler once segregation was in place. Ames skims over the major political events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through avoidance and ellision and gradually reveals himself to be a political quietist in its most negative and accusatory sense, a man who burns his only incendiary sermon and rarely expresses discomfort at the social, economic, and racial inequality he witnesses. Robinson therefore hints at the limits of quiet as a form of engagement while simultaneously demonstrating one of the strengths of her aesthetic. At the end of *Gilead*, Ames mourns Iowa’s forgotten radicalism, an “old urgency that is forgotten now” (267), and Robinson suggests that the quiet of his existence has turned to passivity when it should have turned to action. In quiet fiction, as Michael Sayeau writes of “antievental” novels by Flaubert and Joyce, the world is “a rhythm defined by banal continuity rather than accentuated series of revolutionary shocks” (5). Robinson’s quiet aesthetic therefore presents multiple interpretations of the relationship between thought and activity, the past and the present, passivity and action. But, most importantly, the Gilead novels examine and explore the varied states of quiet as a diverse and valid object of study with severe moral and ethical limitations.

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ⁱ In contemporary discourse, quiet and silence are often used interchangeably. I distinguish between the two by reading quiet as a discreet form of conversation and silence as the perceived or attempted absence of sound. Of course, silence has been a key trope of postmodernism: to Ihab Hassan, the "invocation of complex, articulate silences" (94) is a particularly postmodern form of discussion, whilst to Susan Sontag postmodern art is "noisy with appeals to silence" (12). Under postmodernism, silence is conceived as a mode of communication or an absence that invites language, but, most importantly, silence is always deemed impossible. With this impossibility in mind, my discussion of quiet is distinct from postmodern ideas of silence because I examine the presence, and not the absence, of quiet people, places, and states. See also Cheryl Glenn's *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, the first study to organise, contextualise, and analyse silences as a method of communication and the only study of silence similar to the quiet aesthetic outlined here.

ⁱⁱ At the time of writing, Robinson has published three Gilead novels but suggests that "People should be prepared to say quartet and not trilogy" (Charles).

ⁱⁱⁱ The philosophy of event is too complex to consider at any length but it is worth noting that a quiet novel is liberated from the portrayal of event as defined by Alain Badiou as any instance that does not make sense according to the longer "situation" of existence. By this definition, the event is entirely exceptional from day-to-day life and, I would argue, problematic as a marker of contemporary experience because it stresses the present moment's exceptionality. We might also consider the relevance of Jacques Derrida and his suggestion that traditionally linear event-driven narratives suppress difference by supporting teleology, conventionality, continuity, and the idea of truth with particular attention to Derrida's concept of "archive fever" in which the event is burdened by the impulse to imagine how the present will be remembered. See Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Badiou, *L'Être et l'Événement*, Derrida, *Archive Fever*.

^{iv} Greif borrows the term “big, ambitious novel” from James Wood’s infamous essay on the “hysterical” realism of Wallace, Pynchon, and Zadie Smith. Wood *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*, 178.

^v See Attali, Foy, *Zero Decibels*, Prochnik, *In Pursuit of Silence*, and Keizer, *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want*. For more on noise as an aesthetic in fiction see Katsma, ‘Loudness in the Novel’ and Sykes, “‘All that howling space’: ‘9/11’ and the aesthetic of noise in contemporary American fiction.’

^{vi} Futurist art, to name just one example, was composed from a “jabber of lines, planes, light, and noise” that refused to compress experience into a smaller picture, seeking louder, and broader, frames for experience (Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, 44). Similarly, Vorticism claimed to represent the “crude energy” of the world through “vivid and violent ideas”, as declared by Wyndham Lewis in the manifesto for *Blast* in 1914 (‘Introduction’ 7). As *Blast*’s editor, Lewis claimed that the journal’s title referred to Vorticism’s militant aesthetic, “the blowing away of dead ideas and worn-out notions” that would be realised in an explosion of noise and colour (‘Rebel Art in Modern Life’ 14). Importantly, Lewis believed that art should account for noise as a symptom of modernity and the avant-garde increasingly criticised artists who neglected or ignored society’s rising volume.

^{vii} Excepting the prologue, that Morrison writes as a pastiche of the Dick and Jane reading primer, “quiet” is the first word of the novel. Morrison explains the complexity of her attraction to the phrase in the Afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, revealing that the terms were familiar to her as a phrase used at home, between women sharing confidences, but also for its intimation of solidarity within the black community, that keeping quiet might return some agency to them by withholding information from the world outside. Another essay might consider Morrison’s aesthetic of quiet, especially if we consider the phrases opening parts 1 and 2 of *Beloved*: “124 was loud” and “124 was quiet” (*Beloved* 169, 239). See Bouson, *Quiet As It’s Kept*.

^{viii} The Third Edition of the *OED* notes that the earliest use of “quiet” as a noun appears in 1330, followed by “quietness” in 1425, “quietude” in 1598, and “quietism” in 1687. “Loud” is older, dating back to c800, but with fewer listed meanings.

^{ix} Quietism has experienced a resurgence of interest in the past decade. In 2008, six special issues of the interdisciplinary journal *Common Knowledge* were dedicated to exploring the historical breadth of quietism and briefly imagined its potential in literary criticism. Articles by philosophers Richard Rorty, Philip Pettit, and David Macarthur also suggest that quietism provides a way of exploring the ideological tension between performances of action and inaction that I argue quiet fictions elaborate. See Rorty, ‘Naturalism and Quietism,’ Virvidakis, ‘Varieties of Quietism,’ Pettit, ‘Existentialism, Quietism, and Philosophy,’ Macarthur and Price, ‘Pragmatism, Quasi-Realism, and the Global Challenge,’ and Macarthur, ‘Pragmatism, Metaphysical Quietism and the Problem of Normativity.’ There are few comprehensive studies on the term’s recent political use but for a beginning see Perl, ‘Introduction: *Meza Voce* Quietism?’ and Chamberlain, ‘Quietism and Polemic.’

^x Leitch later broadened his complaint to identify “quietism” in much of contemporary literary criticism due to widespread institutionalisation in the humanities. Leitch, *Theory Matters*, 71.

^{xi} There is a real town of Gilead in Iowa but it is located north east of the fictional town in which *Gilead* is set. To readers of modern fiction, Gilead is also the name of the totalitarian Christian nation in Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* although it cannot be claimed that Atwood’s novel influenced the latter. Perhaps more significantly, the name Gilead refers to the hymn “There Is a Balm in Gilead” that originated before the Civil War as an African-American spiritual. The name also draws on its Hebrew translation that means hill or mound of testimony, a location of reckoning and of possibility.

^{xii} *Home* also provides evidence of Ames’ political beliefs beyond the allusions found in *Gilead* and amplifies our understanding of the Reverend’s quiet thoughts. Glory describes arguments between Ames and Boughton as “incomprehensible ... shouting matches” (*Home* 222) whilst

Boughton's account of their fights complicates the quiet persona that Ames writes for himself in *Gilead*. "[Ames] pretends to be mulling it over," Boughton claims, "but I know he will vote Republican again. Because his grandfather was a Republican! ... Whose grandfather was not a Republican?" (43). Boughton presents himself as a moderate outsider and suggests that his family, who arrived in Iowa in 1870, could not understand the "fanaticism" (213) of abolitionists like Ames' grandfather. Whether or not Boughton is right about the vehemence of Ames' convictions, and his surprisingly thoughtless support of the Republican party, *Home* periodises *Gilead* and connects both novels with the political noise of the 1950s that Robinson's quiet aesthetic would otherwise exclude.