Introduction
'Change all aspects of our lives'

Deb Olin Unferth's graphic novel, *I, Parrot* (2017), skilfully illustrated by Elizabeth Haidle, comically critiques the various self-help discourses that enter into the protagonist's life. Daphne is stuck in a cycle of precarious 'stupid jobs', including taking care of parrots for a famous self-help author, within a system marked by 'foreclosures, falling stocks, houses underwater, the populace on unemployment'. She and her partner are nonetheless expected to find a way to 'change all aspects of our lives'; this is a society, Unferth tells us, where the onus is placed on individuals to overcome deep-rooted societal constraints and inequities.[1]

Echoing this philosophy, Daphne's boss produces 'positive thought crap' that asks its audience to uncritically 'parrot' her ideas but also, somewhat incongruously, conceive of themselves as individuals with a unique essence. The other self-help discourses encountered by Unferth's protagonist are similarly troubling. Even a seemingly prosaic how-to guide on parrot care, which Daphne turns to when caring for the author's birds, advances self-help's victim-blaming and individualist tendencies, insisting that bird mites emerge only in 'dirty, poor, morally questionable households' and, perhaps most bizarrely, encouraging the dissolution of parrot communities: 'Our advice? Scatter.' Both pragmatic and therapeutic forms of advice are reduced to 'messages for people to listen to and embrace while running relentless errands over a churning earth', a mere distraction from the social and environmental crisis evinced by the 'relentless' growth ethos of late capitalism. In Unferth's hands, self-help registers as an absurdist farce, one which allows her to articulate a scathing, satirical social critique. But it also becomes something stranger: an ambivalent force that inspires unlikely acts of personal, social, and imaginative agency. Daphne's self-help-author boss attempts to position herself as

a singular, authoritative voice, but Unferth and Haidle delight in showing how her advice circulates in unpredictable and unlikely ways, overflowing the bounds of its objects and leaking out into the wider world through Daphne's sceptical transcriptions (Figure 1.1) and, especially, the screeching chorus of the parrots under her care (Figures 1.2 and 1.3).

Haidler strips this first panel of depth, evoking the banal emptiness of Daphne's work life and workspace even as she transcribes positive-thought affirmations appealing to joy, love, and moral goodness. Yet Figures 1.2 and 1.3 show how, in the mouth of the 'big, wild' birds, generic self-help platitudes become vibrant, dynamic, and unruly affirmations of life, energizing the dull grey landscape. The three-dimensional, richly textured representations of the parrots as they screech, 'you are a divine being', 'just breathe', 'cheer up', and 'visit our website', contrasts with the flat, blank faces and constrained architectural forms of the human work world.

THE MESSAGES WEREN'T ALL THAT SPECIFIC, REALLY, OR CONVINCING, BUT THEY DID SHUT DOWN, SHUT OUT, OR OTHERWISE IMPEDE THE ROAR OF THE UNHAPPY MIND (WHICH FRANKLY MAY HAVE HAD A MORE PERSUASIVE ARGUMENT).

Figure 1 Source: Unferth and Haidle, *I, Parrot* (New York: Black Balloon, 2017).

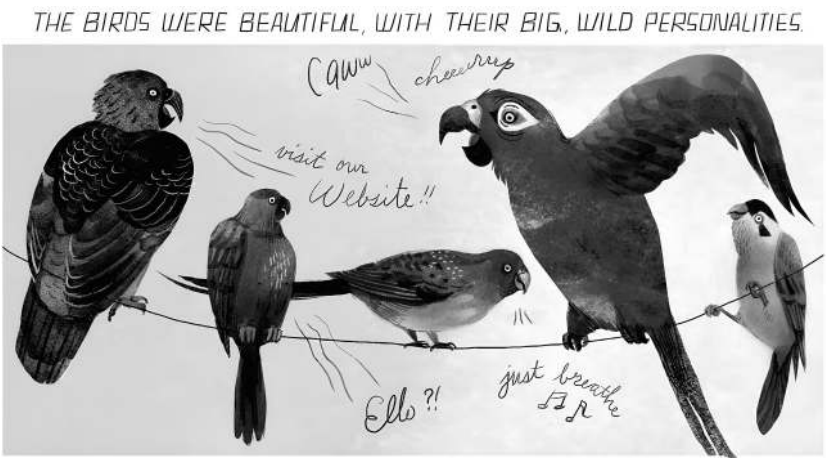

Figure 2 *I, Parrot.*

Figure 3 *I, Parrot.*

The advice within the parrot manual also becomes a source of charged, if ambiguous, surrealism: it is based on 'a simple how-to book' Unferth once read and interpreted as expressing a submerged 'Kafkaesque' critique of domesticated birds.[2] *I, Parrot* stretches how-to-ism to its most ridiculous limits, but it also suggests that it is possible to tune in to resistant potential within the cacophony of self-help voices. Based on a dream vision, Unferth's protagonist eventually decides to free the parrots, who are in danger of extinction, to 'repopulate the earth'. The birds embody and enact several paradoxes of life and self-help: they perform rote repetition yet express uniqueness; fly free but come

together in kinship. Inspired by 'parrots escaped from cages, finding one another, and making a home', Daphne leaves town herself to build a new life and community – 'like a team, or a gang'; 'like a family?' – with her son and partner. In one sense, this seems like a simple individual escape narrative, whereby self-determination and personal choice are offered up as unsatisfactory solutions to intractable socio-environmental problems. But *I, Parrot* turns self-help towards a more conflicted and recalcitrant form of agency by casting personal change as a matter of survival rather than optimization, by situating self-liberation within broader efforts to liberate others, and by decentring the human self as the privileged object of improvement. The stylized, often fabular form of the graphic novel is an ideal space for Unferth to interrogate the symbolism of different kinds of self-help media. Her narrative visibilizes but never resolves core tensions between the personal and social, assimilation and change, and freedom and determinism within the language and practices of self-improvement.

I begin with *I, Parrot* because, in its juxtaposition of multiple forms of self-help and its urge to both critique and creatively recuperate cultures of advice, Unferth's work exemplifies several broader tendencies within contemporary North American fiction. My central argument, in this book, is that North American writing of the past twenty-five years stages encounters between many different self-help practices and ideas as a way of evoking productive frictions between various contemporary conceptions of authorship, selfhood, and society. *I, Parrot* points to various conventions and mediums associated with self-help: we see seemingly straightforward instruction manuals that slide between imperatives, digressions, and generalizations; audio recordings aimed at invoking or manifesting self-love and acceptance; and AA meetings that offer a ritualized, social, and practice-led path to recovery. Self-help takes multiple shapes, each with its own conceptual and formal baggage: it can be a patchwork of loosely gathered-together advice, anecdotes, and recollections; a tightly shaped narrative of upward mobility; a circular, chronic framework of repeated mantras and ongoing self-work; or a shared practice of community discussions and individual actions. Recent new formalist thought, such as that of Caroline Levine, contemplates how rhetorical and literary forms overlap and interact as forces of 'ordering, patterning, or shaping', with specific 'affordances' that enable specific possibilities and responses.[3] The forms of self-help seem doubly charged, on these terms, as organized principles that themselves seek to organize, explicitly claiming the potential to reshape, reorder, and re-form the self and its circumstances. As will become clear,

neither this book nor the literary works it examines regard self-help as a singular entity that imposes its powers and promises in any one particular way. Instead, it is conceived of as an interconnected field with multiple, crisscrossing principles and practices compelling not only for their commonalities but also for their divergent structures, logics, and visions of the good life.

One central claim of this book is that contemporary authors move beyond simplistic understandings of a unified therapeutic culture: they are particularly drawn to the clashes between competing self-help philosophies and what they might reveal. Like Unferth, the authors I examine throughout this book mount a range of responses to self-help texts and techniques, at times modelling their precepts while at others pushing their philosophies to absurd extremes or pitting different wisdom traditions against one other. Hortatory, didactic, and therapeutic texts and practices offer a rich archive of form and thought, showcasing a range of clashing paradigms for living well today. If self-help is typically linked with contemporary fiction in its most obviously therapeutic and didactic forms – through confessional writing, progress-focused *Bildungsromane*, and sentimental-moral realism – this book considers how a wider range of advice texts and theories enter into a wider range of literary works, whose authors, like Unferth, are situated somewhere between experimental and mainstream traditions. This study focuses on eight US authors – David Foster Wallace, Paul Beatty, Tao Lin, Myriam Gurba, Benjamin Kunkel, Miranda July, Alexandra Kleeman, and Ben Lerner – alongside one Canadian author, Sheila Heti. This may seem a somewhat eclectic cohort, covering a range of styles, identities, and levels of recognition, but these writers are united through their investment in working out broader literary and social concerns through the multiple and contradictory practices of self-help, from commencement speeches, motivational talks, and African-American mutual aid traditions to productivity manuals, trauma recovery texts, makeover cultures, and popular guides to neuroplasticity. The writers I survey engage with self-help in ways as complex and multiple as the genre itself, drawn to advice cultures as often for their potential to evoke subversive critique or strange, esoteric aesthetics as for their centring of communicative pragmatism or emotional identification. In some cases, self-help practices themselves suggest unusual possibilities for shaping life and art; this will be evident, for instance, in Heti's use of chance counsel as compositional method, and in July's New Age allusions, which make her characters at once transcendent archetypes and unique, peculiar individuals. In other cases, contemporary writers exaggerate or transform even the most stereotypical mainstream self-help cultures to offer fresh perspectives – as when Kleeman turns skincare and makeover practices towards an aesthetics of sensitivity, or Kunkel rewrites the clichéd self-discovery

travel narrative. By combining close and comparative readings with socio-historical contextualization, archival research, and author interviews, I seek to unravel the complex ways in which the practices and legacies of self-help are put to use in recent writing that contemplates different ways of shaping and navigating contemporary literature and life.

Specifically, this book argues that the diverse discourses of self-help become a generative site for contemporary writers to negotiate anxieties around individual, social, and writerly *agency*. Several scholars have pointed to a 'crisis of agency', understood both personally and politically, from the 1980s onwards, within cultural and literary thought and production. The deconstructive and poststructuralist theory of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gayatri Spivak, Roland Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari, and others dismantled the myths of the essential, authentic self; the autonomous author; and the free, self-constituting agent, leading to fears that if 'the subject is a decentred site where social and linguistic forces converge, there can be no constructing ethical subject but only a constructed political subject', one incapable of setting forth any positive theory of the good life'.[4] Sociologically speaking, the failures of several 1960s and 1970s social movements to effect lasting transformation, and the seeming totality of systemic power dynamics with the operations of capital increasingly unchecked by government, produced what Gabriel Winant terms 'one big crisis of agency' in left-wing thought: 'antihumanist pessimism was triumphant', Winant claims, stifling imaginaries of both individual and societal change.[5] In our contemporary moment, the enormity of climate change, the determining forces of new technologies, and our globalized awareness of injustices and crises worldwide can further seem to obliterate any faith in a subject capable of exercising power and control.

Contemporary writing has given voice to such impasses through what has been called 'the novel of passivity' – in some ways a new iteration of the Generation X Slacker novel of disaffected youth – by authors such as Ottessa Moshfegh, Ben Lerner, Jenny Offill, Rachel Cusk, and others. Lynn Steger Strong notes that much recent fiction and autofiction by women in particular features protagonists 'fully cognizant of their ineffectuality' who passively opt out of the realms of social and interpersonal action, allowing themselves to be buffeted along by fate and circumstance.[6] This can give rise to a resistant, refusenik aesthetics, what has been called a 'radical passivity' in queer studies, and described more stoically as an emphasis on 'giving way', 'restraint, inhibition, forbearance, acquiescence, eschewal' by Steven Connor.[7] And yet, it also brings about a conundrum whereby the writer, by virtue of writing, experiences themselves as 'a subject – who has power and control, and makes choices', while writing about characters and selves who are merely 'acted

upon' as objects.[8] The stubborn, visceral residues of agency and action, however limited, need to be reckoned with.

Thus, the self-help genre, with its implicit faith in the power of words, practices, actions to inspire change, becomes a fascinating site for recent writers to work out which forms of agency and authorship remain possible in our contemporary literary world. As Beth Blum affirms, 'self-help models a mobility and textual agency that has been relegated to the margins of professional literary criticism'.[9] Riven with internal contradictions, though, the field of self-help does not walk entirely in lockstep with ideas of a sovereign, entrepreneurial self, and the authors I consider in this book often juxtapose practices of individual control against self-help traditions that centre around submission to chance and fate, ego transcendence, and even the idealization of non-human forms of life. Indeed, many critics have sought to question false dichotomies between fully sovereign selfhood and hard forms of social determinism which emphasize the impossibility of deliberate action. New and compelling accounts of distributed, relational, embodied, and qualified agency include Deleuzian repetition with a difference, Sharon Krause's 'non-sovereignty of individual agency', and Béatrice Han-Pile's phenomenological 'medio-passive' agency, where actions – especially affective acts such as hope, prayer, and planning – emerge alongside, or even through, a recognition of the agent's ultimate powerlessness.[10] In parallel ways, this book holds that contemporary authors mediate new stories of volition, choice, change, and acceptance by turning to distinct self-help traditions that are suffused to different extents with fantasies of hope, transcendent action, and resignation.

And as we saw in *I, Parrot*, agency and transformation are ineluctably social, as well as personal, issues. This book suggests that contemporary writing is deeply concerned with the possibilities and impossibilities of getting, being, and living better, where 'better' can mean ethical, therapeutic, and/or didactic improvement. In what follows, we will see writers and protagonists anxious about their focus on the self, looking to test the interpersonal and societal effects of individualist self-help ideologies even as they wonder whether self-help blocks or enables communal action. As early as the Victorian novel, as Rebecca Richardson argues, writers felt compelled to dramatize how self-help agency and ambition affected the relationship between the individual and the collective, staging scenarios in which bettering one's life entails worsening another's as well as those in which personal improvement contributes to the social good.[11] In a contemporary moment where the meaning of individualism, collectivism, and agency are subject to continual revision, self-help is a useful and relevant discourse to think with.

The Porous Practices of Contemporary American Self-Help

As a key site for 'technologies of the self' or 'anthropotechnics' that aim to sculpt the self and life, formalized advice has taken various shapes across different societies and eras.[12] These range from collected folk wisdom to conduct and etiquette manuals, ancient philosophy, religious wisdom texts, adult education lectures, mutual-aid structures, transcendentalist ideas of 'self-culture', popularized psychoanalytic and psychological literature, grassroots counter-cultural groups, and the mass cultural industry known as 'self-help' today.[13] This phenomenon ranges far beyond the borders of the United States, but it is undeniable that North America remains a central and influential site of self-help production and reception. The novels I consider both extend and trouble the genre's links with age-old 'American dream' myths of democratic individualism and success for all, as well as more recent associations with neoliberalism. In the United States, Puritan tracts, lectures, and confessional self-accounting practices, Benjamin-Franklin-esque secular almanacs of self-making, and Indigenous wisdom and healing traditions all precede today's self-help culture. Despite these significant precursors, the Anglo-American self-help industry as a discrete, modern genre and set of practices is generally considered to have begun in the mid-nineteenth century with the publication and mass global dissemination of Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859), which emerged from Smiles's engagement with UK working men's clubs and education and health reform movements, and counselled a bootstrap ethos of hard work, self-discipline, and moral character, embodied in the exemplary life stories of successful men.[14] Across the Atlantic, Smiles's work fit into a burgeoning American self-help tradition based on rational striving, self-control, and moral rectitude as a means to success in worldly callings, in line with Max Weber's generalized Protestant ethic. This tradition encompassed works such as Henry Ward Beecher's *Lectures to Young Men* (1844) and Freeman Hunt's *Worth and Wealth* (1856), as well as Franklin's earlier *The Way to Wealth* (1758), which epitomized, as Micki McGee terms it, the figure of the 'self-made gentleman-citizen'.[15] This hardline – and often masculine-coded – focus on willpower, labour, and self-mastery remains evident in several of the contemporary self-help cultures that make their way into my study, from David Foster Wallace's interest in the stern fatherly guidance of Alcoholics Anonymous speakers and other advisors to Tao Lin's investment in the disciplined management of time and work. In many ways, these traditions contrast with another major strand of the American self-help industry: a softer, more therapeutic, Romantic, and

spiritual ethos. Since the mid-to-late 1800s, the self-culture of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other Transcendentalists, and the New Thought and mind-cure movement promoted by Ralph Waldo Trine and Mary Baker Eddy, have emphasized self-fulfilment, individual expression, and attunement to flows of infinite energy as the key to creating abundance and personal growth. Throughout this book, the legacy of this softer self-help is evident in the concepts of creative flow, healing and recovery, and New Age philosophies explored in the writing of Myriam Gurba, Sheila Heti, Miranda July, and others.

If there are clear distinctions between these strands of self-help, Micki McGee wisely cautions us not to draw the lines too clearly. Even the archetypal representatives of each school of thought – Smiles, Franklin, Emerson, Trine – incorporated aspects of hard and soft. McGee argues that in our contemporary age, 'Franklin's orderly, reasoned, and self-disciplined approach to the accumulation of wealth' or 'the frugal, calculating asceticism of the Protestant ethic' are not necessarily 'opposed to the indulgent sentimentality and sensation-seeking of the Romantic ethos'; rather, 'life under capitalism contains complementary, mutually reinforcing elements'.[16] Many of the authors I consider here seek to understand how instrumental, disciplinary self-regimes interact with therapeutic, expressive approaches to self-care. Slower, softer, and more spiritual self-practices can expose fault lines in contemporary hustle culture, seed alternatives to extractive capitalist growth, and push towards more holistic forms of self-improvement – or they can simply prop up the status quo, offering temporary recovery only as a means of creating new products and markets and promoting greater productivity long term.

The industry has both grown and diversified since these origin moments, adapting to meet new needs. A new working world that required soft skills and organizational relationship building gave rise to interpersonal guides such as Dale Carnegie's classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936); a post-1960s countercultural bent popularized practices that offered alternatives to Protestant American ethics, including psychedelic consciousness expansion, human potential movements, often exoticized Eastern traditions, and the holistic mind-body-spirit New Age; an increasingly precarious neoliberal post-1980s labour market has seen a rise in self-help guides to flexible entrepreneurialism and productivity, from Richard Bolles's *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (1970; regularly revised and reissued) to Tim Ferriss's *The 4-Hour Workweek* (2007) and Cal Newport's *Deep Work* (2016).[17] The US self-help 'boom' of the late twentieth century has been marked not only by higher rates of production and consumption (the industry was worth $13.44 billion in 2022) but also by an increased

diversification of media forms (eBooks, apps, audio guides, talk shows, YouTube courses) and a proliferation and segmentation of sub-genres (including New Age, trauma recovery, high-end philosophical self-improvement, and pop-science neuroplasticity).[18] Specific, specialized self-help media are thriving, but contemporary self-help is also notable for its dissemination into the broader culture. In digital contexts, the figure of the advice giver often diffuses into a vaguely therapeutic field of decontextualized advice, circulated, in part, through quotes and memes, though online channels have also enabled the rise of charismatic and famous self-help authorities from Esther Perel, Brené Brown, and Nicole LePera to Andrew Huberman and Jordan Peterson.[19] Self-help infuses broader popular, political, and personal discourses; as Patricia Neville notes, 'self-help books have become integrated into our daily lives, whether we purposely seek these products out or not', often in ways inseparable from wider therapeutic discourses.[20] In 2021, the *New Yorker* published a much-discussed piece entitled 'The Rise of Therapy Speak', which interrogated the ways clinical psychology, popular psychology, and self-help rhetorics together structure 'our idea of the good life'; in 2023, they devoted an entire digital issue, The Therapy Issue, to 'therapy as a distinguishing feature of contemporary life'.[21]

This diffuse contemporary iteration of therapeutic-didactic culture is both historically specific and impossible to separate fully from older, cross-cultural traditions of wisdom, instruction, and psychological guidance. It is notoriously difficult to demarcate the capacious and slippery set of practices that comprise self-help: as one group of critics put it, 'the boundaries between self-help and other advice genres – in particular philosophical ethics, theological ethics, medical advice, and how-to guides for narrow practical tasks – often blur'.[22] While several critics have attempted to propose a single common ideological essence running through the genre – most often its reliance on individualism – others signal a network of overlapping, loosely united practices roughly akin to a Wittgensteinian 'family resemblance'.[23]

As this book explicitly investigates the productive antagonism between fictional depictions of distinct, even contradictory practices, I rely upon a similarly flexible understanding of self-help as indicating an expansive range of texts and activities jointly invested in signalling problems within the current life situation of their reader or audience and in proposing solutions. I also consider self-help across a broad range of media and traditions, beyond the terms of the self-help book alone. Peter Sloterdijk, drawing on Rilke's affirmation, 'You must change your life!' – curiously echoed in the pressure felt by the *I, Parrot* protagonists to 'change all