

“A SUDDEN INEXPLICABLE ONRUSH OF AFFECTIONATE
FEELING”: SUBJECTIVITY BEYOND LIMIT IN CATHER, LARSEN,
FITZGERALD, AND WOOLF

DAVID COODIN

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Abstract

“‘A Sudden Inexplicable Onrush of Affectionate Feeling’: Subjectivity Beyond Limit in Cather, Larsen, Fitzgerald, and Woolf” explores reconceptualizations of subjectivity beyond the discursive limits of realism in Willa Cather, Nella Larsen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Virginia Woolf. Relying on Gilles Deleuze’s theoretical framework, especially his concepts of virtuality and potential, this study examines disruptions to realist novels’ production of subjects: the self-centred *Bildungsroman*, the sexually normative marriage plot, and the reader that narrators call forth and narratives imply. From Henri Bergson to recent queer theory that links narrative linearity to narratives of social reproduction, these disruptions subvert conventional realist storytelling, a central function of modernist fiction in general.

This dissertation reads eleven novels closely to tease out moments of queer potential, which often surface through characters’ encounters with same-sex desire. Chapter One considers Cather’s *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. The first two novels invent new reading practices by staging nostalgia through ironic narrators. This tension gives way to transgressive sexuality in *Death*’s Latour and Vaillant, whose relationship valorizes impurity. Chapter Two examines Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing* and the Harlem Renaissance debates about black representation. The novels’ ambivalence about black middle class aspirations links bourgeois propriety to the conventions of realist fiction. *Passing*’s Clare Kendry fails as a mimetic sign, becoming a resource for the African-American novel and a site of non-identitarian blackness. Chapter Three considers queer productions of subjectivity in three Fitzgerald novels. In *This Side of Paradise*, same-sex desire interrupts Amory Blaine’s

heteronormative self-actualization, multiplying incoherent selves. Similarly, in *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway conceals an affective register of desire through silences. To apprehend this register, *Tender Is the Night* proposes an affective discernment in Dick Diver's decline, a movement away from realist charactericity. Finally, Chapter Four argues that Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves* present a model of subjectivity based on shared desire rather than discursive identification. The first two novels move away from treating characters as psychologically coherent subjects. *The Waves* conceives of womanly reading as the capacity to hold multiple perspectives at once, forming the basis for new forms of community. The political consequences of such ideas emerge in the Conclusion as a latent anti-fascism.

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Introduction: Modernism, Irony, and the Deleuzian Subject

There is a commonplace inclination in modernist studies that usually arrives toward the end of a work of criticism, in which the author, having already displaced a set of binary oppositions, gestures toward some unrepresentable and unnameable other yet to come, whether that other be a new state of being, a new constellation of sexual desire, or a new mode of politics or subjectivity. Erin E. Edwards' recent study of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* exemplifies this approach. In "Extremities of the Body: The Anoptic Corporeality of *As I Lay Dying*," Edwards argues that Faulkner's novel successfully eludes the opposition between the body as a site of discursive inscription, and the body as materially prior to discourse. Instead, *As I Lay Dying* obscures the visual availability of bodies, and in so doing "unhinges representation from the visual forms of power that have traditionally structured the normative body, allowing for new definitions of both corporeality and subjectivity" (741). What are these new definitions? As might be expected, it is difficult to say: the Faulknerian body is a Deleuzian site of transformation and becoming, "redefining the human outside traditional notions of 'personology'" (759); it is "tropological corporeality unleashed" from the constraints of the characterological body (760); it gives rise to "a liberating reorganization of matter and subjectivities" (760). In the end, Edwards argues, the novel claims "an emergent ontology of the body, continually reiterated and reformed" (760).

I single out Edwards' study not for any faults it may contain but to demonstrate how a thorough engagement with a canonical text of modernism cannot help but get caught up in a familiar dynamic: when faced with what is by definition unrepresentable, what else to do but assert the new body, the new identity, the new politics in terms of

what it is not? Such a gesture, no matter how committed to the immanence of this inarticulable outside to representation, is inescapably bound to a certain kind of utopianism, because that outside is inevitably figured as a promise on the verge of arrival, visible only were we to possess the appropriate tools of perception.

This study aims to begin where this common critical trajectory ends, and to redirect its outward search for the unrepresentable inward. Specifically, the novels of Willa Cather, Nella Larsen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Virginia Woolf that are under consideration here all, in sometimes radically different ways, feature textual incoherencies that invite reconceptualizations of subjectivity beyond the discursive limits of realist representation. Figuring these reconceptualizations without falling back into the vagaries of eschatological gesturing requires harnessing a critical apparatus up to the task. As we will see, the thought of Gilles Deleuze, and especially his ontology of emergence and politics of experimentation, read through and deployed by critic Cesare Casarino, produces such an outside: not something external to the subject that arrives as a kind of fresh-faced replacement, but a mode of communication among what remains unactualized by interpellative identification, which Deleuze terms “potential.” To the extent that this potential deviates from and disrupts the processes through which realist novels produce subjects – the self-centred subject of the *Bildungsroman*, the sexually normative heroes of the marriage plot, for instance, but also the reading subject that narrators call forth and narratives imply – it can be called queer potential.¹

¹ I use “queer” in the sense developed by Lee Edelman: “the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (*No Future* 3), which Edelman defines as the ideological limit imposed on political discourse that preserves “the absolute privilege of heteronormativity” (*No Future* 2). Importantly, for Edelman, queerness is not an identity, and can never denote one; rather, queerness “works to undo the belief in identity through which we find ourselves as subjects in the symbolic, to insist on the gap that social reality and the futurism supporting it deny” (“Post-Partum” 183).

One reason Cather, Larsen, Fitzgerald, and Woolf form the focus of this study is that such queer potential often surfaces in their novels as encounters with same-sex desire. Jean Latour, Irene Redfield, Amory Blaine, and Clarissa Dalloway, among others, come up against moments of same-sex eros the formal power of which lies not in the instantiation of some new and discernible identity-to-come, but in their capacity to undo identities that are discursively produced. While these encounters appear to characters to reassure the availability of subjectivity, they are also ironic allegories of reading that reveal disjunctions of readership, authorship, and textuality. In this regard, all four writers produce texts that not only disrupt regimes of heteronormativity, but that query the relationship between reader and narrator that goes into the production of meaning. Although these texts vary widely in their styles – the ostensible realism of Cather’s novels of the prairies might appear to have little in common with Woolf’s manifestly radical experiments with narrative perspective and linearity – they all demonstrate a concern for community that can arise out of queer potential. By the same token, the selection of novels with such disparately rich locales and milieus – the Nebraska plain figured through ironically sentimental memoir, the middle-class Harlem household of the 1920s, the gaudy lavishness of Jazz-Age New York, a quiet country house in pre- and post-war England – suggests that these experiments with subjectivity are not localized or uniquely and most successfully performed, for instance, with black identity in the Harlem Renaissance, or masculine identity in the mind of a shell-shocked soldier. Rather, the status of being outside of discursive identity is a central concern for all of these texts, a

For Edelman, queerness exposes the links between the linearity of narrative and “the narrative of social reproduction through some form of family line” (“Post-Partum” 182).

commonality which itself reveals a surprising community among them, and suggests it is also a concern that is central to the various modernisms at issue here.

The force of radical encounters with unseemly others, however, is not the exclusive domain of modernist literature; realist novels that precede this period are also ambivalent about the inadequacy of their narrative form to accommodate such threats, and develop literary techniques that prefigure modernism. In *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Amy Kaplan demonstrates this fact by distinguishing between the realisms of William Dean Howells and Edith Wharton, both of which try to manage the threat of rapid social change brought on by industrial transformation at the turn of the twentieth century (10). At one side of the spectrum Kaplan places Howells, whose aversion to “the potential for revolutionary upheaval” (10) results in a realism whose *raison d’être* is to fix “protean changes within a coherent narrative form” (44), to tame the social by standing outside it, totalizing its scope and disavowing its turbulence in one anxious gesture.² At the other is Wharton, a writer whose realism “both counters and enacts” the “impudently new” of the modern by becoming a forum in which various manifestations of social change play out (10). Wharton’s novels meditate on the paradoxes of cultural snobbery, for instance, but locate high culture as only one of many different “competing claims to social reality” (11). Unlike the “nostalgia for lost unity”

² Other critics also direct us to some of the ways in which novels of this period begin to figure the chaos that throws realism into the crisis of its late phase. Mark Seltzer argues that realist novels might form part of the vast nebulous network of power operating in an increasingly disciplinary society. In Seltzer’s view, realism’s fascination with “techniques of surveillance and detection” is a power play that serves to police the real, presumably bringing to light the details of quotidian life in order to normalize them (“Realism” 112). For Rachel Bowlby, naturalist novels expose “society with all its flaws, all the seamy, distasteful corners into which a now by implication too genteel realism had failed to peer” (14). (For a discussion of the differences between realism and naturalism, see n. 7, below.) In contrast to Seltzer, Bowlby believes that previously unremarkable locales exceed representation’s containment; rather than being fully co-opted by power, the inclusion of “a multiplicity of social realities” fractures narrative form, as the novel cannot

(11) that Kaplan sees in Howells, anxiety about the modern in Wharton is self-reflexive; by dwelling on the impossibility of bringing such chaotic disturbances under control, her novels bring them into full view as immanent features of their landscapes.³

Kaplan demonstrates, in other words, that there is a strain in realism of narratological and figural unease that yields, first of all, irony to compensate for the inadequacy of realist reporting's attempts to capture the complexity of reality. Henry James, for one, writes in "The Art of Fiction" that the novel is "a personal, a direct impression of life" (859). For James, the novelist finds his or her material in "experience," his definition of which anticipates literary impressionism: "Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and

produce an overarching vision by which to conceive of them all at once, and instead must proceed metonymically from one to the next (14).

³ Kaplan is not alone in pointing to some of the ways in which American novels of this period begin to thematize realist strategies of containment as a topic for representation. June Howard argues that the naturalist tendency to cast out the figure of the brute is always ultimately unsuccessful, the disruptive Other incurably inscribing itself as a danger "in the represented social and psychological order and in the order of the text" (103). Far from generating closure, naturalist domestic spaces "can never seem wholly safe," threatened perpetually by the incursion of that which resists domestication (181). And by tying her study to the "ideological material" of market relations and class struggle (71), while at the same time registering the unwillingness with which naturalist novels bend to such ideology (141), Howard suggests, with Kaplan, that the representational anxiety itself surrounding social upheaval forms an implicit critique of earlier realist modes. Similarly, Philip Fisher finds in the commercialized world of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* a refusal to draw a sharp distinction between acting and sincerity, between "the representation of what one is not [and] authentic self-representation" (*Hard Facts* 167). Carrie Meeber's Broadway performance safely directs the crowd's eager gaze onto her stage persona, serving "to preserve a freedom of the self from its appearance" (*Hard Facts* 167) by opening a concealed space for "protest on the part of the wider possibilities of her self" (*Hard Facts* 168). In taking up the unsettling conflation of manufactured and "real" selfhood under a regime of commodified objects, Dreiser's naturalism thus surmises that the fixity of modern specularly also contains the chaotic seeds of its own undoing.

It is worth noting that critics also look to earlier realist texts for subversive instances of potential social disturbance. Elsewhere, Fisher makes a similar point about *Huckleberry Finn*, in which Huck and Jim engage in "risky experiments in feeling" when alone on the raft, "in spite of and at the mercy of a public world to which they must lie and perform" ("Appearing" 188). Allan Trachtenberg sees in Melville's *Billy Budd* an outer "realist" narrative of "mere events," the utopian claim to American reason and nature, that cloaks the "equivocal, murky, elusive" inner world of unofficial history (205). This "new world," Trachtenberg argues, undermines old values by exposing morality as a function of violence and deceit, a world whose ever-shifting grounds cannot be captured by the rigid language of verisimilitude (206).

catching every airborne particle in its tissue” (860). Similarly, in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, James explains how the ostensible fixity of the given realist world is multiplied by phenomenologically various points of view: “The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million” (46). Kaplan’s reading of Howells’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, for another, fails to notice the self-effacing irony that the novel uses to register its own inability to domesticate social threats.⁴ Secondly, even in texts of the period that do not feature the limitations of narratological objectivity, an important precursor to modernism’s ironic treatment of stable truth can be found in their distrust of symbols and symbolic logic. Lawrence Selden’s exchange with Lily Bart at the end of Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, for instance, troubles the availability of the figure: “in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear” (256). The word that is said to clarify, but whose unspokenness does no such thing for the reader, suggests an inscrutability of all symbols, and anticipates Lily Briscoe’s painting at the end of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, which the novel reveals only *as* concealment.

As literature at the turn of the twentieth century loses faith in both objective surveillance and the transmissibility of symbolic meaning, it also loses faith in nostalgia for a time before these crises of modernization, opening the door for new modes of being as potential. The opening lines of Cather’s *O Pioneers!* (1913), for instance, appear to set up a simplistic binary between the transitoriness of urban culture and the permanence of the land: “One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away” (3). Hanover is conjured as humanity’s feeble attempt to impose itself on the rural landscape, an artifice that will eventually give itself back to the larger totality of the natural setting. Further down the

⁴ See Redding, pages 91-101.

page, however, the seemingly reactionary ontology begins to fray with the description of the town's houses:

The dwelling-houses were set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod; some of them looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves, headed straight for the open plain.

(3)

This is not merely a stand-off between urban flightiness and rural authenticity. The impermanent houses are “haphazard,” as if random and spontaneous. Some have the look of having arrived overnight, not only a sudden and unplanned displacement, but one of mystery, luridness, scandal. Others appear as if in perpetual motion, in collective private exile from the town to which they belong metonymically. There is nothing “straight” at all about this appearance of migration toward an “open” alternative to the regulatory circuit of culture and nature. It turns out that Hanover is teeming with deviant potential, working against the nostalgia with which Cather's narrator codes this opening description. To be “blown away,” then, would be for Hanover to flee from a system of meaning that relegates the city to the status of corrupted and impermanent not-country. Cather's novel thus refuses to manage the anxieties surrounding urbanization by either dismissing or indulging them; instead, *O Pioneers!* undermines this dialectic entirely by pointing to the strange potential for its own undoing, queer insofar as it disrupts the normativity of both modernization and nostalgia. In so doing, Cather's novel calls forth a new kind of modernist reader, one seduced by the reactionary system of stable meanings set up by the sincere narrator, while at the same time compelled by a countervailing ironic resistance to the houses' symbolic value beyond the narrator's control.

This ambivalence toward social change is part of the trajectory of realism that Kaplan describes, and can be found throughout the American texts under consideration here: Helga Crane of Larsen's *Quicksand* and Amory Blaine of Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, for instance, both fear the gaudiness of the crowd, but neither novel presents its protagonist's cultural elitism as either properly high-brow or hopelessly mystified. Rather, Helga's disdain for mass culture becomes a trope for her ambivalent relationship to duBoisian race politics; Fitzgerald treats Amory's snobbery as a stage of immaturity that he must disavow, but only partially, and always hypocritically. In each case, emotional selfhood is only moderately undercut by a critical reflection that remains perpetually at odds with other forces in the novel, resulting in encounters with queer identities. This brand of modernism is less a monolithic break from earlier modes of representation, and more a diverse set of conventions that begins as a logical, if revolutionary, continuation of experiments with irony as the non-resolution of narratological and symbolic crisis.

In England, on the other hand, the modernist break with realism is more manifestly apparent from early on. In his preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), Joseph Conrad writes that the artist, and in particular the writer of fiction, must appeal to temperament as "an impression conveyed through the senses" (12). Conrad's ideal writer conveys truth, but truth only as "a passing phase of life" snatched "from the remorseless rush of time" (13); he awakens solidarity in his readers, but solidarity "in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate" (13). If his readers can be assured of anything, it is only of the instability of the world as we know it, and realism is only a god which "must, after a short period of fellowship, abandon [the writer] – even on

the very threshold of the temple – to the stammerings of his conscience and to the outspoken consciousness of the difficulties of his work” (13). Later, in *Heart of Darkness* (1899; 1902), the narrator’s well-known description of Marlow’s distinctive narrative style is as instructive a tract on literary impressionism as any:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted) and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (9)

Realism delivers a truth which, like the meat of a nut, is easily transferred, easily grasped, and life-sustaining. Impressionism offers only a shifting aura of truth that can be neither grasped nor transferred, made visible only briefly by a narrator’s casting of light, itself only “spectral.”

As much as Conrad undermines the possibility of realist narration, he nevertheless laments its loss. Marlow’s story is highly performative and yields no communal understanding among its audience, but the mere presence of a collective readership indicates a nostalgia for the kind of shared perspective that remains a key feature of realist texts, a nostalgia that Ford Madox Ford will do away with in *The Good Soldier* (1915). The novel’s second chapter begins with a lampoon of realist consensus-building:

I don’t know how it is best to put this thing down – whether it would be better to try and tell the story from the beginning, as if it were a story; or

whether to tell it from this distance of time, as it reached me from the lips of Leonora or from those of Edward himself.

So I shall just imagine myself for a fortnight or so at one side of the fireplace of a country cottage, with a sympathetic soul opposite me. (19)

Ford gives us a narrator, John Dowell, who does not know whether to proceed with his telling impressionistically as the story “reached” him, or in a conventionally realist order, an ambivalence that undercuts the realist option from the start. More radically, in contrast to Marlow’s fractured listeners, here, a community between teller and listener, and its presumed potential for social regeneration, is mere fantasy. Dowell will long for a “sympathetic” listener, but only as a device to help him settle his dilemma surrounding narrative style. Throughout, Dowell’s insistence that he is untroubled by his wife’s infidelity, which only betrays his numerous insecurities, serves to disrupt the conventions of the realist narrator: objective, detached, emotionally stable. In the end, by unmasking the storyteller for the cluster of anxieties that he really is, Ford shows us that all realist narration is but a performance of stable and detached masculinity, and furthermore, that the coherent solidarity of audience after which Conrad lusts is but a delusional projection on behalf of an erratic and needy storyteller.

Finally, Virginia Woolf criticizes the impositional authorial voice of literary realism. “Modern Fiction” (1919), Woolf’s own discourse on impressionism, tells us that “[t]he mind receives a myriad impressions” every day, “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms” (150). Woolf counsels writers of fiction,

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in

appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.

Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is

commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. (150)

For Woolf, fiction should mimic the patterns of human perception, and she excoriates realist writers for letting “life” escape in their stolid descriptions of external reality (149).

In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf blames realist writers for passing off their version of reality as universal, all the while ignoring the perpetually changing and multiple Mrs. Brown, whose own perspective has never been deemed a worthy subject for representation. Instead of imposing a unified character on her, Woolf reminds us that Mrs. Brown is “an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety,” and that a truly “realistic” representation of her must observe these capacities and will never be complete (87). Such writers as Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy, however, have made Mrs. Brown fit into the staid pattern of a stable world, managing her interior capacities by universalizing their masculinist perspective. For Woolf, such a representational strategy will no longer hold.

Like the early novels of American modernism, the impressionistic tradition in Britain that culminates with Woolf proposes narratological strategies that undermine the fantasy of totalized perspective, while simultaneously refusing to criticize such fantasy without irony. Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway is a shell-shocked memoirist, trying to tell a coherent and emotionally detached story that is undermined at every turn by his involvement with occulted registers of desire. Woolf’s narrator in *To the Lighthouse* presents Mrs. Ramsay simultaneously as an embodiment of the Victorian housewife, and as a modern articulation of female agency. Both novels position critical strategies

ironically against a seemingly sincere narrating voice, frustrating the closure they appear to invite in very different ways.

Modernist literatures, in all their multiplicity, draw attention to the crisis of realism through narratological schemes and symbolic breakdown. While realism, particularly its later texts, is ambivalent about the objective transmission of stable meaning, modernist writers push the incongruity between figural disturbance and narratological control until the latter comes to assert its instability as a structural feature of their texts. Irony surfaces as a particularly incisive tool because it can hold, say, sentimentality in tension with critical reflection, while refusing to come down on one side or the other. Such ambivalence would appear to be an ideal strategy for exposing and negotiating this particular crisis, because the failure of realism is the failure of resolution itself.

These anxieties, however, were not the exclusive domain of literary writing. Much as realism in literature is anxious about the fixity of symbolic logic, philosophical discourses leading up to modernism are anxious about the status of objects, sometimes famously so, an important point for situating Deleuze's ontology with respect to the representability of subjectivities. When Marx declares that commodities are repositories of concealed labour (use-value), he registers a skepticism toward the thingly world and the mystical character with which its objects are sometimes endowed (fetishism).⁵ The advent of the department store and the proliferation of advertisements in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as both Rachel Bowlby and Alan Trachtenberg have shown, only

⁵ Similarly, Freud's investigations into dream symbols, for instance, expose the latent dream-work processes of condensation and displacement. What might appear to be a reliable marker of meaning turns out to be a vexed product of chaotic and disturbing unconscious desires.

furthered the disjunction between the commodity and its process of production, creating “a kind of magical appearance of goods as if from nowhere” (Trachtenberg 133).

Literary naturalism, argues Bowlby, took on the task of exposing the hidden labour within objects, showing “society with all its flaws, all the seamy, distasteful corners into which a now by implication too genteel realism had failed to peer” (14).⁶ The status of its objects of representation too shifty and multiple to be captured by the totalizing effects of realism, naturalism invents a “narrative machine,” to use Mark Seltzer’s term (44), to isolate and study, for instance, the power of capitalism to shape desires and limit agency in a character such as Dreiser’s *Carrie Meeber*.⁷

If naturalism invents a series of techniques to compensate for the inscrutability of the object, its philosophical corollary is pragmatism, which sought conceptual clarity in the face of the lively and shifty world of things.⁸ Pragmatism, according to Louis Menand, was “an effort to unhitch human beings from...a useless structure of bad abstractions about thought” (*Pragmatism* xi). Influenced by Darwin, pragmatism, first of

⁶ The distinction between realism and naturalism is vexed. For a good summary of this conversation, see Howard, pp. 10-14, 22-26, 142-147. Howard argues that while both realism and naturalism believe that narrative refers to a “real world” outside the text, and can thus make a documentation of “the real” a central part of their projects (11), it is naturalism that develops knowledge as a discursive means of sociological control (147). Similarly, in *Bodies and Machines*, Mark Seltzer writes that the naturalist novel is an intensification of the realist narrative techniques of surveillance and control (43). By foregrounding the “evolutionary dynamics” (43) of the machinery of surveillance, the naturalist novel “manages late nineteenth-century ‘crises’ of production by the invention of a flexible and totalizing machine of power” (44).

⁷ Kaplan notes this powerlessness in *Sister Carrie*: “In *Sister Carrie* the desire for social change is channeled into the desire for novelty, the desire to construct a social reality in which change most often yields more of the same” (149).

⁸ William James believed that philosophy had become burdened by the disputes between rationalism, which prioritized abstract reason over materiality, and empiricism, which believed that the human mind was conditioned by tactile experience. Much as modernist writers use ironic literary procedures to hold conflicting forces in tension with one another, James and others developed pragmatism as a means to overcome the conceptual duality in philosophy. James says in 1907, in the opening lecture of *Pragmatism*, “I offer the oddly-named thing pragmatism as a philosophy that can satisfy both kinds of demand. It can remain religious like the rationalisms, but at the same time, like the empiricisms, it can preserve the richest intimacy with facts” (18). Three years earlier, C. S. Peirce writes, more colloquially, that pragmatism “sweeps all metaphysical rubbish out of one’s house” (“A Definition of Pragmatism” 58).

all, developed criteria for determining truth, which would measure an idea's utility in everyday experience rather than its conformity to a pre-existing concept. Secondly, and more germanely, pragmatism is "a genetic theory of what is meant by truth" (James, *Pragmatism* 33), which is key to understanding its disruptive character. In Lecture VI: Pragmatism's Conception of Truth, William James says that

[t]he truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *veri-fication*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*. (92)

James' theory says that a truth's historical process of becoming *is* its identity, which implies that all known laws of reality, all structures of the world, are matters of historical contingency and temporal dynamism.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that both James and Peirce believe that what presents itself as immutable reality is the result of acquired habit. The laws of nature, says Peirce, develop "out of pure chance, irregularity, and indeterminacy" ("A Guess at the Riddle" 50), yet appear natural and necessary once we forget that gravity, for instance, is a property that emerges in massive bodies through temporal processes. What pragmatism offers us, therefore, is an ontological expression of realism and naturalism's crisis. Concepts do not precede their material instantiations; truth *is* its historical process of becoming; reality appears as natural because of convention; and most provocatively, the world *organizes itself* through a series of evolutionary accidents. Although the pragmatists were ultimately more conservative than their philosophy might suggest – Peirce looked forward to the day when chance would be displaced by "a complete reign

of law” (“A Guess at the Riddle” 50); James advocated making useful actions “automatic and habitual” from a young age (“Habit” 64) – the supposition that truth and reality are not only subjective, but a matter of historical chance, yields one inevitable conclusion: the world as we know it could have organized itself in any number of other ways.

Modernist writers use ironic literary strategies to elude the stalemate between verisimilitude and critical reflection; pragmatism elaborates an ontology that undermines the stability of “reality,” and offers a philosophical method for pursuing conceptual states that dislodge the production of habit. Ultimately, however, pragmatism’s radical ontology must submit to its utilitarian character: Peirce wants pragmatism to clear away “metaphysical rubbish,” but he will nevertheless direct his thought toward clearing away all uncertainty from the decision-making process, an ethics reminiscent of realism and naturalism’s impulse for descriptive clarity. Writing around the same time as the pragmatists, Henri Bergson senses something much more stifling in habit’s production of reality, and proposes an ontology that, like modernist ironic tendencies, relishes ambivalence and chaos, rather than trying to overcome them.

Bergson developed theories of perception with close affinities to pragmatism.⁹ In the preface to *Matter and Memory* (1897), Bergson also situates his philosophy between

⁹ William James was influenced directly by Bergson. In Lecture V of *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), James credits Bergson with having “killed intellectualism definitively and without hope of recovery” (215), and says deferentially of Bergson, “Reading his works is what has made me bold. If I had not read Bergson, I should probably still be blackening endless pages of paper privately, in the hope of making ends meet” (214). Two years earlier in a letter to Bergson, James notes the similarities between their two philosophical systems, while praising Bergson’s as superior:

You will be receiving my own little ‘pragmatism’ book simultaneously with this letter. How jejune and inconsiderable it seems in comparison with your great system! But it is so congruent with parts of your system, fits so well into interstices thereof, that you will easily understand why I am so enthusiastic. I feel that at bottom we are fighting the same fight, you a commander, I in the ranks. (377)

Further down, James degrades his own philosophy for continuing to use the tools of intellectualism, in contrast to Bergson’s, which “set[s] things straight at a single stroke by [its] fundamental conception of the

“realism” and “idealism,” and sets forth two principles:

The first is that in psychological analysis we must never forget the utilitarian character of our mental functions, which are essentially turned towards action. The second is that the habits formed in action find their way up to the sphere of speculation, where they create fictitious problems, and that metaphysics must begin by dispersing this artificial obscurity.

(xx-xxi)

For Bergson, too, thought is directed toward useful action in the world, and our sense of reality is an effect of repetition. But whereas the pragmatists valorize the utilitarianism of ideas, Bergson notes here that it is action that produces physical habit, which in turn leads to habit in thought. Rather than being a tool for cognitive precision, then, Bergson’s philosophical methods are directed toward overturning thought’s necessity for action, and in so doing, toward overturning the operations of the intellect itself. He writes in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), “To philosophize, therefore, is to invert the habitual direction of the work of thought” (52). In short, Bergson constructs a world of flux, what he calls pure movement, or duration. While conventional philosophy has tended to think of movement through space as an accumulation of infinitely small intervals¹⁰ (*Memory* 248), Bergson believes that while *space* is indeed divisible into ever-smaller units, *movement* itself is not (*Memory* 250). Pure movement refers to the continuous flux underneath perceptible reality, the process of change that all entities undergo, as being differs with itself from one moment to the next (*Memory* 270). Pure

continuously creative nature of reality” (377). For James’ full explanation of Bergson’s theory, see Lecture VI of *A Pluralistic Universe*, “Bergson and Intellectualism,” pp. 223-273.

¹⁰ This is the origin of Zeno’s paradox, which dwells on the seeming contradiction between the infinite divisibility of space, and the irrefutable observation that we pass through it seamlessly.

movement gives rise to three-dimensional space, but, as with the pragmatists, such space is but one instantiation of an infinity of realities that might have been, and habit serves to isolate the given world as natural and immutable. As Bergson tells us, “To perceive means to immobilize” (*Memory* 275). It is to immobilize a body from its flux through time. It is also to divide bodies in space into “distinct material zones” (*Memory* 261), a necessity for satisfying our needs in the world,¹¹ but a division that is rather arbitrary: “All division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division” (*Memory* 259).

If realist writers try to erect a contingent stability to compensate for the chaos of social change, Bergson begins to give us an idea of what that latent anarchy might look like.¹² Similarly, Bergson suggests that just underneath the perceptible world that we take for granted, to which realism devotes its energy, lies a continuous flux from which

¹¹ Bergson says that to carve out a body of our own within the continuity of duration, and to enter into relation with other “portions thus carved out from sensible reality,” is what is called “living” (*Memory* 262).

¹² Bergson’s theories had a considerable impact on some strains of American and British modernisms. In addition to his influence on pragmatism (see n. 9, above), Bergson was so celebrated in the United States that large crowds came to see him receive an honorary degree from Columbia University in 1913 (Quirk 1). Although he denounced him later on, T. S. Eliot attended Bergson’s lectures at the Collège de France in 1911, which, according to Eliot’s mother, affected him so profoundly that he decided to study philosophy instead of literature at Harvard (Quirk 83). Willa Cather is said to have read Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* excitedly in 1912 (Quirk 103). In her 1922 preface to *Alexander’s Bridge*, Cather argues that the successful writer relies on an imperceptible guide that “corresponds to what Mr Bergson calls the wisdom of intuition as opposed to that of intellect” (96).

Bergson was first popularized in England by T. E. Hulme, who published at least eighteen items on the philosopher between 1909 and 1912 (Pondrom 16), and translated the first English edition of Bergson’s *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1912), which contains a statement of authorization from Bergson himself. In “Bergson’s Theory of Art,” Hulme writes that action interposes a veil between the intellect and the world (158); the poet’s role is continually to invent fresh language and metaphors to help us communicate directly with reality (163). The influence of Hulme on the imagist poets can therefore be linked to Bergson’s influence on Hulme (for Hulme’s full account of his own introduction to Bergson’s work, see “Notes on Bergson” in *Further Speculations*, pp. 28-63.) John Middleton Murry also writes on Bergson’s importance for literature. In a 1911 essay, Murry calls his philosophy “the open avowal of the supremacy of the intuition, of the spiritual vision of the artist in form, in words and meaning” (55). Importantly, Murry asserts that art, in all its “movement, ferocity, tearing at what lies before” is “the true and only expression of reality” (56). Wyndham Lewis studied under Bergson in 1910 (Quirk 85), but like Eliot, later had scorn for his attacks on intellect (Campbell 351). For a compelling deconstruction of

reality derives its being, which Bergson calls “the virtual.” Things that are seemingly stable are actually self-different; matter that appears to be completely separate from all that surrounds it is really not;¹³ perceiving oneself as an autonomous subject is just a bad habit of metaphysical thought. Bergson will thus give us “intuition,” a tool for attuning ourselves to the flux of pure duration. He calls for intelligence to “place itself within the mobile reality, and adopt its ceaselessly changing direction” (*Metaphysics* 51). Although Bergson does not reveal precisely how this might be accomplished, he is passionate in acknowledging the difficulty of this task, an urgent one for the future of philosophy:

The mind has to do violence to itself, has to reverse the direction of the operation by which it habitually thinks, has perpetually to revise, or rather to recast, all its categories. But in this way it will attain to fluid concepts, capable of following reality in all its sinuosities and of adopting the very movement of the inward life of things. Only thus will a progressive philosophy be built up. (*Metaphysics* 51)

Bergson’s call for doing violence to regular perception is particularly germane to the novels under consideration here. The encounters with queer potential that these texts stage must be thought of as encounters with the register of the virtual: coming face to face with the flux that subtends all identities means that any one identity is contingent and somewhat arbitrary, precisely the frightening notion from which Larsen’s Irene Redfield recoils, inspiring her to commit acts of violence, both epistemic and physical.

Lewis’ vexed disavowal of Bergson, see SueEllen Campbell’s “Equal Opposites: Wyndham Lewis, Henri Bergson, and Their Philosophies of Space and Time.”

¹³ It is important to note that Bergson understands that there are distinct beings and objects in the world, each with its own properties and evolutionary history, but that these distinctions are not as absolute and precise as they seem. What he is getting at is that a thing cannot be completely separated from its environment, that “there is a passage by insensible gradations from the one to the other” (*Memory* 278).

The register of the virtual is not a transcendent realm that contains any one identity in latency. Rather, it is the continuous interval between any two identities, and thus the potential for a subject to become someone other than herself.¹⁴

On this count, Deleuze's ontology, which builds on Bergson's, is instructive. For Deleuze, a subject emerges out of this virtual flux not by being "retroactively fabricated in the image of what resembles it" (*Difference and Repetition* 212), but through a process of actualization:

The actualisation of the virtual, on the contrary, always takes place by difference, divergence or differentiation. Actualisation breaks with resemblance as a process no less than it does with identity as a principle. Actual terms never resemble the singularities they incarnate. In this sense, actualisation or differentiation is always a genuine creation. It does not result from any limitation of a pre-existing possibility. (*Difference and Repetition* 212)

As opposed to the fiction of making real what was already rigidly presupposed, which Deleuze calls "possibility,"¹⁵ the actualization of virtual potential is a process of creation, insofar as its undertaking is experimental, its result totally unpredictable.¹⁶

¹⁴ In *Difference and Repetition* (1968), Deleuze compares the realm of the virtual to the colour spectrum, akin to a continuum of infinitely small intervals (206, 245). So continuous is the spectrum that it appears only as an indistinct mass of whiteness (recall Bergson's conception of pure movement). This mass cannot be said to present any one shade, but contains the *potential* for any and all actual colours.

¹⁵ Todd May explains the isomorphism between the possible and the real as follows: "The possible is structured like the real, missing only its characteristic of really existing" (48).

¹⁶ Miguel de Bestegui notes three ways in which the virtual is different from the possible: 1) actuality is "*produced* on the basis of the reality of the virtual"; 2) the virtual "presupposes difference alone" in the identity of the actual, whereas the possible subsumes differences under self-identity; 3) the possible is "retroactively modeled after the actual," whereas "virtual multiplicities are nothing like their actualization" (273-274).

The key to Deleuzian subjectivity is that actualization is not a perfectly efficient and final process: there is always something outside subjective identifications (May 162). There is, in other words, some residue of the potential out of which the subject has emerged, persistent “pre-individual singularities” that have somehow eluded capture by the process of actualization. These singularities are chaotic and unrepresentable from the perspective of the regime of subjectification, existing perhaps on the same continuum as the “bodies and pleasures” that Foucault looks to as a “rallying point” against the institutional discourses that produce sexuality (Foucault 157). The outside to power, for Deleuze, lies within the subject’s capacity for reorganizing itself, as a multiplicity, by pursuing new and unforeseen connections with other multiplicities in the terrain of the actual. And most importantly, these connections must occur between pre-individual singularities, as one subject’s virtuality enters into a “zone of indiscernibility” with another’s.

To form new political assemblages, in other words, individuals must connect not as subjects, but as unactualized flows and affects, where subjects become indistinguishable from one another because they have emerged out of the same spectrum of virtual potentials, to “endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their natural differentiation,” as Deleuze and Guattari tell us (*Philosophy* 173). Lest, however, we think of the virtual and actual in a strictly linear temporal relationship, we should remember that virtuality is not some antecedent that is lost and recaptured, but subsists within the actual, which constantly produces it anew at each instant of subjectivity, such that the actual and the virtual “‘run after each other’, refer to each other, reflect each other, without it being possible to say which is first” (*Cinema* 46). Or, as Casarino

understands it, “the virtual and the actual form an immanent circuit, in the sense that each of the two is the obverse side of the other – and hence the actual always has virtual facets, always leads parallel virtual lives, and vice versa” (Casarino and Negri 179).

If the actualized life of the subject keeps producing new virtualities at every turn, self-identity is important, but only insofar as it expresses “the necessity of dipping into actuality in order to provoke the next burst of virtual creativity” (Protevi, “Emergence” 31-2). What follows from this is Deleuze’s call for subjects to attempt to unhinge themselves from habit and discover their capacities for assembling relationships that are unrecognizable from the perspective of power. When Deleuze tells us that bodies are not defined by “their genus or species, by their organs and functions, but by what they can do, by the affects of which they are capable” (Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II* 60), he is not just talking about individual bodies and their virtual flows (although it is that too). He is also talking about the body politic, which is formed into discursively recognizable arrangements, but which also contains the potential to become something other than itself. When bodies connect by sharing these potentials, it is a creative threat to the established order, a political subjectivity beyond the concept of the individual, a concept so often used to isolate bodies and work them into sexualized, gendered, and raced subjects.

As a critical strategy of reading, a Deleuzian ontology and politics – with respect to Bergson, the pragmatists, and late realist writers who prefigure and influence these concepts – allows the outside of identity, which is actually an inside, to emerge immanently. When Fitzgerald’s Amory Blaine encounters the poet Tom d’Invilliers in a Princeton cafeteria in a moment that disturbs his heterosexuality, the result is neither an

actualized queer identity, nor some ephemeral non-identity whose terms we cannot understand. Rather, he and Tom briefly share a subjectivity based on excess consumption of food, of books, of pleasure. And as Amory becomes a sharer of selfhood that is queer insofar as it interrupts the normativity of his desire, the moment also queers the narrative, insofar as it disrupts the teleology of the *Bildungsroman* and its constitution of a stable and hetero-masculine protagonist.

This encounter, along with similar encounters in all of these texts, forms what Casarino calls “the waste of dialectical processes” (*Modernity* 192): for our purposes, that which eludes the process by which narratives produce subjects – both characters and readers – forming the virtual and queer potential for forms of community based on shared and illicit desire. In reading the novels of Cather, Larsen, Fitzgerald, and Woolf, it will be important to recognize this potential and to distinguish it from possibility, which can be easily swept up in a narrative’s teleological progress. To this end, Casarino’s concept of the other limit, which he develops in *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis* (2002), will be useful. The other limit is in contrast to the last limit, that which appears as a horizon in the actual, but can be overcome dialectically, and is therefore not truly a horizon.¹⁷ To criticize industrial progress, for instance, by appealing to a pastoral anteriority is to approach urbanization as a last limit, because it presumes that the world will be set right if we replace this version of reality with another. Such critique only yields further corrupted realities to be overcome, all the while entrenching the expansive logic of industrial capitalism. To approach industrialization’s other limit, on the other

¹⁷ This is, for Casarino, how capitalism expands its dominion: “Each and every limit is posited as the last limit and already points to yet another last limit. Capital treats each and every limit at once as the last one and as the one before the last: it confronts limits merely by displacing them and setting them farther along”

hand, might be to explore how the technologies of the city contain the potential for overturning this very logic from within. The impersonality of the crowd, for instance, offers a way to think subjectivity beyond the confines of distinct bodies, undoing the individualistic logic that makes industrial expansion possible. Instead of a transcendent outside to modernization, its actuality can be shown to contain a virtual underside infused with the queer potential for relations between bodies outside the regime of subject-producing desire. Cather's ambivalence toward social change, or Larsen's toward an emerging black middle class in Harlem, can thus be characterized as a refusal to resolve these problems by appealing to their last limits – the purity of the uncorrupted rural landscape, or of an essentialist black identity, respectively.

The texts of Cather, Larsen, Fitzgerald, and Woolf often feature narrators or protagonists who see only last limits, or who mistake a last limit for the other limit,¹⁸ which has serious consequences for the queering of narrative form. The structural irony of Cather's *My Ántonia*, for example, features narrator Jim Burden telling a story of boyhood innocence emptied of sexuality, as Blanche Gelfant has shown.¹⁹ Jim's nostalgia expresses a desire to transcend the social by representing it: "I wanted to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world, which could not be very far away" (59). As he seeks a position that allows him to totalize the world from its outside, however, he also tells of merging with the landscape itself: "I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more....At any rate, this is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great"

(98). To seek the outside of state power by trying to overcome it is to be complicit in the expansion of capital, to feed and grow by pushing the ostensible last limit forward *ad infinitum*.

¹⁸ For Casarino, Melville's Ahab is exemplary of this fault.

¹⁹ See Gelfant's "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in 'My Ántonia.'"

(60). It is a fantasy both of being outside the world, and of disappearing into it. This apparent contradiction reveals Jim's fantastical representational strategy: to be both everywhere and nowhere, which, as Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth argues, is the very condition of realist narration.²⁰

Jim treats potential to be explored as possibility to be exploited, playing at the virtual without ever putting his privileged position at risk. In featuring such a narratological strategy, Cather's novel undercuts Jim's attempts to be the all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-present narrator with its ironic counter-discourse: for one, the frame story, which highlights the performative nature of his narration. The manifest tension between these two registers reveals a dynamic that will become familiar over the course of this study: the conjuring of an implied reader torn between narratorial seduction and resistance. In short, the structural irony in many of these novels fractures what we might call the text's readerly subjectivity, pointing to the other limit, beyond which lies the queer potential of reading: for Cather, a readerly love for the impurity of irony; for Larsen, the reading of the black body as a site of pleasure; for Fitzgerald, a kind of queer sensitivity necessary for reading characters as non-psychological impressions; for Woolf, the capacity to hold contradictory propositions at once, which is what it means to become Woolf's womanly reader.

Throughout, it will be necessary to pursue a double-edged course of analysis. As tempting as it is to begin *tout court* on the precipice of the other limit, it will be necessary to consider the techniques by which these novels arrive there: namely, the ironic representations of power and authority, which critique the suppression of the virtual

²⁰ See Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth's *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel*, which argues that the realist narrator must be both "the collective nature of human consciousness" (everywhere) and abstracted

register. Jim Burden, Irene Redfield, Nick Carraway, *The Waves*'s Bernard are differently inflected satires of the social desire to muffle or expel queer potential and its complicity with literary realism's strategies of containment, whether those strategies are meek and already fractured (Carraway), or manic and all-consuming (Redfield). As Casarino reminds us, the two courses of analysis are inextricably linked, because

to the extent to which representation does take place, it needs to be understood and studied as the by-product of a forever incomplete and forever renewed process of exploitation of the unrepresentable; in other words, we do need to cut through representation but we cannot stop there.

Ultimately, the unrepresentable beckons. (*Modernity* xxxiv)

This assertion, which follows logically from the simultaneity of Deleuze's actual and virtual, has grave implications for discourse, ideology, and literary representation: all attempts to erect dialectical systems of meaning must be understood as attempts to manage encounters with queer potential, a consequence I will take up in the Conclusion. To the extent that the novels of Cather, Larsen, Fitzgerald, and Woolf query these attempts and thus expose the other limit, it will be possible to show that the ostensibly conventional texts of early American modernism and the ostensibly radical texts of British impressionism are *both* experiments with different registers of textuality, narratology, and social, political, and bodily relations. All of these texts, in other words, cannot help but explore, even if only unwittingly, the radical potential for self-difference buried in the modern.

Chapter 1: Willa Cather: Irony Comes for the Archbishop

Chapter One considers three of Willa Cather's novels: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My*

Antonia (1918), and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). Throughout our reading of these texts, an overarching concern is the ways in which they invent new practices of reading and of writing. To accomplish this task, *Pioneers* and *Antonia* use ironic narrators who view the natural landscapes of the Nebraska prairies through a nostalgic lens. While such sentimentality is equated with a pioneering ethic of hard work and authenticity, it also solicits an equally affective response from the reader, whose temporal distance from the narrative action is crucial to maintain the illusion of nostalgia. At the same time, these novels erect a critical counter-discourse that undercuts their narrators' emotional coding. The result is what we might call a readerly ambivalence, or the conjuring of a reader torn between affiliation to and deviance from this discursive and affective program. In the space opened up by this ironic opposition, the novels situate queer potential in transgressive forms of sexuality – for instance, the lush eating of melons by Pavel and Peter, two Russian exiles, in which seeds and juices spill chaotically, but also pleurably. Such wastefulness, exuberance, and abandon is linked, furthermore, to transgressive forms of writing – Marie's blood spilled on the ground in *O Pioneers!*, the frame narrator's messy notes in *My Antonia*, which remain as unactualized potential.

While these two novels of the prairie evoke queer practices of reading and writing, they ultimately leave their ironic oppositions unresolved. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, on the other hand, uses innovations in narrative form to imagine a non-identitarian community, which has implications for the Catherian reader. Charged with imposing the will of the Catholic Church on the New Mexico landscape, Father Jean Latour is an unwilling wielder of such authority, unlike *My Antonia*'s Jim Burden.

Instead, he is drawn into an ethic of “pass[ing] through a country without disturbing anything” (233), which he observes in the native Navajo. Trying to access Navajo culture, however, raises another set of problems: how to do this from the outside without orienting it. Similarly, Latour is drawn to his companion, Father Joseph Vaillant, in terms that evoke same-sex eros, at least to a variety of Cather critics. The queerness that appears in this attraction is undercut, however, by what Vaillant represents: the authoritarianism of Rome, from which Latour has been trying to detach himself. Paradoxically, as he draws closer to both the Navajo and to Vaillant, Latour risks replicating the ideologies against which he wishes to be positioned.

Despite the contradictions that multiply in the relationship between Latour and Vaillant, their domestic partnership becomes the text’s model for community. Here, the love between the two men occurs within an ironic opposition, rather than in reaction to it, suggesting that sincerity in the face of irony can be a model for a non-identitarian form of subjectivity, and thus, for a queer form of reading. By eliciting sympathy, that is, for an explicitly impure form of desire, the novel points to this form of love – love for impurity – as a queer principle for relating discursive positions, and for a principle of reading.

Chapter 2: Nella Larsen: Bourgeois Blackness and the Body’s Other Limit

The love for impurity might also characterize the unspoken discourse in Nella Larsen’s two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Here, of course, Larsen’s texts feature characters concerned with *racial* purity as a mode of authenticity. In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane seeks access to middle-class comfort, but is confounded throughout by her mixed racial heritage, which excludes her from both black and white communities. Allured seductively by the promise that material objects seem to bestow –

in particular, a fantasy of racelessness – Helga is pulled further and further into the racial stereotype that she tries to disavow. Written in the context of Harlem Renaissance debates about how blacks should be characterized in fiction, Larsen’s first novel is ambivalent about the emergent black middle class and its seemingly inevitable aspirations toward white norms. For Helga Crane, these aspirations are also directed toward the conventions of realist fiction, especially the marriage plot, an access point to which she seeks entry. The novel traces the limits of the African-American novel, orienting us toward the queer potential of black identity.

Passing takes up this other limit. Charged with safeguarding the integrity of both her bourgeois household and the realist novel form, Irene Redfield is never at ease in her carefully ordered world. The threat that is Clare Kendry troubles Irene’s entire epistemological apparatus, upon which her ability to discern, among other things, the desires of her husband, Brian, relies. Clare brings with her a seemingly improper form of black identity, which Irene sees as pure self-interest, and therefore, as antithetical to her own conception of blackness. The novel, however, compels us to notice Irene’s own self-interestedness, or her complicity in the very thing she seeks to shut down. The most shocking instance of this hypocrisy, which critics have mostly failed to remark upon, is Irene’s longing for patriarchal white power, embodied by Clare’s husband, John Bellew. For Irene, the only thing worse than inauthentic blackness is the absence of racial meaning itself, which she senses as the true threat of Clare’s passing, an abyss of meaninglessness that she must keep closed.

Beyond the threat of self-interest, however, the novel raises Clare’s body as a queer site of upheaval. If Irene longs for complicity with the regime that produces stable

identities, Clare's failure to mean is a failure to be actualized as a black subject, according to the identitarian strictures to which Irene clings. She is instead a non-mimetic play of surfaces and same-sex desire, disturbing Irene's subject-producing tendencies each time they encounter one other. Against Irene's devotion to the realist novel, Clare represents a kind of decadence that is outside both sides of the Harlem Renaissance debates. Instead, *Passing* suggests that the failure to mean itself can be a resource for a new kind of black identity, and a new kind of black American novel.

Chapter 3: F. Scott Fitzgerald: Sensation, Sensitivity, and the Crisis of Manhood

Chapter Three will consider Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Tender Is the Night*. *Paradise*, often viewed as the retrograde stepping stone Fitzgerald needed before writing the more mature *Gatsby*, can easily come across as a conventional *Bildungsroman*. Beneath the development of protagonist Amory Blaine, however, lies a world of same-sex desire that threatens the novel's seemingly linear structure. Amory would like to become the voice of his generation, speaking for the disillusionment of post-war youth, but these dialectical aims are undercut by a queerness whose eruptions he cannot abjure. Chief among these is his relationship with Tom D'Invilliers, with whom he becomes a sharer of excess consumption and excess pleasure. As with Irene Redfield, my goal is not to settle the question of Amory's sexuality, but to demonstrate the ways in which queer desire interrupts the process through which narrative produces coherent characters and coherent readers. At each encounter with this register of desire, queer productions of Amory are put into conflict with his attempts to actualize himself as a heteronormative hero of a coming of age story. The result of this is a multiplication of subjectivities that fractures the protagonist, as his various selves are in

play at the same time.

Gatsby further explores same-sex desire as a limit to narrative coherence and resolution. Where *Paradise*'s narrator maintains some critical distance from Amory's perspective, *Gatsby*'s Nick Carraway is both narrator and suppressor-of-queerness. As such, those moments of suppression are more difficult to discern, because they are often marked by textual silences. We might think of Nick's relationship with Gatsby as parallel to Amory and Tom's: for both Amory and Nick, these relationships are key to the dialectical resolution of narrative, but for the reader, they also contain excess and deviant desire that cannot be exhausted by their foreclosure. While Nick performs emotional detachment in order to achieve some ideal of solitary authenticity, the other limit to his story begins to appear in his rigidly enforced silences which betray an affective register of desire where he operates through the kind of queer sensitivity that he denounces in others. By the end of the novel, however, Nick's attempts at concealing this other limit are overwhelmed by the suspension of narrative teleology that Nick, perhaps unwittingly, discovers.

If the ending of *Gatsby* allows for a brief moment of hope in the face of the other limit, *Tender Is the Night* takes place in a world where such hope seems to be all but exhausted. Whereas same-sex desire forms an access point to queer potential in both *Paradise* and *Gatsby*, in *Tender* it is already coded as "homosexuality" by the discourse of psychoanalysis, in which protagonist Dick Diver participates. In the novel, Dick looks back longingly to a pre-war America when gender roles were ostensibly clear, and when a stable set of values seemed easily defined. Dick's crisis in masculinity is also a crisis in representation, as the novel seeks a way to apprehend a character beyond the conventions

of realism. Such a new kind of reading would operate according the same queer sensitivity that we witness in *Gatsby*: affective discernment rather than indicative knowledge. Seen in this light, Dick's social decline and disappearance can be read not as a downfall, as it has typically been, but as elaborating a mode of post-identitarian subjectivity. Whereas *Paradise* and *Gatsby* feature characters attempting to overwrite the queerness evoked by their narratives, *Tender Is the Night* does away with these fortifications of selfhood, even the ironic ones. Instead, the novel's form forecloses any kind of dialectical resolution, as Dick becomes only a series of vague impressions.

Chapter 4: "The Dark Pools on the Other Side of the World": Woolf, Deleuze, and a Post-Identitarian Politics

Virginia Woolf's novels allow us to begin where the other texts in this study leave off: teetering on the edge of the other limit, because instead of having to ironize the conventions of realism, they presume that its hermeneutic contract has already been broken. Chapter Four examines three of Woolf's most celebrated and studied novels: *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*. For Woolf's novels, subjectivity is not a personal and private state of being, but a public and political process of change enabled by social encounters. All of these novels figure the problem of how to connect multiple, fragmentary selves without the support of a transcendent structure, and they find a provisional answer in what Woolf calls "moments of being," where characters are transported out of their own experience into pure sensation. Because these moments propose a model of subjectivity based on shared desire rather than discursive identification, they have affinities with the Deleuzian virtual.

Such connections are not immediately apparent in *Mrs. Dalloway*, whose central

character tries to arrange herself into a coherent bourgeois subject, while looking back longingly to her putatively pre-subjective self. Clarissa Dalloway fetishizes the privacy of self as a place of such authenticity, but the novel reveals it as a privileged space of self-sustenance. This occurs through Septimus Warren Smith, whose suicide lays bare the problems with fantasies of self-erasure, and through Clarissa's own classist musings. Ultimately, the novel uses Clarissa as an occasion for querying forms of knowledge and of reading. Like *Dick Diver*, Clarissa is an object of study by the novel's end, both for Peter Walsh and for the reader. The novel diagrams the problem of treating characters as psychologically sound, revealing the necessity of moving beyond character to illuminate virtual connections.

This challenge is taken up in *To the Lighthouse*, which also features characters that are multiply constructed, and traces the limits of charactericity itself. Mrs. Ramsay, for instance, is both the retrograde Victorian housewife, but also a sign of Bergsonian vitalism; the challenge is to read her as both at once, or as representing the problem of how to hold multiple and contradictory propositions together without resolution. Whereas *Mrs. Dalloway* raises this question, *To the Lighthouse* seeks an answer to it in Lily Briscoe, whose artistic experiments try to theorize this very issue. Both Lily's artistic process and her artistic works are attempts to unhinge the self from discursive attachments, or, to use Deleuze's language, to isolate percepts and affects. Characteristically, the novel does not solve this problem, but offers the simultaneous concealment and revelation of Lily's painting and of Lily's character as a way to represent competing perspectives without an overarching structure.

To the Lighthouse also moves beyond character in its middle section, "Time

Passes,” in which the impersonal force of nature overwhelms the insignificance of human activity. This section also reveals the limitations of free indirect discourse, which preserves the psychology of character, even while revealing its instability. *The Waves* begins with the notion of character already decentred, its six characters already contingent formations sharing a lack of narrative progress. The novel, that is, plays on the conventions of charactericity in order to move away from them as a central unit of meaning. Moreover, as the novel undermines realist notions of character, it extends the impersonal technique of “Time Passes” in the poetic interludes. Through their various figures of figurations, the interludes sketch the unavailability of Bergsonian flux; despite the seemingly objective viewpoint of these sections, their descriptions suggest that even the workings of nature are always only phenomenologically for a point of view. Rather than lamenting this absence of objectivity, the novel sees it a productive resource for a new relationship between reader and text. This relationship is contained in the act of womanly reading, which mediates between the public and the private. For Woolf, to read as a woman is not to be anatomically female, or to achieve a feminine identity. Rather, it is to share in the capacity to hold multiple propositions at once, which is a challenge that resonates with the anti-fascist politics of Woolf’s novels.

Conclusion: The Double-Bind of Identity and Queer Modernism

The short conclusion to this study considers the mode of commonality that the critical gesture of reading these texts together implies, a question illuminated by the double-bind of identitarian representation itself, as both resistance to, and entrenchment of, the norm. In so doing, I extend the consequences of the individual chapters to a larger reading of modernism as a sharing of the desire to queer narrative. To illustrate this point

and extend it further, I briefly consider Djuna Barnes' 1937 novel *Nightwood*. In both its explicitly queer content and characters, and its unconventional and at times bewildering syntax, *Nightwood* exemplifies many of the queer tendencies of Cather, Larsen, Fitzgerald, and Woolf. Moreover, the novel, written and published during the rise of European fascism, implicitly points out the problems with erasing identity in the context of the Holocaust. The novel, that is, reminds us of the necessity of stable identity, while also ironizing all attempts to construct it.

Chapter 1: Willa Cather: Irony Comes for the Archbishop

In 1936, toward the end of her career as a novelist, Willa Cather famously wrote, “The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts” (*Not Under Forty* v). Contained in a preface to a series of Cather’s own essays, the claim served not as a celebration of the destruction of the old order – as was the case with Virginia Woolf’s declaration that “in or about December, 1910, human character changed” (70) – but rather, as a lament for its passing. The very title of the collection, *Not Under Forty*, was a terse rebuff to those readers for whom it was *not* intended: the modernized youth, the “forward-goers” under forty years of age (v). Cather concluded her preface by asserting, “It is for the backward, and by one of their number, that these sketches were written” (v).

Trying to account for Cather’s curmudgeonly directive, critics have long noted a marked shift in Cather’s fiction around the infamous year of 1922, from celebratory veneration of the pioneer’s success in her early novels, to a middle period full of dark depictions of the pioneer’s failure at the hands of material culture, and an aching nostalgia for a return to a time of plenty.¹ It should come as little surprise, then, that in 1923 Cather published “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,” an essay detailing the processes that had led to the state’s contemporary urban-rural mix. Railing against the so-called “ugly crest of materialism,” Cather upbraids Nebraska’s young:

The generation now in the driver’s seat hates to make anything, wants to live and die in an automobile, scudding past those acres where the old men

¹ See Leon Edel, who argues that over Cather’s first eight novels, “[t]he triumph and achievement of the pioneer yields to disillusion, and disillusion harbors in it a wish for extinction. A whole world has been lost and seems irretrievable save in memory” (260). Daiches notes that in *A Lost Lady* (1923), “[t]he pattern of rising achievement which lies behind her earlier novels of the West has given way to one of frustration” (57). For the same reason, Trilling suggests that *A Lost Lady* is the central work of Cather’s career, her “most explicit treatment of the passing of the old order” (8). According to Woodress, Cather’s aversion to

used to follow the long corn-rows up and down. They want to buy everything ready-made: clothes, food, education, music, pleasure. (261)

Against this bohemian modernism, dominated by alienating speed and a senseless attachment to things, Cather positions a hope for a return of the old values of hard work and connectedness (261),² the seeds for which have been planted by the pioneers themselves:

I have always the hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again. Something that will come out not only in sturdy traits of character, but in elasticity of mind, in an honest attitude toward the realities of life, in certain qualities of feeling and imagination. (258)

As tempting as it might be to understand this critique as reactionary nostalgia, I want to resist this way of reading not only Cather's essay, but her pre- and post-1922 fiction.³ In "Nebraska," the temporality of Cather's hope for return suggests something else at play: "we must face the fact that the splendid story of the pioneers is finished, and that no new story worthy to take its place has yet begun" (260). Oriented toward the future rather than the past, the essay despairs at the void opened up by "the materialism and showy extravagance of this hour" (261), but recognizes that what is to fill it must be "new." Moreover, Cather characterizes this newness not by a simple reiteration of the past, but by an indeterminate "something" marked by equally unspecified affects:

the market was exacerbated by the sudden financial success resulting from her 1922 Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours* (242).

² Reynolds notes that Cather believed in a historical model in which civilizations are linked by a series of cycles (*Cather in Context* 49).

³ The sincerity of the nostalgia in Cather's fiction was axiomatic until Blanche Gelfant's seminal 1971 essay, "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in 'My Ántonia.'" In it, Gelfant states unequivocally, "Our

“elasticity of mind,” “certain qualities of feeling and imagination.” With the world at a crisis, Cather looks to a new and ephemeral “something” whose arrival will expand human capacities of thought and perception.⁴

Something similar might be said of her novels. If Cather’s world is suspended between a pure past and future not yet arrived, *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Ántonia* (1918), and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) thematize this crisis. All three novels critique nostalgia as a curative to a corrupted present, yet are hesitant to name a new discourse that would fill the breach opened up by the inadequacy of belief in the past. As in the novels of Larsen, Fitzgerald, and Woolf, these texts stage encounters with a register of queer desire that reconfigure the modes of subjectivity upon which authority’s devotion to nostalgia is founded. What results, ultimately, is a love for impurity that persists through Emil and Marie’s illicit relationship, Jim Burden’s resistance to sexuality, and most productively, the same-sex love between Jean Latour and Joseph Vaillant.

Cather’s other limit, however, is not only thematized, but appears in the very structure of her texts in the practices of reading that they solicit.⁵ It is the overarching

persistent misreading of Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* rises from a belief that Jim Burden is a reliable narrator” (103).

⁴ In Cather’s famous essay, “The Novel Demeublé,” Cather refers to “the inexplicable presence of the thing not named” as an ingredient in her fiction (50). Similarly, in her 1922 preface to *Alexander’s Bridge*, Cather refers to a “something else” upon which the writer of fiction relies: “the thing by which our feet find the road home on a dark night, accounting of themselves for roots and stones which we had never noticed by day” (96).

⁵ There have been multiple recent attempts to read Cather’s texts progressively but mostly from a thematic standpoint. Some examples: Joseph Urgo and Guy Reynolds believe that Cather’s fiction espouses progressive values as a curative to its putative nostalgia. Urgo writes that her novels argue for the nomadic and migratory nature of American identity; Reynolds believes that Cather’s fiction promotes multiculturalism in its depiction of the immigrant experience. Mike Fischer, in an influential article, argues that Cather’s novels bury the extermination of North American natives, which resurface as their political unconscious; Melissa Ryan takes up this idea, showing how these texts gesture toward this historical omission, particularly in the corn-god fantasy of *O Pioneers!*’s Alexandra Bergson (294). Christopher Nealon, compellingly, suggests that Cather’s novels, contradicting an essentialist, blood-based conception

argument of this chapter that these novels invent a new kind of reader, one always wary of emotional proximity, perpetually torn between affiliation with, and deviance from, an ideological program. Cather herself compels us to consider the role of the reader, not only because her fiction contains so many instances of literal reading and writing,⁶ but because she so often features characters put on display as legible texts: *Ántonia* Shimerda, Marian Forrester, Tom Outland, to name a few. Their availability to pathetically *bad* readers – Jim Burden, Niel Herbert, Godfrey St. Peter, respectively – queers the act of reading itself.⁷ But if official storytelling and proper reading are complicit with nostalgia for pioneering ideals – with the “[f]ortunate country” that will “receive hearts like Alexandra’s into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat,” at the end of *O Pioneers!* (210) – then there must be other kinds of writing, alternative practices of reading that would revel in the deviance of that which refuses to return. It is this queer potential – of writing that abandons itself to its own messy

of American identity, champion affiliations based on emotional affect in a radical redefinition of the family. Scott Herring argues that her texts, particularly *The Professor’s House*, elaborate male-male relations that elude the capture of the homosexuality-heterosexuality binary, in the process “queering” the historical development of these terms in the United States.

There are, of course, many deviations from this trend, but even these mostly treat Cather’s form as incidental. Reynolds, for instance, believes that the fragmentary structure of Cather’s later fiction is a symptom of her texts’ inability to reconcile the various ideological perspectives they choose to incorporate: “The wrenching of the narrative [in *The Professor’s House*] results from the enormous disjunctions between the various ‘Americas’ which Cather has let in to her narrative” (*Cather in Context* 147). A notable exception is Sarah Wilson, who argues that the fragmentary form of *The Professor’s House* proposes an alternative form of open historicism to Tom Outland’s grossly nostalgic and possessive sense of history (“Fragmentary” 571).

⁶ For example, the manuscript that Jim Burden hands to an unnamed narrator in *My Ántonia*; Jim’s scholarly reading of the classics, as well as Niel Herbert’s studies in *A Lost Lady*; Godfrey St. Peter’s academic writing in *The Professor’s House*, and his obsession with writing a proper introduction to Tom Outland’s diary; the various embedded stories within *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* that call attention to their conditions of telling. Richard Millington points out that these instances, more than anything else, foreground the making of meaning; *Ántonia*’s tramp story, for instance, is not a parable intended to teach a moral lesson, but an instance of meaning being made on the spot, a narrative disruption that is there only to be witnessed (54-5).

⁷ Lindemann defines Cather’s “queering” of America as “a process of restless and ambivalent interrogation” that “lay[s] bare the operations of an eroticized and radicalized nationalism” (*Queering* 7). In a similar way, the interplay of uncannily “textual” characters and the ineptitude of their authoritative

contingencies, of reading that declines a narrator's seductive invitation of sympathy – that Cather raises in her texts.

The ironic narrators of Cather's prairie novels are committed to the purity of the Nebraska landscape, and use disciplinary tactics to contain its unseemly and disruptive elements: capitalist commodification, sex and sexuality, queerness of various sorts. In installing these narrating authorities while simultaneously featuring their self-serving fantasies, Cather frustrates the sympathy her narrators evoke, conjuring an ambivalent reader caught between the promise of industrial progress and the alluring nostalgia for its erasure. In *O Pioneers!*, Cather's nameless narrator tries to negate the gaudy newness of commodity culture by appealing to the return of pioneering values through an official mode of writing – the “old story” that writes itself perpetually over again (*Pioneers* 208). Cather's irony, however, exposes both capitalist commodification and the pioneering ethic as forms of exploitation that require the capture and containment of deviance. Instead of choosing between the two, Cather's novel summons the potential for elaborating new forms of subjectivity and bodily connections, new modes of reading and writing that would revel in that which does not return, that would refuse to participate in the larger historical dialectic. *O Pioneers!* explores such queer potential through Emil Bergson, whose attempt to disconnect himself from authorized history results in death, in its deviant landscapes, and in the Catherian reader that the text evokes, and to whom Cather issues the following challenge: how to think alienation from the past not as loss, but as a resource for producing new forms of subjectivity.

My Ántonia takes up a similar problem: how to relate to Jim Burden's coercive

nostalgia without turning into Larry Donovan, *Ántonia*'s most literal exploiter. In attempting to purify history through narrative, Jim casts himself as the passive medium for the sublimation of memory into pure experience, all the while delivering a version of *Ántonia* eviscerated of sexuality, a fantasy enforced, paradoxically, by the erotic appeal of her alleged purity. Such a strategy requires Jim to imagine sex and writing as metaphysical practices purged of the messy contingencies of material embodiment. With little outside of Jim's all-encompassing narrative viewpoint, Cather situates an alternative in that which, literally, does not return: the exiles Pavel and Peter, whose experiments with domesticity and bodily pleasures invoke a sexual ethic of wasteful expenditure; and the frame narrator, whose unfinished manuscript haunts Jim's entire story as the anarchic potential for its radical undoing.

It is in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), however, that Cather most fully takes up the problems articulated by her pioneering novels. Here, instead of deriding characters who grapple with epistemic disorientation by asserting selfish nostalgia (Jim Burden), destructive indulgence (Pavel and Peter), or utter abnegation (the frame narrator), Cather gives us Jean Latour, a character who faces this challenge head-on. With the authoritarian nostalgists relegated to the sidelines, Cather dwells on the political and aesthetic potential for forming community out of difference without recourse to an external authority. In attempting to access Navajo culture, Latour is appropriative, yet different from the controlling pioneers of the prairie novels and their representative in *Death*, Father Joseph Vaillant. Instead of pitting Latour and Vaillant against each other as ethical opposites in dialectical struggle, Cather puts these opposing forces in play but lets them engage each other through a domestic form of male-male love that eludes

capture by the vocabulary of sexual taxonomy. The sustained elaboration of their love colludes with the novel's fragmented structure and reticent narrative voice to try to imagine a world that is neither authoritarian nor chaotic. Instead of ironically enforcing Latour's will through narratological coercion, the novel situates his problematized relationship with Vaillant – itself an allegory for Latour's relationship with the natives of New Mexico – between the fantasy of ethical purity and the dangerous allure of same-sex eros. Irony emerges not as an occasion for readerly resistance, but as the potential for a productive relationship that a reader can have with a text, as a form of sincerity that is pure in its impurity.

O Pioneers!

Cather's first novel about Nebraska prairie life seems, at first glance, to be thoroughly conventional.⁸ Indeed, upon its publication in 1913, many reviewers praised the novel for its realistic depictions of the pioneer struggle and, as we will see in early criticism of Fitzgerald's first novel, its faithful representations of the human spirit.⁹ A reviewer in the *Tatler* writes, for example, "One seems to feel the clear, fresh breezes of the prairie blowing across the face as one reads of the rolling hills of golden corn, the fierce storms of winter" (King 55).¹⁰ Others, seeking to bring out the novel's more radical features, venerated its feminist politics: Alexandra prevails over weak men "by

⁸ *O Pioneers!* was Cather's first attempt to write a novel about subject matter that she knew intimately ("My First Novels" 172). In a 1931 essay, Cather contrasted it to her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, a novel of manners set in London, which she called "unnecessary and superficial" ("My First Novels" 171).

⁹ There is a persistent humanism in much of the criticism not only of Cather's other novels under consideration here, but of the works of the other authors as well. See, in particular, veneration of Clarissa Dalloway's private soul, as outlined in Chapter 4. In Woolf's case, as with Cather, this kind of criticism depoliticizes the novel by burying its critique of subjectivity.

¹⁰ Other examples include the *Chicago Evening Post*, which noted the novel's "faithfulness not merely to the exterior of life, but to its intimate soul" (Dell 47), and the *Lincoln Sunday State Journal*, which found "an extraordinary effect of reality" in the prairie landscape and "the forces that wait under it" (Harris 51).

virtue of her superior common sense, her stronger will, her clearer vision, her greater courage, her firmer faith in the future of the country” (*Sewanee Review* 57); more succinctly, “Alexandra is triumphant womanhood” (Wood 45). Even as these latter reviewers attempted to politicize the novel, however, they nonetheless situated its politics well within the bounds of social convention: the novel’s feminism was considered almost incidental, as merely one minor theme among many worth exploring;¹¹ Alexandra was said to be a feminist heroine, but only insofar as she embodies masculine characteristics.¹² In both cases, critics turned the novel into a narrative of escape.¹³

Some recent criticism goes too far in the other direction, casting Cather as an unambiguous progressive at the cost of ignoring some of the more disturbingly conservative elements represented in *Pioneers*. Wiesenthal, for instance, shows how the novel constructs Alexandra as “hermaphroditic,” thus disrupting medical discourses of the time that labelled the “semi-woman” as deviant (54), but she fails to consider her fantasy of being carried off by a man (*Pioneers* 137). Rosowski argues that Cather rejects conventional femininity by focusing on Alexandra’s relation to the land, rather than “to the male she will marry” (“Subverted Endings” 73), but makes no mention of her condemnation of Marie for cheating on her oppressive husband (199). Reynolds believes the novel not only recasts the conventions of the pioneer myth as female (*Cather in Context* 60), but also undercuts the myth of American superiority by treating past

¹¹ The *Boston Evening Transcript* writes, “*O Pioneers!* has many missions: it is a disclosure of the splendid resources in our immigrant population; it is the revelation of a changed and changing country; it is, indirectly perhaps, an embodiment of the feminist theory; and, finally, it is more than worth reading for its literary value” (E.U.S. 46).

¹² The *Chicago Evening Post* review notes that Alexandra is “a fine, resolute, man-minded, thoughtful young creature” (Dell 47).

¹³ It is a cruel irony, then, that Cather lost her canonical status in the 1930s because of the “womanly” quality of her writing, as Sharon O’Brien has shown. For a detailed discussion of the latent sexism of

civilizations “in themselves, not as mere stepping stones towards a supposedly ‘higher’ order” (72). Like the others, however, he remains blind to Alexandra’s all-encompassing westward gaze that seems to naturalize white ownership of native lands, thereby entrenching the ethic of American exceptionalism (209).

Another recent school of Cather criticism has begun to take up such contradictions in order to move past this deadlock. In particular, Marilee Lindemann’s *Willa Cather: Queering America* (1999) makes two critical developments that situate *O Pioneers!* as neither apolitical escapism nor unalloyed celebratory transgression. First, she reads Alexandra not only across the axis of gender – along which, Lindemann concedes, she “may indeed seem worth celebrating” (46) – but across the axes of sexuality and ethnicity, as well. Seen in this light, Alexandra appears as a deployer of the disciplinary norms of whiteness and heterosexuality, “as an allegory of nation-building predicated on the repudiation or containment of the ‘queer’” (46).¹⁴ Second, Lindemann shows us that Cather’s narrator, although nameless, is not necessarily reliable. While not a character in the novel, the narrator embodies a discursive position, operating “blithely...as an observer of human beings, with a faith in bodily types derived from the positivism of the nineteenth century and the nativism of the twentieth,” all the while ignoring the complex interplay of desire and deviance that takes place (40). Instead of reading *O Pioneers!* as either nostalgic or progressive, Lindemann sheds light on its ironic ambivalence, on the anxious tension it establishes between its romantic narrator

Marxist critics of the 1930s and their dismissal of Cather as sentimental and romantic, see O’Brien’s “Becoming Noncanonical: The Case Against Willa Cather,” especially pages 115-119.

¹⁴ The same might be said of *Passing*’s Irene Redfield. While Irene is often read as enforcing a similar brand of sexual propriety as Alexandra, critics have failed to notice that she, too, upholds a standard of whiteness, over whose toppling she ruminates with anxiety.

and its transgressive bodies. At stake, then, is the position of the reader, for such irony leaves the reader caught in dynamic tension between the narrator's romantic invitations of sympathy and the novel's critical counter-discourse.

The narrator's romantic nostalgia is present in the novel's opening: "One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away" (3). These lines set up a dialectic in which nature threatens to undo culture by taking it back into its eternal reservoir, hence the conspicuous absence of people in this scene: the shopkeepers "[keep] well behind their frosty windows" (3); the children are all away in school; the "few rough-looking countrymen" that populate the streets are invisible in their "coarse overcoats, with their long caps pulled down to their noses" (4). In depicting the town of Hanover, centre of modern urbanity and commodity culture – the people wear "fine clothes" and have "hard hearts" (4) – as on its way to becoming a mere historical blip, the narrator is faithfully in line with the pioneer fantasy that Alexandra embodies. As Lindemann notes, the narrator's final words – "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (210) – "conspire in the effort to take Alexandra out of history and install her in myth" (45), thus obscuring the economic system and regulatory practices that have allowed her to triumph. The novel ends after Alexandra and Carl recede together into the house, "leaving the Divide behind them, under the evening star" (80), as if to illustrate their premature disappearance into cyclical history, closing the circuit of pioneer and land, of historically specific and historically transcendent.

Complicity between narrator and character suggests that the figure of the pioneer elaborates not only a discursive space, but a mode of representation, an isomorphism between the way pioneers relate to the land and the way narrators relate to their material. The narrator tells us, “A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves” (33), because the fruits of farming the harsh land may not come until well after the individual’s death. To be a pioneer is to be able to think across generations, to know one’s place in history, not only to be free of individual appetites,¹⁵ but to sacrifice individuality itself to the larger forces of nature. At the same time, “to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves” suggests the ability to secure physical possession without the burden of physical presence, to capture the land’s output in advance as a reified idea. The pioneer is thus a dual figure in *O Pioneers!*: both free of bodily desires, willing to sacrifice him- or herself to larger natural forces *and* a supreme domesticator of space and of time. It is to be without a body, and yet to have a stable and imperial self. In this sense, it is akin to being the narrator of realism, according to the terms used by Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth: both everywhere and nowhere (65), disembodied, yet omnipotent and omniscient.

Appropriately, then, the form of Alexandra’s writing, at least in her written explanation to Carl of Emil and Marie’s deaths, is a terse description, devoid of subjective emotion: “a single page of note-paper, a bare statement of what had happened” (194). Ultimately, it is Carl Linstrum who links the double pioneer figure to a specific mode of historical writing when he tells Alexandra, in reference to the graveyard, “Isn’t it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as

¹⁵ Alexandra’s success as a pioneer comes from the “simple direct way of thinking things out” (16) that she inherits from her grandfather, but without the sexual appetite that led to his loss of fortune at the hands of a

fiercely as if they had never happened before” (80). Alexandra later refines Carl’s affirmation: “You remember what you once said about the graveyard, and the old story writing itself over? Only it is we who write it, with the best we have” (208). The pioneer, in this sense, is a writer, delivering individual human agents over to history, as they emerge as writing on the land. In domesticating the recalcitrant landscape, the pioneer becomes the supreme authority that ensures the continued movement of historical cycles.

The explicit and implicit links that the novel draws between the pioneering ethic and writing compel a close consideration of the extent to which the narrator, too, acts as a “pioneer.” Following Lindemann, we can return to the opening scene to note how the narrator’s technique tries to position an ideal reader to understand the nostalgia that permeates the passage. While masquerading as objective description, the novel’s opening situates a reader temporally – it takes place “thirty years ago” – and spatially – the overhead view of the houses “set about haphazard” (3). Perhaps more importantly, the narrator foregrounds the act of looking: the houses “*looked* as if they had been moved in overnight”; they have no “*appearance* of permanence”; the countrymen are “rough-*looking*” (3-4, my emphasis). A crucial part of this opening scene, then, is the presence of an observer, a discursive position that completes a circuit between writer, text, and reader. As if to naturalize the town’s seemingly imminent sublimation into history, the narrator furnishes a distance from this viewing perspective, both spatial and temporal. Hanover, this distance seems to say, is already gone, subsumed by the larger forces of natural time into transcendence and apotheosis.

younger, “unprincipled” woman (16).

As we will see, another form of writing appears at the novel's climax that implies a different, and queer, relationship between text and reader, one that eludes the pioneer-narrator's authorized nostalgia. Early on, however, the novel uses Emil Bergson as a figure for the reader in order to theorize this alternative relationship. If the narrator explicitly inaugurates an observing perspective of the town in the opening passage, that perspective is personified in Emil, who becomes an avatar for the reader, deposited as he is into the middle of the town: "On the sidewalk in front of one of the stores sat a little Swede boy, crying bitterly. He was about five years old. His black cloth coat was much too big for him and made him look like a little old man" (4). Having been abandoned by his older sister and his kitten having run away, Emil is scared, yet "afraid to stop any one, afraid to go into the store and ask for help" (4). As a parody for the reader, Emil's abandonment suggests a kind of disorientation that queers the realist distance that the narrator earlier establishes. Without the proper historical perspective endowed by a narrator's nostalgia, Emil is out of place in this landscape:

He was a little country boy, and this village was to him a very strange and perplexing place, where people wore fine clothes and had hard hearts. He always felt shy and awkward here, and wanted to hide behind things for fear some one might laugh at him. (4-5)

Emil is abandoned to a "strange and perplexing" setting, a modernist urban town, where kindness has given way to the coldness of commodity culture, where he is made to feel self-conscious about his appearance, and in which he is without the tools to appeal for assistance to orient himself.

At the same time, Emil is also a figure for a new kind of reader, freed from authority – Alexandra has departed – and ill-served by the false security of his pet, now missing. While he longs for Alexandra’s return and a retreat to the countryside, the novel features this solution as childish obedience, equally inadequate as a curative to frightening modernity as an outright embrace of the new (the town’s impersonality). Rather, in remaining ambivalently suspended between these two poles, the novel raises a series of questions about Emil as a figure for potential readerly resistance. Emil strays from edict, yet, as a child, has no tools for imagining what it would be like to break free from his sister’s authoritative grasp, instead longing for its return. What will it take, Cather seems to be asking, for Emil to think such abandonment creatively, as an opportunity not merely to repeat or long for the past? How might readers resist the narrator’s trap of nostalgia without being completely disoriented, or pathetically searching for an authority to deliver comfort? Is it possible to elaborate the new in a way that is not merely a repetition of the old, nor the emptiness and impersonality of commodity culture?

Emil remains blind to such questions, but the novel does not. His pursuit of Casarino’s last limit only iterates the logic of old forms, because each stage of putative satisfaction yields only further horizons to be overcome.¹⁶ Emil’s eventual pursuit of Marie, for instance, leaves the conventions of heterosexual romance squarely in place, and so his only recourse is to submit to them by defying them outright, resulting in death. Casarino teaches us, on the other hand, that the other limit is the field of the virtual, beyond which lies the potential for new forms of non-identitarian community. To think

¹⁶ For a fuller account of Casarino, see Introduction.

the unthinkable other limit is, paradoxically, to experiment with immanent forms of relation that would expand the bounds of subjectivity beyond the individual body. While Emil is without the tools to reconfigure himself as a desiring agent in a heterosexual romance plot, in featuring Emil's doomed pursuit of pioneering's last limit Cather's text conjures a reader inevitably engaged in this problem. It suggests that deviance from a narrator's program requires a rethinking both of the conventions of writing, and of the subjectifying activity that occurs through the act of reading.

In the novel's opening scene, the potential for such deviance subsists in the landscape. The narrator's description of the houses contains this virtual underside:

A mist of fine snowflakes was curling and eddying about the cluster of low drab buildings huddled on the gray prairie, under a gray sky. The dwelling-houses were set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod; some of them looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves, headed straight for the open plain.

(3)

The buildings huddle because they are cold, and appear to be leaving an inhospitable landscape, but the scene also demonstrates that Hanover is teeming with deviant potential, a resistance that, instead of trying to overcome nature or submitting to it passively, evokes the potential to break free entirely from the natural order. The houses are "set about haphazard," as if lazily and without planning. Some appear to have been "moved in overnight": they are imported, sampled from other sources without discernible authorship, and put together as collage. Others look to be "straying off by themselves," engaged in collective private exile toward the "open plain," an

impermanence that suggests disappearance without the promise of productive return. In the absence of human subjects, the landscape contains a deviant form of writing, “anti-pioneer” in its modernist aesthetic of importation, collage, and exile.

Cather’s technique is thus dual: it both narrativizes deviance from authority, and evokes it as the reader in tension. The opening scene is *about* a potential, immanent in the setting, for the landscape to write itself according to modernist standards that surpass cyclical history; and the scene *is* the conjuring of a reader, in being pulled between affective sympathy with this cycle and an awareness of the narrator’s unreliability, being forced to reimagine the act of reading as deviance.

The same tension informs the scene of Emil and Marie’s deaths, in which the narrator tries to draw the reader’s attention away from the materiality of their bloody corpses. As Lindemann reminds us, Emil and Marie’s deaths are turned into writing: “The story of what had happened was written plainly on the orchard grass, and on the white mulberries that had fallen in the night and were covered with dark stain” (*Pioneers* 180). But the narrator insists that this writing is insufficient:

But the stained, slippery grass, the darkened mulberries, told only half the story. Above Marie and Emil, two white butterflies from Frank’s alfalfa field were fluttering in and out among the interlacing shadows; diving and soaring, now close together, now far apart; and in the long grass by the fence the last wild roses of the year opened their pink hearts to die. (182)

The narrator supplements the insufficiency of the death scene with the story’s proper half: a metaphor that enshrines Emil and Marie’s death in nature. For the narrator, the morbid scene fails to compensate for the deaths by appealing to a larger romantic

meaning.¹⁷

What is it that the scene of death-writing lacks? For Lindemann, the naturalistic description of Marie's corpse – the scientific details of her bullet-punctured lung and bleeding (182), in contrast to the short romantic description of Emil's death – “denaturalizes the relationship between death and representation” by laying bare the “gender asymmetries” in a cultural system that uses the female body as a site of alterity (*Queering* 42). To this we can add that the sort of “writing” that Marie undertakes is in stark contrast to the proper writing of history in which Alexandra, Carl, and the narrator conspire. Instead of bodies giving themselves back to nature, secure in the knowledge of their return through the land and the next generation, Marie's death is only brutal and forensic:

She must have started up and gone toward the hedge, leaving a trail of blood. There she had fallen and bled. From that spot there was another trail, heavier than at first, where she must have dragged herself back to Emil's body. (182)

Marie writes a story that does not give back to the land, a story of materiality and bleeding bodies that defies the romance upon which the narrator insists. There can be no compensation for Marie's mode of writing that uses bodily fluids as ink. Whereas Alexandra and Carl, a proper couple in all senses, disappear *into* the land and into transcendence at the novel's end, Marie ends up as stark materiality written *on* the land.¹⁸

¹⁷ Cf. Nick's telling of Gatsby's death in *The Great Gatsby*. Nick's description elides the materiality of Gatsby's body in favour of romantic tropes that naturalize his death as part of a larger, natural order.

¹⁸ For an alternative reading, see Haralson (149-154). Haralson argues that Alexandra and Carl are the queer couple in *O Pioneers!*, as opposed to Emil and Marie: “Not only is the queer not vacated from the novel, as some have argued, but it is precisely centred in Alexandra and Carl's relationship” (153-4). For Haralson, Carl is an extension of the “Willean masculinity” that she begins to explore in her short story

But Marie's movements in the death scene also allegorize Cather's pursuit of representational deviance. The narrator concludes from the trail of blood that Marie "must have started up and gone toward the hedge" (182), as if oriented toward some sort of boundary. Instead of surpassing the hedge, however, Marie falls and bleeds, as if to soil and mark the limit between immanence and transcendence with bodily reality. It is this point of falling and bleeding that becomes the marker of return to Emil's material corpse: "From that spot there was another trail, heavier than at first, where she must have dragged herself back to Emil's body" (182). While the narrator insists that the story of the competing trails of blood is about the romantic reunion of dying lovers, this second trail, written over the first, is the drama of bodily experiment that vitiates the initial proper movement away from material embodiment. Marie "must have" started up and returned, the narrator tells us, but this heavy-handed reading is overwhelmed by the heaviness of the second trail of blood that opens up return as desubjectification, rather than integration into historical propriety.

The other author of this scene, of course, is Frank Shabata. In killing Emil and Marie, he forecloses the potential for the novel's characters to continue thinking deviance as production, even though the narrative continues such production on numerous registers. Frank ends up as an ironic version of Marie, his selfhood ceded not to her transgressive body and the prettifying butterfly story that tries to obscure it, but to the disempowering institution that turns him into a number. He is remanded, that is, to an aspect of the modern that the novel reacts against: the penal institution, modernity as disciplinary instrument of surveillance and producer of subjectivities. Obsessed with

"Paul's Case" (150), evidenced by his "bloodless complexion and nerves," "sensitive mouth," and nervous hands (150).

hygiene and classification – ““We have to keep ‘em clean, you know”” (197) the warden says of the prisoners; each has a number instead of a name – the prison that houses Frank appears as the novel’s warning against this horrific side of the new. Alexandra is “bewildered” here (199), seeing how Frank has become, “somehow, not altogether human” (200). For the first time in the novel, she encounters a power greater than the pioneer’s: that of the modern institution, which does not need the “great fact [of] the land itself” (10) to subjectify. Unlike the ethic of the pioneer, theological in its reverence of “the great operations of nature [and] the law that lay behind them” (47), this power does not hold out the promise of integration into something larger. Alexandra can try to get Frank out of here, but there is no sense that she will succeed. Instead, she goes back to the Divide and back to the land, after having “refused with horror the warden’s cordial invitation to ‘go through the institution”” (202). What is so horrific to Alexandra is the cordiality of the invitation: the institution’s agents exercise their power indifferently, without recourse to larger meaning or historical cycles. Alexandra pledges to fight for Frank’s freedom, but such a promise is disingenuous at best, because, as Melissa Ryan argues, the prairie that forms the prison’s putative outside is equally complicit in processes of subjectification (285).

This scene pits two extremes against each other: the inhuman face of the hyper-modern, and the naïve and appropriative nostalgia of the pioneer, each seeking the obliteration of the other. By exposing the horrors of both, the novel invokes the new as something that requires more than just negation of the old romance, or capitulation to the emptiness of the institutional-modern. How to think deviance as desubjectification, in other words, is the challenge of *O Pioneers!* Instead of simply registering the

inadequacies of pursuing the new by rejecting the old, like Marie's dying displacement toward the hedge, the novel experiments with subjectivity, allegorized by Marie's return to the immanence of Emil's body. Like the narrator who reads Marie's death as the reification of romance, convention tries to render such praxes illegible; and yet the novel both dramatizes and evokes them as the ironic non-resolution of the tension between capitalist urbanization and nostalgic fantasy. By directing attention to narrative instantiations of a cultural crisis, the text inaugurates a reader already actively undergoing a process of becoming something other than what the narrator prescribes.

Cather does not exhaust this problem in *O Pioneers!* It would take a dramatic move away from prairie fiction and the distance of a number of other works before she would write a novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, that was centred around such productive potentiality. As a text in which character yields to sometimes mundane description of landscape, *Death* provides a more germane forum for reworking subjectivity, because its abundance of non-human forms is already free of the conventional attachments of individual personhood. Still, while the land in *O Pioneers!* enters into accord with the pioneering spirit of domination and authorized history, Cather also uses it to begin to work through the idea of deviance as non-dialectical opposition.¹⁹ *My Ántonia* takes up the challenges put forth in *O Pioneers!*, but pursues them in radically different ways.

¹⁹ Michael Hardt gives the term "nondialectical opposition" to a specific form of political argument. Instead of negating its opponent, thereby relying on it for its identity and thus preserving it in some form, it "operates a complete rupture with its opponent through an unrestrained, savage attack," prohibiting any "recuperation of relations" (52). To this extent, nondialectical opposition seeks to bring out the chaos hidden in seemingly stable structures.

My Ántonia

In an interview from 1921, Cather explains her technique in writing *O Pioneers!*: “from the first chapter, I decided not to ‘write’ at all – simply to give myself up to the pleasure of recapturing in memory people and places I had believed forgotten” (Carroll 21). Cather continued to describe her experience of composing the novel in this way a full decade later, writing, “Here there was no arranging or ‘inventing’; everything was spontaneous and took its own place, right and wrong” (“My First Novels” 97-8).

Cather’s claim to unmediated memoir is curious, firstly, given some of the more disturbing “memories” she invokes in her first novel of the prairies: the brutal murder of Emil and Marie, Frank Shebata’s dystopic incarceration, as we have seen. But secondly, the terms in which Cather describes her writing process after the fact are strangely similar to how Jim Burden characterizes his in the Introduction of *My Ántonia*: “I did n’t arrange or rearrange. I simply wrote down what of herself and myself and other people Ántonia’s name recalls to me. I suppose it has n’t any form” (49).

Taken at face value, the similarity between Cather’s and Jim’s professions of automatism suggests that both are “authors” of the same order, pursuing the past through an unmediated recovery of memory. *My Ántonia*, however, contains an ironic framing device, which foregrounds the performative nature of Jim’s narration, and illustrates the transition that Cather’s writing went through between her second and third novels.

Because the narrator of *Pioneers* is ontologically distinct from the figure of the pioneer, the invitations of sympathy offered to the reader are more pliable, the counterdiscourse more easy to discern. In *Ántonia*, on the other hand, the novel’s figure of acquisition is also its narrator, a writer of manuscripts and a storyteller of the most explicit order. Jim

Burden's desire to possess is one with his desire to represent.

If to "arrange or rearrange" is to distort the past, Jim is an ironic figure for belief in the possibility of recovering truth through the passive registration of his childhood memories.²⁰ His claim to write formless narrative is, of course, false.²¹ His story is full of subjective interpolations and commentary from the present: his qualifications of killing the snake as a "mock adventure" (76), the insertion of the story of Blind d'Arnault's childhood (150), Jim's criticisms of his adolescent "drifting" from school because of Lena Lingard (202), for example. His affixing of "My" onto the title of his manuscript, while meant to indicate his story's subjective nature, suggests an appropriateness that belies its supposed neutrality (49). Moreover, Jim's claim of formlessness is also impossible, for even adherence to chronology *is* an arrangement. All writing relies on conventions, yet Jim professes, paradoxically, to practice a kind of metaphysical "non-writing" that would transfer memory unmediated from "non-writer" to reader, transcendent in its ability to dissolve the materiality of words into transparency.

Belief in such purity is merely one aspect of Jim's meaning, when we place it in the larger context of modernist storytelling. "Jim Burden" is the name for a triple dynamic: belief in pure writing, its ironic subtext, and the interaction between these two

²⁰ Jeff Webb argues that "Jim's memories re-create through representation the very distance he wants to overcome by remembering" (228), forcing him to seek out an unmediated way of accessing these memories as experienced objects in the present (228), a non-representational narrative strategy to relate the past without diminishing its immediate presence

²¹ Critics generally read Jim as an unreliable narrator, thanks in large part to Blanche Gelfant's terse observation in 1971, "Our persistent misreading of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* rises from a belief that Jim Burden is a reliable narrator" (103). As Jan Goggans notes, he is also a pathetically bad and nostalgic reader, both of *Ántonia* and of the Latin texts he studies in college (162). It is therefore surprising that there are still many critics who take Jim at his word. As with their readings of *O Pioneers!*, Urgo and Reynolds insist on the novel's progressive energy, at the cost of ignoring its unmistakable irony. Urgo venerates Jim, in claiming that *Ántonia* is a part of himself, as the epitome of the "migratory American" (79, 55). For Reynolds, Jim "transfers and fuses" the "various terrains" in his memory of Nebraska, Virginia, and the Ukraine, thus giving voice to Cather's multicultural impulses to show that America is a

registers. The novel, in other words, uses Jim to demonstrate that the literal may always be interrupted by irony, that textual coherence is a fantasy afforded only by the suppression of a countervailing subtext. By performing a story about the purity of storytelling free from performance, Jim instantiates a conundrum: how to be both inside and outside a text at the same time, how to make *Ántonia* stand for the purity of the past without turning her into a material object for consumption.

One manifestation of this conundrum is Jim's metonymizing of the land through *Ántonia*:²² her eyes are "big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood" (62); her cheeks evoke permanence and fertility in their "constant, dark color [that] never changed" (169). Importantly, like Nick Carraway's bodiless description of Gatsby's dead body, Jim's language violates the terms of metonymy by repressing the anatomical and psychological contingencies inherent in its object. For Jim, *Ántonia is* the country, and he therefore requires, as Blanche Gelfant notes, that she remain perpetually virgin, forever his childhood companion amputated of the messiness of sexual desire.²³ To reconcile his memory of *Ántonia* with the fact that she has given

"patchwork terrain" of "patchwork people" (*Cather in Context* 91). In both cases, the critics fail to recognize the appropriateness of Jim's seemingly progressive gestures.

²² A variety of mid-century critics unwittingly suggest that *Ántonia* fills the function fulfilled by the land in *O Pioneers!* Miller shows that *Ántonia* is a symbol "of the undeviating cyclic nature of all life" (52). Daiches argues that *Ántonia* does not achieve success over the land, but submerges herself in it as her salvation, ending as "the ideal wife and mother, bound to the farming life" (37). Terence Martin finds that Jim's instinct to impose order on the land gives way to his surrender to nature (92), as *Ántonia* comes to represent "the epitome of all he has valued" (95). As the frame narrator says, "More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood. To speak her name was to call up pictures of people and places, to set a quiet drama going in one's brain" (48).

²³ The critical history that has thought through the relationship between Jim's aversion to sex and his narrative strategies is long, beginning with Gelfant in 1971, as noted in n. 21, above. Gelfant observes that Jim's story is a boyish fantasy that tries to recast his childhood as free of sexual implications; through his telling, Jim seeks "a purified past in which he can find safety from sex and disorder" (105), that "Jim forgets as much as he remembers" (105). From this seminal essay have emerged a variety of other responses. Deborah Lambert, for instance, argues in 1982 that the narrative structure of the novel "itself becomes a defense against erotic expression" (30), in the sense that the narrative energy that glorifies

birth, for instance, he must understand her as only a “rich mine of life” (234), akin to a mythical Earth-goddess, removing her from the material realm in which sex takes place. He describes her relationship to Cuzak as one of “easy friendliness, touched with humor” (236), as if their breeding has occurred without the sexual act. He tells the grown-up *Ántonia*, “I’d have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister – anything that a woman can be to a man” (219), effectively equating all of these roles as platonic familial positions.

Jim’s nostalgia thus unfolds along a set of clear logics. He yearns for the past as immaterial, yet manifestly present. *Ántonia* is a carrier of sex emptied of its material content, a paradoxical “non-sex” to accompany Jim’s “non-writing,” in order to establish the vitality of a past without corruption. What Jim purports to have discovered at the novel’s end, when he sees “what a little circle man’s experience is” (244), is that the dangers of sex turn out not to have been a threat all along. The circle of “man’s experience” – which is code for his own experience – closes with the uncorrupted return of his remembered *Ántonia*, her vitality undiminished. Jim invents a myth that relationships between men and women have always been free of the perils of sexuality, that while we might lose our faith in such innocence while we are *in* the past, to come out of it and see its inevitable shape is to see that its purity cannot help but return.²⁴ Jim’s final lines seek to remove *Ántonia* and him from the world entirely, installing them as privileged overseers of the purified past, and safely without bodies that might risk corruption in the future:

Ántonia is Cather’s own prophylaxis against homosexual attraction, which in turn produces the novel’s fragmented structure.

²⁴ In this sense, Jim is similar to Fitzgerald’s Amory Blaine, who continually casts his persistently queer relationship with Tom D’Invilliers as one of boyish immaturity, purged of its suggestive content.

For Ántonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past. (243-4)

As the past returns “as fiercely as if [it] had never happened before,” to quote Carl Linstrum (*Pioneers* 80), Jim and Ántonia will now stand outside it, holding it as its only true guardians, safely free of corporeal danger. What they possess is the knowledge that bodies are only temporary material inconveniences, that beyond the body exists an innocence and truth everlasting.

Jim’s claim to being a passive medium for the transmission of memory engages the claim to destiny in these lines, as Jim appears to surrender his agency to fate. He learns that the story he has just told was destined by some larger force to happen, that its events could not have gone any other way. The upshot of such an admission is that as narrator, Jim is claiming to have had no choice but to relate the past as it has unfolded. While he tells it “through [him]self” (49) as a compound of personal memories, it is as if the story could not help but be told. Like the ending of *O Pioneers!*, in which Alexandra and Carl dissolve into the overwhelming land and into myth, here Jim appears to recede into the great swath of destiny produced by the circuit between past and present, and with him appears to go his agency as controlling narrator.

Jim’s apparent desire to cede authorial control to the continuity between past and

present suggests a concern in the novel for Bergson's *élan vital*.²⁵ Indeed, Jim's ultimate subjugation of personal agency to fate is akin to Bergson's concept of intuition, which requires immersion in the pre-representational flux out of which the individualized present arises, the placing of oneself "in pure duration, of which the flow is continuous and in which we pass insensibly from one state to another" (*Matter and Memory* 243).²⁶ But what is the quality of the disappearance about which Jim fantasizes? Jim's putative surrendering of ego might make him subservient to the larger forces of time, but, unlike Bergson, his conception of memory requires a temporal teleology that only serves to bolster his authorial agency. For Jim, the "early accidents of fortune" predetermine his reunion with *Ántonia*; the past is rewritten as the cause of a unitary present, and can be possessed from a position exterior to the flux of time. For Bergson, on the other hand, memory is not "a regression from the present to the past," but "a progress from the past to the present," a shedding of perception and subjectivity in order to touch the past as

²⁵ Cather is said to have read Bergson's *Creative Evolution* excitedly in 1912 (Quirk 103). In her 1922 preface to *Alexander's Bridge*, she argues that the successful writer relies on an imperceptible guide that "corresponds to what Mr Bergson calls the wisdom of intuition as opposed to that of intellect" (96).

²⁶ Similarly, Jim remembers his impressions of the Nebraska landscape upon his first arrival as also without form, overpowering in its expansiveness:

There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land – slightly undulating, I knew, because often our wheels ground against the brake as we went down into a hollow and lurched up again on the other side. I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction. I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it....Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. (54)

Claiming to feel erased by the seemingly endless plain of pure matter, Jim revels in his putative disappearance a few pages later in his grandmother's garden:

Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it

virtuality (*Matter and Memory* 319). The totality of the past, in other words, persists in each moment not as a possession that appears to confirm present reality, as Jim would have it, but as a weighty “image of the past” that only reveals reality’s multiplicity, despite perception’s tendency to convince us otherwise (*Metaphysics* 40).²⁷

O Pioneers! naturalizes the fantasy of disappearing into a larger system; *My Ántonia*, on the other hand, marks it as such, gesturing ironically toward Jim’s nostalgia as a hubristic textual game. Jim’s professed renunciation of selfhood attempts to appropriate Bergsonian duration, ordering the pre-representational as retrospective confirmation of authorial agency. Such a strategy attempts to use the virtual without submitting individual personhood to the desubjectifying force of its flux, instead allowing Jim to situate himself as both inside and outside his story, both microscopic human element in comparison to the grand landscape of personal memory, and imperial overseer and narrator of the same. Casarino’s “Surplus Common” helps us distinguish between Bergsonian duration and Jim’s self-serving appropriation of it by theorizing two forms of desire under capitalism: “desire to be in common” and “desire not to be” (17). Desire to be in common, as in Bergson, seeks to produce the conditions for living an actualized identity “without foreclosing that which enables us to actualize in the first place” (23), in other words, leaving open the potential for remapping subjectivity by entering into unforeseen assemblages of desire. The desire not to be, on the other hand, is a pernicious form of subjectivity that exploits being-in-common by co-opting its revolutionary energy, fortifying capitalist individuality while pretending to renounce it in the name of the

comes as naturally as sleep. (60)

²⁷ The past and the present can thus be said to coexist. For a discussion of virtual coexistence and an enumeration of its paradoxes, see Deleuze’s *Bergsonism*, pages 59-63. For Deleuze, the Bergsonian

common good (19). Like Jim's appropriation of community at the end of *My Ántonia*, the desire not to be does this with recourse to bodily transcendence:

the desire not to be is the desire to foreclose and transcend death altogether: it is the desire to live forever as always already dead. This is the desire to live as pure dead labor in perennial exchange, as pure commodity in perpetual circulation: under capital, *the desire not to be is the desire to be money*. (18, emphasis in original)

According to this conceptual model, Jim's pretense of obliterating the self fuels his expansive authorial ego. Instead of renouncing his privileged position, Jim fantasizes a transcendence of the body. As Casarino shows us, Jim's is the ultimate capitalist fantasy: to become the medium of exchange itself, omnipresent and immaterial.

The full extent of Jim's narratological strategy should be clear by now: his fantasy of direct access to the past's pure content requires that he become pure form. In order to touch and transmit the past without corrupting it, Jim must *be* its immediate vehicle. He admits as much in the Introduction: "'Of course,' he said, 'I should have to [write about Ántonia] in a direct way, and say a great deal about myself. It's through myself that I knew her and felt her, and I've had no practice in any other form of presentation'" (49). "Jim Burden" is the name of a literary technique, the "My" in "My Ántonia," the putative shape of the story that Jim will tell. He writes himself as the immaterial medium of transmission for the past, the means through which the pure matter of memory can circulate into the present. Casarino shows us that such a transformation, far from effecting the erasure of self that it purports, fortifies and expands the self by turning it

revolution consists of the insight that "[w]e do not move from the present to the past, from perception to recollection, but from the past to the present, from recollection to perception" (63).

into a pantheistic presence steeped in the capitalist fantasy of perpetual growth.

The further irony is that Jim claims to guard his cherished memories against commodification by capital, much as *Passing*'s Irene Redfield will guard her conservative conception of race against the dangerous fluctuations of the market ushered in by Clare Kendry. After Jake and Otto leave, Jim remembers fondly that they "had given us things that cannot be bought in any market in the world" (127), things, in other words, for which nothing can be given in exchange, because their value defies the fickle instability of supply and demand, in fact cannot be approximated by any system of valuation. He blames Larry Donovan for preying on the market's susceptibility to a false inflation of values when he lies about his "unappreciated worth" as a passenger conductor to secure female company, a precursor to his exploitation of *Ántonia*. Even Jim's claim to transfer his memories to the reader untainted by arranging or rearranging betrays a desire to exempt himself from the relationship of confidence into which readers must enter with him to fix his "value" as either reliable or unreliable.

Donovan, a figure for a new breed of greedy capitalists that interested Cather,²⁸ personifies for Jim the unregulated and dangerous forces of the market on the purified past. And yet, Jim's scorn obscures an earlier scene between market and memory that also involves a passenger conductor, who arrives on the very first page of Jim's story:

Beyond Chicago we [Jim and Jake Marpole] were under the protection of a friendly passenger conductor, who knew all about the country to which we were going and gave us a great deal of advice in exchange for our confidence. He seemed to us an experienced and worldly man who had

²⁸ Compare *A Lost Lady*'s Ivy Peters, who also uses monetary schemes to gain a sexual advantage over Marian Forrester.

been almost everywhere; in his conversation he threw out lightly the names of distant States and cities. He wore the rings and pins and badges of different fraternal orders to which he belonged. Even his cuff-buttons were engraved with hieroglyphics, and he was more inscribed than an Egyptian obelisk. (51)

Jim scripts the passenger conductor as an allegory for the modern – he is “experienced” and “worldly,” belongs to “different fraternal orders,” “thr[ows] out lightly the names of distant States and cities,” as if coolly unimpressed by their exoticism – while also concealing this invention by associating himself with Jake, whose “experience of the world was not much wider than mine” (51). He dramatizes being sucked in to the passenger conductor’s visual and narrative semiosis, offering him his confidence in exchange for “a great deal of advice.” As that advice resolves into Jim’s first apprehension of *Ántonia* – ““She’s not much older than you, twelve or thirteen, maybe, and she’s as bright as a new dollar. Don’t you want to go ahead and see her, Jimmy? She’s got the pretty brown eyes, too!”” (51) – Jim casts himself as shying away from the implications of sexuality, and from the monetary simile that commodifies *Ántonia*: “This last remark made me bashful, and I shook my head and settled down to ‘Jesse James’” (52).

Like Donovan, this passenger conductor exploits *Ántonia*’s sexuality by offering her to a young Jim Burden through an exchange, only here, Jim offers his complicity while pretending not to. As much Jim insists that he and Donovan are opposites, the passenger conductor mediates between them, encapsulating both in his amoral valuation of *Ántonia*. Moreover, the passenger conductor is also a figure for Jim the writer. Jim,

after all, offers the conductor his “confidence,” just as Jim requires the confidence of his reader and acts as “conductor” of the narrative. Jim, too, is a railroad functionary, directing the reader while acting as the obscure man of experience. He thus features himself as both boyish innocence turning away from commodification of purity, *and* as writer-conductor, involved with the glamour and power of authorship, while attempting to conceal the latter. As Casarino shows us, both images are connected in their buttressing of narratological agency, even as Jim scripts them as opposites.

The novel uses Jim to demonstrate that the new (Donovan’s commodifying falsities) and the fantasy of a purified past (Jim’s claim to pure medium of narrative transfer) are not opposites, but equal capitalistic partners, complicit in promoting the logic that maintains the status quo of writing as immaterial. As the distance between these two poles collapses, the novel exposes Jim’s attraction to closure and propriety. Mr. Shimerda, for instance, emerges in Jim’s narrative as a figure for the recompense of loss. It is Mrs. Shimerda who insists that he must be buried at the site of the future crossroads (111), an image suggestive of a turning point in the family’s life, but it is Jim that makes it mean the permanence of his spirit persisting through the urbanization of the landscape: “Years afterward, when the open-grazing days were over, . . . Mr. Shimerda’s grave was still there, with a sagging wire fence around it, and an unpainted wooden cross” (113). Jim is drawn to settle what he deems proper. In his account, the grave resists being buried under modern streets that might erase its presence; through “error from the surveyed lines,” the roads end up curving around it, making the grave “like a little island,” marked clearly as a compensatory memorial for loss: “Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, I am sure, without wishing well to the sleeper” (114). Past the

disappearance of the prairie's unalloyed purity, Jim suggests, Shimerda remains as a reminder of an older way of life, returned to the land and returning through it in a proper cycle of historical restitution.

Like the queer landscape in Hanover, however, there is another limit beyond the dialectic of commodification and nostalgia, the other limit of Jim's desire that his narrative is unable or unwilling to settle with propriety and closure. The impropriety of non-closure and immanence can be found in Jim's account of the exiles Pavel and Peter, which is in stark contrast to Mr. Shimerda's death. Pavel and Peter are literally unable to return to their homeland, placeless after being chased out of their village by the horrific wolf story that always catches up to them (82). As Gelfant shows, the story is about heterosexual convention being devoured by animalistic lust;²⁹ like the deaths of Emil and Marie, it is written with the dead bodies of the bride and groom. In this sense, their exile is also an exile from the contemporary norms of heterosexuality: "Once, while he was looking at *Ántonia*, [Peter] sighed and told us that if he had stayed at home in Russia perhaps by this time he would have had a pretty daughter of his own to cook and keep house for him" (69). Instead, Pavel and Peter live together as bachelors in a domestic dyad that evokes the life of a married couple. Their house contains "a wide double bed built against the wall, properly made up with blue gingham sheets and pillows" (69). While Pavel is "wild-looking" and sickly (67), Peter is fat and has a friendly demeanour: "He always seemed pleased when he met people on the road, smiled and took off his cap to every one, *men as well as women*" (68, my emphasis). Peter is further associated with a cow, symbol of femininity, and his domestic obligations, which distinguish him from

²⁹ For Gelfant, the wolf story shows that to the novel, "the real danger to man is woman, that his protection lies in avoiding or eliminating her" (115).

other single men, make him the object of ridicule: “I had heard our neighbors laughing when they told how Peter always had to go home at night to milk his cow. Other bachelor homesteaders used canned milk, to save trouble” (68).

Pavel and Peter’s experiment in domestic queerness, however, is doomed to collapse, as Pavel dies and Peter leaves to wander alone (82). As with Shimerda’s death, Jim tries to make sense of this loss by enshrining it in a metaphorical suicide:

I did not see him do it, but this I know: after all his furniture and his cook-stove and pots and pans had been hauled off by purchasers, when his house was stripped and bare, he sat down on the floor with his clasp-knife and ate all the melons that he had put away for winter. When Mr. Shimerda and Krajiek drove up in their wagon to take Peter to the train, they found him with a dripping beard, surrounded by heaps of melon rinds. (82)

Stripped of his domestic accoutrements, all that is left for Peter to do is to eat his future, to perform hopelessness. Jim’s narrative distance from the scene – “I did not see him do it, but this I know” – attempts to monumentalize Peter’s indulgence as something deeper than mere reporting: he “knows” it happened, because the scene is a metaphor that speaks to a larger truth.³⁰ Unlike the gravestone metaphor, however, the metaphorical suicide does not supplement the loss of the domestic experiment, because no community crystallizes around it. Instead, Jim is outdone by abjection and excess, unable to tell a story that yields a tangible image as satisfying as Shimerda’s grave.

³⁰ Compare Nick Carraway’s speculative “must have” that he uses to settle that which he does not know, often with recourse to a similarly metaphysical propriety: “He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass” (161).

Moreover, the metaphor that Jim proposes is overwhelmed by an earlier scene of melon-eating that suggests lushness and bodily pleasure, when Jim and *Ántonia* visit Peter, well before the collapse of his household:

Peter put the melons in a row on the oilcloth-covered table and stood over them, brandishing a butcher knife. Before the blade got fairly into them, they split of their own ripeness, with a delicious sound. He gave us knives, but no plates, and the top of the table was soon swimming with juice and seeds. I had never seen any one eat so many melons as Peter ate.
(69)

In this scene of overindulgence without restraint, the melons “split of their own ripeness,” as if complicit in their own consumption, with a synaesthetic “delicious sound” that evokes sensuality. Armed with penetrating knives only, and no receptacles on which to catch the spilled seeds, Peter, Jim, and *Ántonia* tear apart the melons with such vigour that juice and seeds cover the table. There is a sexual imperative here of waste, of the spilling of seed for its own sake, satisfaction that is messy and unproductive. Unlike the “rich mine of life” that Jim insists *Ántonia* becomes, or the image of *Shimerda*’s gravestone, the tabletop carries the material excess of sexual indulgence without putting it to any use, hosting the physical discharge without concern for its proper return.

Although Jim does not explain the relationship between the two scenes of melon-eating, their juxtaposition suggests sensuous lushness repeating as grief over loss, laying bare Jim’s inability to domesticate queerness through a compensatory metaphor. The interplay between these two scenes therefore exposes the relationship between Jim’s narrative and the novel’s frame device, because the former is also a kind of metaphor to

compensate for loss, yet also connected to another instance of storytelling that undercuts its efficacy. As the ostensibly “real” located outside Jim’s story, the external narrator initially appears nostalgic, complicit in Jim’s resistance to corrupted city life and indulgence of adventure stories, valorizing Jim for his boyish exploration of “big Western dreams,” and his “youthful” and “solicitous” interest in women (48). In entering into an agreement with Jim – “I would set down on paper all that I remembered of *Ántonia* if he would do the same. We might, in this way, get a picture of her” (49) – she officializes Jim’s writing as the fulfillment of a contractual obligation.

This contract, however, also makes the narrator’s manuscript a double to Jim’s, an unlikely doppelgänger that precedes the dissemination of Jim’s story, but that does not return once narrative authority is handed over to Jim.³¹ Furthermore, like the scene of Peter’s lush melon-eating, the narrator’s unwritten manuscript is material and abject, starkly different from Jim’s fantasy of transcendent writing that accesses and delivers the past without corrupting it. Instead of returning Jim’s manuscript with one of her own, the narrator opts out of the project of “get[ting] a picture” of *Ántonia*, having made only “a few straggling notes” (49). Like the uneven rows of wooden buildings that “straggle” at the beginning of *O Pioneers!* (3), these notes deviate from the regular order in their dispersed and disorderly organization. Whereas Jim’s is a story without notes, ostensibly spontaneous and without arrangement or form, hers is a collection of notes without story,

³¹ The critical opinion as to how much agency Jim retains or renounces is divided. Judith Butler argues that the narrator’s handing over of narrative authority to Jim is a “false transfer” (148). For Butler, the citational nature of Jim’s story – as she says, “Jim’s authorship is assumed only through a literal repetition of Cather’s own title” (149) – preserves a space outside of Jim’s agency. Lindemann disagrees with Butler, arguing that although Jim is unreliable, he nevertheless retains full authorial agency. For Lindemann, women’s voices “suffer from a crisis of location that dangerously diminishes their ability to construct a counterstory to the romanticized ‘boys’ book’ that is Jim’s *Ántonia*” (“Prairie” 118). Unlike Butler, who believes that the erasure of these voices continues to haunt and disrupt Jim’s narrative, Lindemann believes

the beginnings of a narrative never completed. Whereas Jim claims to be presenting to his reader the pure matter of memory, freed from the conventions of writing that would underline its materiality as writing, the notes suggest a different kind of formlessness: not matter free from form entirely, but matter free from form discernible by convention.

While Jim's narrative attempts to compensate for the loss of purity by delivering *Ántonia* directly through metaphysical "non-writing," the narrator's notes suggest an alternative form of writing, foregrounding their material existence, wasteful and non-teleological in their failure to resolve into a completed story or to act as a symbolic portal between past and present.

The external narrator is thus the site of the potential for an alternative form of writing, but also for an alternative form of reading. Jim gives her a code as to how his story, contained in a "legal portfolio" (49), should be properly read: "'Read it as soon as you can,' he said, rising, 'but don't let it influence your own story'" (49). This paradoxical directive attempts to colonize resistance by making the writing of a story free from Jim's influence the adherence to his command. The straggling notes elude such cooptation; they are not a story in the conventional sense, but the virtual potential for the undoing of Jim's own, for becoming something other than itself. Instead of either heeding or transgressing Jim's edict, the narrator leaves her anarchic material as unactualized potential, and offers an alternative form of reading in her last sentence: "My own story was never written, but the following narrative is Jim's manuscript, *substantially* as he brought it to me" (50, my emphasis). Her resistance, as Butler argues, is to cite Jim's manuscript, while suggesting the possibility of deviating from it. While

that no alternative view "is ever loudly or clearly articulated" ("Prairie" 118), that there is "no space that is not-Jim" ("Prairie" 128).

neither reiterating Jim's reactionary nostalgia, nor simply negating his story by exposing the naiveté or tendentious politics of his childish fantasies, the narrator's "substantial" paraphrasing evokes the double nature of this narrator as both reader and writer of Jim's manuscript: she will read without adherence to a narrator's doctrine, impossibly eluding his paradoxical command;³² the unactualized manuscript that she begins to produce remains as an ironic and expressly material counterweight to Jim's faith in the purity of the past, and in the possibility of its direct transmission into the present.

Like *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia* positions its reader between the seduction of nostalgia, propagated by a controlling narrator, and a discernible counter story that solicits the refusal of nostalgia. That the frame does not return at the novel's end, giving Jim the last word, only increases this ironic gap, highlighting Jim's narrative control while marking the disappearance of the external narrator by her absence. While the novel evokes queer potential in the narrator's immanent and non-nostalgic form of writing, it is *Death Comes for the Archbishop* that begins to explore this potential as an opportunity for theorizing a new form of being-in-common.

Death Comes for the Archbishop

Like *My Ántonia*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* begins with a transfer of authority. Where for Jim Burden, however, the hand-off is textual, in *Death*, the transfer of power is more literal and institutional: control of the Catholic church's domain in New Mexico, from the regional diocese, at the hands of the Roman cardinals, to Jean Latour.

³² Just as Emil is punished by the text of *O Pioneers!* for taking his readerly resistance too far, without understanding that straying from authority requires the elaboration of a new subjectivity, the 1926 edition of *My Ántonia* strips the narrator of her power by removing, among other things, the last sentence from the Introduction, containing the qualification "substantially." Sharon O'Brien argues that while both editions underline the subjective nature of Jim's narration, the later version gives "over to Jim the novel's creative inspiration, as well as its authorship" ("Introduction" 16). For a biographical discussion of Cather's decision to alter her Introduction, see O'Brien 1999 (15-17). Also see Richard Harris (34).

But Latour is an unwilling and ambivalent authority. As Jean Schwind argues, Latour seems gradually to move away from the Catholic doctrines of Rome toward a surrender to the “native forms and traditions” that already exist in Santa Fe (82). Indeed, instead of accepting outright the charge to impose the church’s will on the land and its inhabitants, Latour looks to indigenous North American practices for alternative ways of relating to the land without dominating it, which the novel emulates in its fragmented structure and reticent tone.³³ Cather, however, lays bare Latour’s ambivalence in his conduct as an agent charged with imposing a foreign control on the American southwest by featuring his involvement in another story: Latour’s suggestive connection to Joseph Vaillant, his companion. The connection between the two priests, Cather’s attempt at imagining a same-sex love story of tenderness and respect, allegorizes Latour’s attempt to understand the indigenous territory without depriving it of its own agency. The question of how to love Vaillant without controlling him – or naming love as same-sex eros – comes to exemplify Cather’s working through of how ethically to establish a non-indigenous presence in New Mexico without the violence of orientalizing nostalgia.

³³ Critical opinion on Latour’s allegiance to the doctrines of the civilizing mission has been sharply divided. Some read Latour as a progressive who comes to understand the problems with “Americanizing” indigenous cultures, thus becoming a mouthpiece for Cather’s critique of the same. See, for instance, Urgo, who argues that Latour “discovers the limits of his missionary capabilities” through Jacinto, who will not heed the lessons of migratory identity (184). Urgo, rather problematically, suggests that the novel upbraids the Navajo for clinging to a single idea in the face of modernity, thus ignoring Cather’s ambivalence toward industrial progress. Similarly, Katerina Prajznerová believes that Latour comes to embrace multiculturalism, which is represented by the cultural diversity of the garden he tends (134). Others read Latour as an incurable agent for the Church, practicing a hylomorphic imposition of order, which Cather never problematizes or ironizes. Godfrey, for example, argues that Latour orientalizes native culture by valorizing its landscape as “pre-creation” (18). For Godfrey, Cather is complicit in this romanticizing, even in the putatively rare moments when Latour’s and the narrator’s voices are separated (23). Haein Park argues that the “serene memories” that permeate the novel obscure the “actual historical reality of the French mission in the Southwest” (14), implying that Cather embarks upon the kind of romantic rewriting that Jim Burden undertakes in *My Ántonia*. For an account of some of the French mission’s oppressive actions, see Matovina and Poyo (54-5; 68-70). One example they focus on is the arrival of Bishop Lamy in New Mexico in 1851, where he “suspended several New Mexican priests, reinstated mandatory tithing, and decreed that heads of families who failed to tithe be denied the sacraments” (54).

Recent critics note the relationship between Latour's ambitions and the novel's experimental structure, and see it as an element of *Death's* politics. Reynolds, for instance, argues that the novel's "gappiness" ("Ideology" 5) is a strategy, ultimately inadequate, to reconcile the differences between individual actors and the larger ideological system, each of which Cather holds responsible for the violent political upheaval in the Americanization of the southwest. Sevick argues that while the aesthetically beautiful descriptions in the novel obscure some "unflattering" moments in American history ("Nervous" 13), they also invite a new kind of reader to see beyond these mystifications ("Catholic" 197). And John Hilgart, also aware of the dangers of dehistoricizing, believes that Cather's novel aims to preserve cultural artifacts "against the amnesia of the commodification [Cather] had witnessed" (383). For Hilgart, Cather's strategy in *Death* is to develop a means to mediate between the commodification of historical objects, and the kinds of naïve nostalgia for a pre-commercial utopia that we have seen in Jim Burden's childish longings. Her solution, according to Hilgart, is to have Latour embrace the "messy contingencies" of these cultural forms, the uncertain material history that persists in each object (386).

Hilgart's point should not be understated, as it stresses the kind of immanence that challenges the metaphysical impulses of some of Cather's other figures of authority that we have considered: Alexandra Bergson and Jim Burden, for instance. For Hilgart, Latour is invested in exploring such materiality, exemplifying a markedly different tactic than what Cather pursues in her novels of the prairie. Unlike the ironic protagonists of her early fiction, Latour will seek a way to access the materiality of setting and of history, to effect an erasure of self that is not a covert project of deification. Cather, however,

situates Latour as ironically removed from a cultural tradition that he can never fully inhabit, in pursuit of a native ethic of inhabiting the land without imposing on it, but able only to approach such an ethic hylomorphically.³⁴ The relationship between Latour and Vaillant that emerges as an allegory for the power and ethical dynamics of Latour's Catholic imperialism, however, is founded on an ironic misunderstanding. As such, through this relationship the novel attempts to elaborate an experimental ethical and textual practice: an impure "love" as both the condition for a subjectivity that exceeds the bounds of the individual body, and a relational principle between discursive positions: neither eros nor disjunction, but a celebration of irony itself.

Latour appears to be in constant movement away from the hylomorphism of the Catholic church, and toward an ethic of material self-ordering, which he will never fully inhabit. The opening scene after the frame device exemplifies this movement, and implicates the reader by drawing parallels between the intradiegetic setting and the narratological form. We encounter Latour having "lost his way," and "trying to get back on the trail, with only his compass and his sense of direction for guides" (17). His disorientation is produced not by a monotony of scenery, however, but by an excess: "The difficulty was that the country in which he found himself was so featureless – or rather, that it was crowded with features, all exactly alike" (17). What at first strikes the narrator as a barrenness reminiscent of Jim Burden's opening description of the formless Nebraska prairie – merely "the material out of which countries are made" (54) – appears

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari define "Hylomorphism" as the imposition of transcendent form on passive or inert matter (*Nomadology* 31), exactly the kind of will to organization about which the cardinals fantasize in the novel's prologue, that Alexandra Bergson practices, and Jim Burden covertly enacts. It must take place from without, and sees material as helplessly in need of an external shaping force. In the fiction that we have considered so far, Cather lampoons hylomorphism through irony. And if hylomorphism implies the illusion of objectivity, "material self-ordering" is its opposite, the radical potential for elements to organize themselves without deference to an overarching structure.

on second thought be its exact opposite: an excess of form, replicated rhetorically in the narrator's cumbersome and overwrought description of the land. Latour's journey continues:

He must have travelled through thirty miles of these conical red hills, winding his way in the narrow cracks between them, and he had begun to think that he would never see anything else. They were so exactly like one another that he seemed to be wandering in some geometrical nightmare....The hills thrust out of the grounds so thickly that they seemed to be pushing each other, elbowing each other aside, tipping each other over. (17-18)

As Latour searches for difference in the landscape, he is haunted by the nightmarish repetition and "intrusive omnipresence of the triangle" (18). The setting is thus a satire of Jim Burden's fantasy of a virginal land: its apparent featurelessness is oppressive rather than stimulating. Moreover, the image of the hill as triangle is suggestive on various registers: the trinity, but also dialectical synthesis; dream symbolism, but also geometrical measurement and "triangulation," and hence, a figure for code and logic itself. The landscape in which Latour finds himself is one filled with contradiction: it appears to offer divine salvation, but the nightmarish quality of its repetition, as well as parallel associations with its figure, suggest that Christian symbolism and scientific measurement are tied together as oppressive.

Like Emil Bergson's disoriented frenzy at the opening of *O Pioneers!*, this scene is also a parable for the reader. Cather's novel appears to be featureless, emptied of the standard accoutrements of fiction: a linear story, the conventional marriage plot,

progressive character development, for example. Through the novel's seemingly barren setting without any such sustenance, the novel challenges the reader to look for meaning without reiterating the overarching and homogenizing logic of Rome. To look to the theological transcendence of the trinity, it seems to suggest, is as useful as appealing to a barren landscape of sameness, itself a precursor to the capitalist nightmare of commodified objects that Cather critiques in her earlier fiction. In a text in which not much seems to happen, in other words, where can a difference be found that avoids both the fetishization of an ostensibly purified natural world and capitulation to an external authority?

Latour's solution evokes the materiality that Hilgart notes, finding refreshment within the landscape itself:

When he opened his eyes again, his glance immediately fell upon one juniper which differed in shape from the others. It was not a thick-growing cone, but a naked, twisted trunk, perhaps ten feet high, and at the top it parted into two lateral, flat-lying branches, with a little crest of green in the centre, just above the cleavage. Living vegetation could not present more faithfully the form of the Cross. (18)

As opposed to the deep theological rumblings that Alexandra and Jim find buried under the landscape in Nebraska, Latour's cruciform tree is an expression of nature. His miracle, while Christian in its symbolism, is not an escape from bodily reality into an ethereal realm of historical truth, but a tree whose material features are emphasized in their description: the tree is naked and twisted, alive. It does not yield direct access to salvation, but forms temporary satisfaction of bodily need; it is not a crude representation

of Christian divinity, but a living, breathing cross in its own right. It is thus a miracle *with* nature, rather than a miracle above or beyond it. God is immanent in the oppressive setting, waiting to be found by Latour.

The ethic of immanence to which Latour bends in this opening scene is a crucial step in the novel's thinking through the problem of eluding the dichotomy between gaudy newness and naïve nostalgia. In *Death*, Latour is put in conversation with his companion Vaillant, who seems opposed to the archbishop in his desire for an apprehension of God's literal force from outside the material world.³⁵ The two priests' differing views about miracles epitomize these two competing models of representation. Vaillant, Latour thinks, "must always have the miracle very direct and spectacular, not with Nature, but against it" (29). For Latour, on the other hand, miracle is a function of perspective:

‘The Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.’ (50)

For Latour, a miracle occurs in the interaction between subjective impression and external fact, suggesting something like an impressionistic relationship to symbols, as opposed to Vaillant's conventionally realist logic. Such an aesthetic implies a model of representation in which what is already there must be brought out through an alteration of

³⁵ While critics have tracked Latour's movement away from the doctrines of Rome, they have largely failed to notice the important differences between Latour and Vaillant that speak to this very issue. Even critics who note these differences tend to consider them as psychological traits, rather than as discursive or aesthetic positions. Skaggs, for instance, believes that Latour and Vaillant are "equally admirable," and enumerates a series of differences that does little to bring into focus the ideological tension between them: "Latour is a man of reflection, for example, while Vaillant is a man of action. Latour is careful and thoughtful while Vaillant is impulsive. Latour loves a few very well while Vaillant is sympathetic with many people" (402).

self, rather than through a direct intervention of transcendence.³⁶

Vaillant, we might say, exemplifies the pioneering ideal, which Latour comes to reject. When imploring Latour to let him continue his missionary work, for instance, he casts himself as both benevolent colonizer and sympathetic compatriot: “I have almost become a Mexican! I have learned to like *chili colorado* and mutton fat. Their foolish ways no longer offend me, their very faults are dear to me. I am *their man!*” (208).

Furthermore, like Alexandra Bergson and her complicit narrator, Vaillant relies on a theory of history that understands the future as already contained in the past, waiting to be enacted, rather than as open terrain for unpredictable experimentation.³⁷ As with his

³⁶ The same opposition is present in other disagreements between the two priests. Latour’s conception of the soup’s ontology is one of historical emergence, rather than of abstract and stable categories: “a soup like this is not the work of one man. It is the result of a constantly refined tradition. There are nearly a thousand years of history in this soup” (38). In contrast to Vaillant’s assertion of the self as the agent of creation, for Latour, an artistic object emerges out of historical contingencies much larger than the individual’s will. Similarly, Vaillant is appalled to hear Latour’s assertion of the Angelus bell’s “Moslem” origin, and would rather fix its identity by obscuring its historical emergence (45). Latour understands that accounting for its history does not make it “infidel” (44), as Vaillant believes, but that all objects with seemingly stable and hegemonic identities emerge out of a complex interplay of historical forces.

³⁷ We recall here the Deleuzian distinction between potential and possibility. A concept is said to be a possibility if its materialized object does not yet exist. For Deleuze, possibility is dogmatic, because it implies that the concept pre-exists the object. It is thus a fantasy, because the concept is, as Deleuze says, “retroactively fabricated in the image of what resembles it” (*Difference and Repetition* 212). Potential, on the other hand, is not a pre-formed mould, but the realm of the virtual, and is said to become actualized rather than made real:

The actualisation of the virtual, on the contrary, always takes place by difference, divergence or differentiation. Actualisation breaks with resemblance as a process no less than it does with identity as a principle. Actual terms never resemble the singularities they incarnate. In this sense, actualisation or differentiation is always a genuine creation. It does not result from any limitation of a pre-existing possibility. (*Difference and Repetition* 212)

As opposed to the fiction of making real what was already presupposed, the actualization of virtual potential is a process of creation, insofar as its undertaking is experimental, its result totally unpredictable.

Deleuze is insistent throughout his philosophical canon that the virtual “must create its own lines of actualization in positive acts” (*Bergsonism* 97). For Deleuze, this is possible because the virtual consists not of stable physical forms from which the actual derives its being, but an infinite and inexhaustible spectrum of potential futures. Any given actualization is not pre-determined, but is governed by difference itself: the virtual “is actualized by being differentiated and is forced to differentiate itself, to create its lines of differentiation in order to be actualized” (*Bergsonism* 97). Differences in intensity between the pre-individual singularities that populate the virtual govern this process of actualization (*Difference and Repetition* 245). Manuel DeLanda explains this concept with the example of two entities, each with a

conception of the miracle as a function of divine will, he thus sees his missionary work as the emancipation of a repressed divinity that, under the proper circumstances, cannot help but return:

The Faith, in that wild frontier, is like a buried treasure; they guard it, but they do not know how to use it to their soul's salvation. A word, a prayer, a service, is all that is needed to set free those souls in bondage. I confess I am covetous of that mission. (207)

Similarly, toward the end of his life, he tells Latour, "To fulfil the dreams of one's youth; that is the best that can happen to a man. No worldly success can take the place of that" (259).³⁸ For Vaillant, verisimilitude between possibility and its realization enacts the proper return of that which should be, and furnishes his colonial will as agent of its fulfillment.³⁹

Vaillant is trapped within the episteme of the making-real of that which was possible, which suggests adherence to a model of representation that embraces verisimilitude as its organizing principle. Cather points Latour away from the model propagated by Rome, as he looks elsewhere for a suitable representational principle to relate to his dominion without domesticating it. He appears to find such a principle in the

different temperature: movement of air between them occurs not because of any internal property in either, nor an over-arching force, but merely because of intensive difference itself (60). Similarly, Miguel De Bestegui explains that differences in intensity "designate a differential in potential that triggers actual effects or forces a system into a definite actual state" (296).

³⁸ See *A Lost Lady's* Captain Forrester, Cather's quintessential domesticator of native land, who says the following about the realization of possibility, linking personal dreams to industrial expansion:

'a thing that is dreamed of in the way I mean, is already an accomplished fact. All our great West has been developed from such dreams; the homesteader's and the prospector's and the contractor's. We dreamed the railroads across the mountains, just as I dreamed my place on the Sweet Water.' (44-5)

native landscape and culture that he comes to valorize, signalling a particular aesthetic relationship between form and matter. The mesa plain, for instance, is described as having an appearance of

incompleteness; as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together, on the eve of being arranged into mountain, plain, plateau. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape. (94-5)

The description hearkens back to Jim's fantasy of a formless landscape, except that here, the land is as if on the precipice of being completed. Instead of the landscape's virginity signalling a purified nostalgia from the modern, and inviting the imposition of Jim's imperial memory, the narrator, focalized through Latour, valorizes incompleteness as the absence of authority and of final meaning. Indeed, Latour sees in the mesa country a fluidity of form, rather than a simple lack of form:

One thing which struck him at once was that every mesa was duplicated by a cloud mesa, like a reflection, which lay motionless above it or moved slowly up from behind it. These cloud formations seemed to be always there, however hot and blue the sky....The great tables of granite set down in an empty plain were inconceivable without their attendant clouds, which were a part of them, as the smoke is part of the censer, or the foam of the wave....

...Whether they were dark and full of violence, or soft and white with luxurious idleness, they powerfully affected the world beneath them. The

³⁹ In this sense, we might think of Jim Burden as attempting to take the relationship between possibility and realization beyond mere verisimilitude, into a fantastical realm in which the past can emerge as present

desert, the mountains and mesas, were continually re-formed and re-coloured by the cloud shadows. The whole country seemed fluid to the eye under this constant change of accent, this ever-varying distribution of light. (95-6)

The setting here is worked upon by something from above, but in defiance of hylomorphism and verisimilitude, each mesa is coupled with a cloud mesa so closely that the latter is an essential part of the former. The clouds, which constantly re-form the land by redistributing light, are not transcendent or external imposers of form, but immanent to the land. Instead of completing the landscape once and for all, their unpredictable movements remain open to flux, forever incomplete and without an ideal form toward which they strive, Bergsonian in their seeming immersion in the pre-representational.

Similarly, Latour admires the Navajo ethic of “pass[ing] through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water, or birds through the air” (233). In contrast to the pioneering ethic of making the land yield to human imposition, the Navajo “seemed to have none of the European’s desire to ‘master’ nature, to arrange and re-create. They spent their ingenuity in the other direction; in accommodating themselves to the scene in which they found themselves” (233). Again, this model of representation appears similar to Jim’s, but contains some crucial differences. Jim’s professions of representing his memories without leaving a trace on them masks a desire to bring them under his dominion, whereas the Navajo make no such claim. Instead, their ethic of disappearing into the land requires a changing of self so as to leave it undisturbed. While Jim will disappear into the land only to the extent that he can become its imperial form, the Navajo’s “manner to vanish into the

through a careful and stylized act of storytelling.

landscape” (233) contains no such self-aggrandizing gesture.

Latour, however, is a tool for Cather, an instrument her novel can use to think through hylomorphism’s opposite and its constituent political and aesthetic problems. As a curative to Vaillant’s whole-hearted adoption of European principles, Latour is ambiguous, because his relationship with Vaillant emerges as a troubled allegory to his attempts to remain proximate to Navajo culture without orientalizing it. From a formal perspective, Nicholas Birns argues that the novel defies the norms of the “culturally Protestant” novel by replacing the standard tension between protagonist and antagonist with “a more unusual and subtle tension between two characters who are friends” (12). Indeed, the model of friendship that the novel elaborates between the priests is intimately tied up with both innovations in form, and a radical rethinking of how starkly different theoretical positions can co-exist in tension within and as a novel. As Lindemann argues, the point is not to read the two men as “priests-in-the-closet,” but to notice how far they “collaborate in the production of a shared and powerful subjectivity” (123), how the love between them eludes the capture of the language of both hetero- and homosexual identities.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ There is an abundance of criticism concerning Latour’s sexuality and gender. An early article by Lindemann argues that Latour, in turning away from the church and toward the native ethic of passing through the landscape without disturbing it (“Con-Quest” 16), comes to accept the “female principle” (15). In this sense, Latour’s femininity undermines the “conventionally phallic” hero of the frontier (17). For John P. Anders, the novel evokes homosexuality as the “thing not named” by foregrounding “spiritual friendship...in a theology that combines religious feeling with physical affection” (248). Ultimately, Anders argues, this allows Cather to equate sexual release with the novel’s form, as Latour’s climactic death mimics the spiritual and sexual ecstasy of orgasm (254-5). Hill demonstrates how Latour and Vaillant bond homosocially through the female position, filled here by “the Virgin Mary, the Church, and other female characters closely associated with the Church” (98). This dynamic, according to Hill, forms a critique of the “culturally normative” world of the priests, and brings to light female sexuality and lesbianism, too easily overlooked in Cather’s time (113). Smith reads Latour as androgynous, oscillating “between norms of femininity and masculinity,” which Cather employs to destabilize the conventional gender binary (91). Latour’s passionate attachment to men, however, is complemented by his celibacy, which “erases the category of sexuality as a marker of gendered identity” (92), thereby forcing the reader to “look beyond such dichotomies to understand Latour’s gender and sex identity” (92).

Lindemann's argument connects the novel's sexual and cultural politics. Just as the relationship between Latour and Vaillant offers the production of intimacy as a utopian space "outside of the regime of compulsory heterosexuality" (124), she argues that as Latour moves from the assimilationist mentality of Rome to a pluralistic ethic of multiculturalism, the novel exposes both poles as founded on an essentialism that prohibits meaningful communication between different races and cultures. In so doing, however, the novel also evokes an ideal community that would avoid being trapped by this logic: "the fantasy of a dynamic, syncretic culture that is neither blandly 'American' nor narrowly 'ethnic,' neither a melting pot nor a multicultural cafeteria line of proximate but unrelated options" (127). Jonathan Goldberg extends Lindemann's point, hailing the workings of affect between the two priests, "the reaching out in friendship to another," as the foundation of these utopian possibilities (94). For Goldberg, the "unnameable found in the relationship to an alterity" in Cather's novel, the impossible "realization of a desire that is there to be had at any moment, were we only to see or hear it," is conveyed through the "ranges of feeling" that persist in such a model of homosocial friendship (94). For these critics, Cather solves Latour's political problem by countering with the prospect of a successful model of communing without possessing.

Such utopianism, however, discounts the irony in the relationship between Latour and Vaillant. Latour's desire for Vaillant, despite serving as an allegory for his putatively ethical relationship with the Navajo, is in fact coercive from the start. Although the story of their escape to the West together as young men has the character of an elopement – Vaillant goes against the wishes of his "stern, silent" father (282); they are "disguised as if they were criminals, escaping by stealth from their homes" (283) – their relationship is

founded in this moment on a misunderstanding. As Vaillant is torn between his vow to his father and his vow to enter the church, Latour attempts to console him:

[Latour] had not known how to comfort his friend; it seemed to him that Joseph was suffering more than flesh could bear, that he was actually being torn in two by conflicting desires. While they were pacing up and down, arm-in-arm, they heard a hollow sound; the *diligence* rumbling down the mountain gorge. Joseph stood still and buried his face in his hands. The postilion's horn sounded.

'*Allons!*' said Jean lightly. '*L'invitation du voyage!* You will accompany me to Paris. Once we get there, if your father is not reconciled, we will get Bishop F— to absolve you from your promise, and you can return to Riom. It is very simple.' (283)

As the young Vaillant risks being torn apart, Latour offers a closure that appears to unify his discordant desires. As we learn in this passage, however, Latour does not know how to comfort Vaillant; instead, he reduces the latter's ethical and philosophical conflict to something "very simple": the allure of being able to reconcile mutually exclusive paths, offering the impossible promise of remaining loyal to both his father and the church. In this sense, Latour's offer is coercive, designed to satisfy his own desire for companionship, while disguising it as the origin of an ethical relationship between equal partners, akin to the Navajo's relationship to nature. Thus, their "arm-in-arm" pacing is interrupted by the sound of the train, signalling the beginning of a same-sex relationship that is insincere in its language of sympathy, emblemized by the hollowness of the

train's rumbling.⁴¹ As a troubled allegory for his relationship to the indigenous culture of the American southwest, Latour's treatment of Vaillant in this ordinary moment undercuts his attempt to emulate the Navajo's ethical model of stewardship over the land, exposing the fact that as an agent of the Catholic church, he will always be at a remove from that with which he seeks to engage without controlling.

Vaillant is an enduring monument of his suasion by Latour, reminding us that Latour's appropriation of the other vitiates his attempts at ethical purity with the Navajo. The power imbalance in their relationship manifests from its inception:

When Jean Marie was in his second year at the Seminary, he was standing on the recreation ground one day at the opening of the term, looking with curiosity at the new students. In the group, he noticed one of peculiarly unpromising appearance; a boy of nineteen who was undersized, very pale, homely in feature, with a wart on his chin and tow-coloured hair that made him look like a German. This boy seemed to feel his glance, and came up at once, as if he had been called. (223-4)

Vaillant appears to Latour as difference, as something exceptional, but also in need of guidance, due to his "unpromising" and sickly appearance. The initial meeting has the character of a conversion, with Latour as master: his glance calls Vaillant, as if to inaugurate him into his order. Moreover, we learn that the young Vaillant is prone to influence by the aesthetics and rhetoric of ritual:

The year previous, after the surrender of Algiers, there had been a military review at Clermont, a great display of uniforms and military bands, and

⁴¹ Compare to the backfiring car that interrupts Clarissa Dalloway's erotic cataloguing of flowers in *Mrs. Dalloway* (14). In Clarissa's case, the sound does not expose the moment as insincere, but raises the

stirring speeches about the glory of French arms. Young Joseph Vaillant had lost his head in the excitement, and had signed up for a volunteer without consulting his father...[T]hat one day, among the bands and the uniforms, he had forgotten everything but his desire to serve France. (224-5)

Vaillant is as if looking for a master to guide him, in search of an aestheticized ideological purpose. His need to serve something higher finds an outlet in Latour, who vows to “take this new boy under his protection” (225).

In Latour’s recollection, the meeting is the beginning of a friendship: “In that first encounter, he chose the lively, ugly boy for his friend. It was instantaneous” (225). This description features friendship as inherently unequal: Latour chooses to inaugurate the relationship, belying the putative automatic and mutual joining that instantaneity implies. This contradictory notion of friendship finds a contrast in a proximate description of Navajo friendship, who welcome Latour with seemingly unconditional hospitality, with the phrase, ““My friend has come”” (220): “That was all, but it was everything; welcome, confidence, appreciation” (220). In contrast, Latour’s deliberate choice to enter into friendship from its outside treats Vaillant as less of a friend than a pet, a companion to satisfy Latour’s own fear of loneliness. His promise of being able to reconcile Vaillant’s impossible choice between serving the church and serving his father only reiterates this originary moment of subjectification: “There was something in the baker’s son that had given their meeting the colour of an adventure; [Latour] meant to repeat it” (225). This repetition, the suasion that contradicts Latour’s later claims of perfect understanding

between the two priests, instantiates Latour's desire as coercive.⁴² As an allegory for Latour's mission, the accumulation of such events suggests that Latour seeks some kind of ethical intersubjective communion with the native landscape, as long as he can control that relationship from its outside.

By exposing Latour's desire as coercive, the novel undercuts its seeming nostalgia for the purity of communication between the two priests and, by extension, between Latour and the native culture of New Mexico. At the same time, the novel also features Latour's reaction to the danger of a transgressive moment that would undo his Catholic and exploitative identity by remapping his desire as same-sex eros. In the cave scene, cultural authenticity manifests as erotic contact, bringing together the novel's political and same-sex domestic plots, as Latour's desire for a kind of Navajo purity leads him to fundamentals that repulse in their bodily associations. Latour follows Jacinto into the cave as refuge from the storm, a forbidden place into which non-natives are not allowed. Once inside, he is disoriented by "an extraordinary vibration," which "hum[s] like a hive of bees, like a heavy roll of distant drums" (129). As he listens, Latour tells himself that "he [is] listening to one of the oldest voices of the earth. What he hear[s is] the sound of a great underground river, flowing through a resounding cavern" (130). Geological rather than theological, the voice is troped as immanence, the great movement of elements beneath the earth, but not apart from it. However, Latour is ambivalent about gaining access to what appears to him as the voice of authenticity. He is disgusted by the cave's "fetid odour" (127), repelled by and yet drawn to the "curious hole" that Jacinto plugs (131), on the other side of which seems to lie "another cavern" (128). The mysterious

⁴² Latour's hylomorphic treatment of Vaillant repeats throughout the narrative. He recalls Vaillant from Colorado, as he later admits, because he was lonely (251); he is upset that Vaillant will leave again

Pecos secret, ostensibly as close as Latour comes to accessing some “truth” about the land and the cultural customs that care for it, both allures and repulses.

Latour’s venture into the cave is a straying from his priestly identity, insofar as he enters a place “used by [the Pecos] for ceremonies and is known only to [them]” (128). When Jacinto implores him to forget he has been here, it is a call to restore the cave’s sacredness, but also speaks to Latour’s ambivalence toward its simultaneously captivating and revolting threat. Of course, Latour does not forget the cave in the end:

The Bishop kept his word, and never spoke of Jacinto’s cave to anyone, but he did not cease from wondering about it. It flashed into his mind from time to time, and always with a shudder of repugnance quite unjustified by anything he had experienced there. It had been a hospitable shelter to him in his extremity. Afterward he remembered the storm itself, even his exhaustion, with a tingling sense of pleasure. But the cave, which had probably saved his life, he remembered with horror. No tales of wonder, he told himself, would ever tempt him into a cavern hereafter.

(132-3)

Torn between bodily pleasure and disgust, Latour reaffirms his commitment to orthodoxy. Coming so close to accessing some truth behind Jacinto’s culture – whatever it is that lies in the other cavern to which the hole “seem[s] to lead” (128) – terrifies Latour, and he must recall the experience as a foolish temptation by cultural myth.

Latour’s frenetic recollections of the storm and the cave, however, both pleasurable and horrifying, also come across as a recollection of an initiating and traumatic sexual experience. After all, the transgression that takes place arrives as bodily

“without one regret” (249), acting more like a jilted lover than a priest.

exhaustion – Latour is “blind and breathless, panting through his open mouth” (126) as he follows Jacinto into the cave – and is so queer to the celibate priest that he vows to avoid its temptation in the future. Moreover, the cave is shaped like a body, which Latour and Jacinto enter through “two great stone lips, slightly parted and thrust outward” (126). Critics have noted the vaginal imagery associated with the latter,⁴³ and with the “curious hole” that Jacinto plugs to quell Latour’s uneasiness (131). But the hole, “about as large as a very big watermelon, of an irregular oval shape” (128), also suggests another kind of orifice. Unlike the “common” holes of this shape elsewhere, “where they occur in great numbers,” this one is “solitary, dark, and seem[s] to lead into another cavern” (128). The hole is thus queer in its difference, mysterious in being set apart spatially and conceptually. In keeping with the cave’s bodily shape, the hole’s position at “the rear wall of the cavern” makes it a rectum. Irregular, deviant, comparable in size to a watermelon – which *My Ántonia* associates with an excess of male sexual pleasure – the hole offers an opportunity for terrifying pleasure, to which Latour recoils in horror.

What might have materialized in the closeted space of the dark and unlocalizable cavern – the potential remapping of Latour’s identity as celibate agent of the Catholic church – remains hidden, even as it becomes an object of curiosity in retrospect. Still, the particular form of deviance that makes itself felt in the cave, as both cultural and sexual queerness that must be forgotten to re-establish hegemonic norms, is but the beginning of a series of such experiments that take place, and have taken place. Although Lindemann and Goldberg are concerned with the relationship between Latour and Vaillant as a production of affect that would rewrite subjectivity, thereby opening up the potential for

⁴³ See, for example, Smith, who argues that the cave’s stone lips make it “an obviously female sexualized locale” (92), to which Latour reacts with repugnance, a misogyny further exemplified with his disgust at

an ethical non-native presence in New Mexico, they nonetheless focus on the utopian possibilities that lie, metaphorically speaking, on the other side Jacinto's cave: an actualized alternate universe in which such transgression is made manifest. While they miss the significance of Latour's recoiling from such an actuality in this scene, the logic that they propose can only see this retreat as a failure, as a missed opportunity for the making actual of virtual potential. Accordingly, Lindemann focuses on Cather's fiction's reticence toward same-sex intimacy: the novel "comes very close to the subject, but the characters' clear commitment to their vows of celibacy helps ensure that their devotion to one another is viewed as merely platonic" ("Introduction" 7).

As Casarino reminds us, however, withdrawing in the face of the virtual need not be an emptying of potential. Rather, for Casarino, this touching of the utterly unthinkable, and the concomitant "recoil[ing] from it in horror and ecstasy" (*Modernity* xx), can be generative of new affects. By this logic, Latour's turning away in both disgust and pleasure from the thought of erotic bodily contact, and its constituent political consequences for his relationship with the Navajo, is itself a productive moment. It is not, in other words, the specific character of what lies on the other side of the cave that matters.⁴⁴ Instead, Latour's movement away from the hole, away from a remapping of his identity, is the novel's way of evoking transgressive community without idealizing either same-sex eros, or the purity of sincere communication.

In recoiling from the danger of same-sex eros, Latour also recoils from some kind

the "tangle of woman's hair" he discovers in Padre Martinez's house (92).

⁴⁴ Casarino also reminds us that for Deleuze, the virtual and actual form "an immanent circuit, in the sense that each of the two is the obverse side of the other – and hence the actual always has virtual facets, always leads parallel virtual lives, and vice versa" (Casarino and Negri 159). Actualization, in other words, does not exhaust the virtual spectrum out of which particular identities arise; rather, each actualization opens up new potentials. In this sense, the question is not whether the cave discloses a same-sex erotic relationship, but what kinds of connections between seemingly stable and independent bodies are enabled by Latour's

of Navajo “authenticity,” which manifests as anal penetration, thereby preserving the boundaries that maintain his priestly celibacy and his European distance from native culture. But at the same time as it forecloses the undoing of hegemonic identity, the cave scene also reminds us of the impurity of the putatively pure relationship between Latour and Vaillant. In turning away from erotic contact with “Vaillant” – this name standing for the utopian same-sex relationship on the cave’s other side – Latour also turns toward “Vaillant” – standing also for the latter’s quasi-racist hylomorphism. Latour’s recoiling is thus a double movement that suspends him between the danger of the radically new, and the purity of the conventionally old. “Vaillant” is the name for the allure of the former, and the impossibility of the latter.

It is in this recoiling that *Death* makes its most significant departure from *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, and makes itself exemplary of the modernist rethinking of subjectivity that informs many of the texts under consideration here. The ways in which Amory Blaine, Nick Carraway, Irene Redfield, and Clarissa Dalloway recoil from same-sex encounters, for instance, make the remarkable supposition that all fiction is deformed by its attempts to deal with the presence of inexpressible desire; instead of trying to bury it, however, these novels foreground the connection between same-sex desire and narrative convention. Cather’s novels of the prairie feature exploiters rendered as the pursuit of narratological control, making use of affective appeal to serve their own myopic desires. *My Ántonia*, for instance, is dominated by a narrating presence that strives to eviscerate the past of virtual potential, rendering present a compound of memories by ensuring their transhistorical truth. The narrator of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, on the other hand, mimics Latour’s ambivalent authority, rarely commenting

directly or inviting sympathy through emotional coding. Moreover, the narrator organizes the story by a principle of fragmentation, rather than that of Jim Burden's "pure" memory, or the chronology that *O Pioneers!* deploys and subsumes under Alexandra's success and the return of old values.⁴⁵ *Death* constantly interrupts its chronological trajectory: with Latour and Vaillant's boyhood meeting, with the legend of Fray Baltazar, with other stories that explore the historical processes of becoming of the various religious artifacts and locales that the priests encounter.⁴⁶ The shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, for example, emerges from a miraculous appearance of the Virgin, and the telling of this history occurs on the same plane as the narrative present, beginning with the mundane, "On Saturday, December 9th, in the year 1531, a poor neophyte of the monastery of St. James was hurrying down Tapeyac hill to attend Mass in the City of Mexico" (46). At any time, the narrative is liable to shoot off in an unpredictable direction, lacking a controlling "archbishop" to bring together these divergences under a unifying principle.

More importantly, Cather features Jim Burden and Alexandra (and her complicit narrator) as ironic instantiations of the same dilemma she sets up for Latour: hypocritical nostalgia for purity, counterposed to a controlling animus toward transgressive desire.

Her novels of the prairie leave their pioneers in ironic opposition to a countervailing

⁴⁵ Early reviewers of *Death* debated whether the book could be classified as a novel, given its experimental anecdotal structure. A review in the *New York Times Book Review*, for instance, argues that it "falls under no category hitherto familiar," calling it less a historical novel than "a superimposition of the novel upon history" (Stuart 311). Another review begins, "In the first place, this is not a novel" (Gilman 314). Cather responded to this debate in a letter to *The Commonweal* as follows: "I am amused that so many of the reviews of this book began with the statement: 'This book is hard to classify.' Then why bother? Many more assert vehemently that it is not a novel. Myself, I prefer to call it a narrative" ("On *Death*" 12).

⁴⁶ Sarah Wilson argues that the novel presents material objects in order to protect cultural difference ("Material Objects" 183). For Wilson, these objects emerge "as a revolutionary site, wherein the cultural narratives of colonizer and colonized can engage in mutual reinterpretation and subversion, and multiple cultures can begin to accommodate each other's differences" ("Material Objects" 172).

subtext, evoking the immanence of writing as an alternative model of representation to elude the impossible dichotomy between nostalgia and the ultra-modern. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, on the other hand, ironizes its own irony, as Latour and Vaillant form a loving domesticity, despite the contradictions inherent in the power imbalance between them. As Lindemann notes, their relationship is “a rare depiction of the couple as a site of nurturance and productive collaboration” for Cather, whose fictionalized couplings are, more often than not, doomed to failure (*Queering* 118). Instead of making her figure of co-optation an ironic narrator, who controls the terms of the story through emotional appeal from its outside, Cather gives us two men living together *within* the ironic opposition.

That a community can exist within irony suggests a different program for this novel. The language of sympathy between Latour and Vaillant is hopelessly insincere, as we have seen. Still, the misunderstanding at the heart of their ostensibly “pure” relationship evokes a kind of domestic intersubjectivity without longing nostalgically for this purity. Instead, the novel celebrates irony itself as perhaps the only model of ethical relation possible. Latour and Vaillant, in this sense, operate in a domestic enclave sheltered from the narratological games that take place in *Pioneers* and *Antonia*; hypocrisy does not call for its own undoing here, but instead solicits an awareness of its own impurity. Furthermore, instead of using irony to evoke a reader caught between an affective invitation of sympathy and a legible counterdiscourse that calls for the refusal of this invitation, *Death* allows us to see ironized sympathy as a means to productive engagement with a text. Latour and Vaillant, in other words, are sincere ironists, and this teaches us that a reader’s relationship with an ironic text need not be one of antagonism

or resistance. To the contrary, the novel solicits sympathy for an expressly impure constellation of desire without either yearning for some standard of purity that may never have existed, or fetishizing the dialectical negation of a problem.

Latour dies thinking of having consoled Vaillant and bringing him to Paris, “trying to forge a new Will in that devout and exhausted priest” (297). The final pages before this, however, depict his nostalgia for the Navajo ties to the land – “the two were inseparable” (292) – and his frustration with American policy that initially pays no heed to this connection (293), until the Navajo are restored “to their sacred places” after “five years of exile” (295). In tying the political and domestic registers together in the novel’s conclusion, Cather suggests that Latour remains an ironic figure: his dying recollection of unambiguous selflessness to Vaillant is mirrored in his unalloyed faith that the Navajo problem has been solved, and that ““God will preserve [the Indian]”” (296). This declaration of sustained belief in purity, in turn, is offset by the hyperbolized apotheosis in his final view of the Navajo – “it was like an Indian Garden of Eden” (295) – which subsumes the native culture under a hylomorphic Christian system of meaning. The impurity of Latour’s convictions, however, are not of the imperialistic kind that we find in the dominating textual strategies of Jim Burden, and Alexandra Bergson’s didactic narrator. Latour appropriates Vaillant and Navajo culture alike, but he lacks the narratological agency to pursue his co-optive desires through the seduction of a reader.⁴⁷ Cather’s depiction of his ironic faith does not presume to be able to solve the political dilemma that the novel takes up – how to instantiate a non-impositional European

⁴⁷ It is for this reason that Lindemann resists reading the novel in the “terroristic terms in which [she reads] *O Pioneers!*” (*Queering* 121). For Lindemann, *Death* is “rich in the pleasures of an eroticized looking that is not subjected to punishment or prohibition” (*Queering* 121).

presence in New Mexico; how, in other words, to enter a field from its outside without controlling it – but instead suggests that an ironizing of the bond, which in this text goes by the name “love,” is the only bond there is. *Death* conjures a reader in a similar “loving” relationship to this ironic bond, rather than one in phobic opposition to it.

The transition that occurs between Cather’s novels of the prairies and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is rather the reverse of what mid-century critics argued. For both Edel and Trilling, for instance, Cather’s shift to a historical locale was a kind of escapism, a discovery of the frontiers of the mind after she had exhausted the literal frontiers of the land, an optimistic alternative to the inevitability of failure that haunts her middle period, but that does little to resolve its political questions (Edel 267; Trilling 9). Rather, as we have seen, *Death* represents a direct response to the problems raised by *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, looking to ironized love and love for irony as its relational principle. The novel’s fragmentary structure and reticent narrative voice are an emancipation from the monological impulses of Cather’s subjective narrators, opening the door to textual experimentation that creates rather than reacts. Instead of authority, we get monotony, instead of ironic nostalgia, material history.

The allegedly bleaker novels of Cather’s middle period – *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor’s House* – are largely absent from this consideration. They might easily have found a home here: *A Lost Lady*’s Niel Herbert is a version of Jim Burden, clinging to childish notions of purified femininity, and linking these to a nostalgia for a pastoral landscape before the horrors of industrialization. The novel’s deceptive third-person voice masks Niel’s puerile impressions as ironically distant from the narrator, evoking a reader who cannot help but see their complicity. Tom Outland in *The Professor’s House*

elaborates a utopian domestic space with Roddy Blake on the Blue Mesa, yet also relates to the native artifacts he finds there in a way that is acquisitive and capitalistic. The fragmented structure of the novel makes Godfrey St. Peter the gatekeeper of the embedded “Tom Outland’s Story,” and his attempts to exempt Tom’s memory from the marketplace conjures a reader inevitably stuck between realism and romance. Each of these novels, in other words, takes up questions that are asked by *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and develops narratological techniques for thinking through the fraught relationship between the past and the present, between the antiquated and the commodified.

That said, there is something specific to the historical sense in Cather’s pioneering novels that implicates both a mode of storytelling and a method of relating form to matter. Because deviance is evoked as a materiality that exposes the theology behind these ironically situated strategies, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, a novel that relishes the immanence of the land and of history, is a natural sequel to Cather’s experiments on the prairie. Its recoding of ironic opposition as a relation of love for irony makes queerness an occasion for building new forms of community, rather than merely the destruction of the old. The novel is an occasion for Cather’s readers to make a new sense of her canon up to this point, suggesting that the transgressive writing of Marie’s bloody death and Jim’s external narrator, the radical experiments of Hanover’s landscape and Peter’s domestic exuberance, can be marshalled toward productive encounters with the virtual that would rethink the novel itself as engaging a reader through a love for impurity, rather than a negation of the pure. This question of purity and impurity is a key concern in the Harlem Renaissance novels of Nella Larsen, which counterpose the strict

desire for racial propriety to the abjectness of black bodies freed from this interpellating discourse.

Chapter 2: Nella Larsen: Bourgeois Blackness and the Body's Other Limit

Between March and November of 1926, a debate took place in the pages of *The Crisis*, a journal of black arts and culture centred in Harlem. Its editor, W. E. B. DuBois, had sent out surveys to prominent writers – some black, some white civil-rights allies – and published the results as a symposium entitled, “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed.” At issue was the problem of artistic freedom: the survey’s first question read, “When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray?”¹ (“A Questionnaire” 165). Overwhelmingly, the answer from respondents was a clear *no*. Charles Chesnutt, for instance, argued that racial polemic and artistic merit were incompatible:

The colored writer, generally speaking, has not yet passed the point of thinking of himself first as a Negro, burdened with the responsibility of defending and uplifting his race. Such a frame of mind, however praiseworthy from a moral standpoint, is bad for art. (29)

Sherwood Anderson espoused a similar view of artistic purity: “Why not quit thinking of Negro art? If the individual creating the art happens to be a Negro and some one wants to

¹ The survey’s subsequent questions were as follows:

2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group?
3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?
4. What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?
5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere and sympathetic as ‘Porgy’ received?
6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?

call it Negro Art let them” (36). Even Langston Hughes conceded the writer his or her freedom, albeit from a practical perspective: “the true literary artist is going to write about what he chooses anyway regardless of outside opinions” (278).

According to Amritjit Singh, DuBois was likely disappointed with the results of the survey (29).² Indeed, in introducing the experiment in the February issue, DuBois had argued vociferously against absolute artistic freedom. While its proponents, he contended, held to a romantic ideal of inner expression unsullied by political interests, DuBois laid bare the consequences of such freedom: “the net result to American literature to date is to picture twelve million Americans as prostitutes, thieves and fools and that such ‘freedom’ in art is miserably unfair” (“A Questionnaire” 165). Art is necessarily, DuBois suggested, imbued with political ramifications and interests; as he later wrote, “all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists” (“Criteria of Negro Art” 296). As such, DuBois called for “a similar right of propaganda to those who believe black blood human, lovable and inspired with new ideals for the world” (“Criteria of Negro Art” 297), art that would eventually lead to political transformation.

In truth, DuBois had been making this argument for some time, most recently in his review of Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*, published in *The Crisis* a mere month before the symposium began. *The New Negro* was a literary anthology that brought together the writings of the Harlem Renaissance’s mainstays and sought to document the

7. Is there not a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class? (“A Questionnaire” 165).

² Singh notes that three notable exceptions to this trend were Counter Cullen, Benjamin Brawley, and Jessie Fauset (29). Cullen argues,

Negro artists have a definite duty to perform in this matter, one which should supersede their individual prerogatives, without denying those rights. We must create types that are truly representative of us as a people, nor do I feel that such a move is necessarily a genuflexion away from true art. (193)

transformed black identity that had crystallized through the thriving artistic movement.³ In his generally favourable review, DuBois praised the book for “so adequately” expressing “the present state of thought and culture among American Negroes” (140) (DuBois himself was a contributor), and for Locke’s editing and arrangement (141). But while he thus saw the anthology as precisely the kind of reverse-propaganda he was calling for, DuBois took Locke to task for insisting explicitly on the book’s merits as art in its purist form: “Mr. Locke has newly been seized with the idea that Beauty rather than Propaganda should be the object of Negro literature and art. His book proves the falseness of this thesis” (141). Ultimately, DuBois worried that paying fealty to pure beauty risked depoliticizing an artistic movement that he believed would be instrumental in the fight for equal rights: “if Mr. Locke’s thesis is insisted on too much it is going to turn the Negro renaissance into decadence” (141).

As a variety of critics have argued, however, DuBois’ charge of decadence against Locke was rather unfair.⁴ If DuBois insisted on agitation through propaganda, Locke was committed to an idea of cultural pluralism that hardly precluded the fight for political equality. His philosophical writings, for example, might seem apolitical, theorizing that ethical values in human societies derive from the cultural orientation of psychological feelings (the experience of exaltation, for example, as an “extroverted”

³ “The American mind,” Locke writes in his preface, “must reckon with a fundamentally changed Negro” (8).

⁴ While Locke advocated for beauty in art, George Hall argues that this appeal to beauty was toward the goal of political equality through an honest and balanced presentation of black culture, rather than the narrowness of one-sided propaganda, which, for Locke, caused the black writer to return to a negation of his own self-image (94). A. Gilbert Belles argues that Locke saw culture as a weapon in the fight for black survival: “If blacks could be recognized as legitimate contributors to American and world culture, it followed that social proscriptions would be removed and the mood and creed of white supremacy would be scrapped” (54). According to Tommy Lee Lott, Locke’s organization of collective artistic production was for the explicit purpose of gaining political equality for blacks (104). Locke’s opposition to DuBois’ call

religious zeal produces the values of good and evil [“Values and Imperatives” 324]). As Johnny Washington argues, however, such a theory is inevitably tied to the race struggle, as blacks would only be accepted and racial conflicts reduced once the white majority learned to accept and understand the values of the black minority (35). For Locke, true cultural pluralism can only be achieved when we dissolve “the narrowness of our provincialisms...and our sectarian fanaticisms lose some of their force and glamor” (“Values and Imperatives” 332).⁵ As Houston A. Baker, Jr. insists, the communal nature of *The New Negro* makes it an expressly political book, opposing itself directly to “the general economic, political, and theological tenets of a racist land” (77).

If Locke turns out not to be the apolitical romantic that DuBois makes him out to be, the latter’s fear of freedom in black representation also betrays an unmistakable bias toward bourgeois propriety.⁶ Politically oriented as it might be, a call to do away with depictions of scandalous black sexuality is also a call for acceptance by genteel society, revealing, as Singh suggests, DuBois’ “inability to break free of the limitations imposed by his New England Puritan background” (29).⁷ Moreover, given the self-gratification of art for art’s sake that DuBois reads in Locke’s call for a more liberal mandate for the

for propaganda, in this sense, is not because he was averse to political objectives in art, but because propaganda was an impoverished strategy for achieving these objectives (104).

⁵ See also Locke’s lectures from 1916, in which Locke calls his philosophy “a theory of social conservation which in practice conserves the best in each group, and promotes the development of social solidarity out of heterogeneous elements” (*Race Contacts* 98).

⁶ Wirth argues that depictions of “sordid reality” were acceptable to DuBois only if the proper moral conclusions were also conveyed: “Prostitution limned with pathos was acceptable; prostitution painted as an enticing or fulfilling way of life was not” (47).

⁷ DuBois’ apparent interest in bourgeois art fits into a tradition in African-American literature of representing blackness as acceptable to the expectations of an implied white audience. Influenced by nineteenth-century sentimentalism, early African-American novelists, according to Robert Bone, drew black characters “of impeccable deportment” as their own kind of reverse-propaganda (19). Similarly, Arlene Elder argues that black novelists of this period were bound by their need for professional acceptance, “in a white society on white terms,” to draw more heavily on the sentimental tradition rather than black sources (xiii). Their novels featured aristocratic heroes and heroines wearing blackface, genteel diction, and plots typical of popular fiction (9).

black artist, the charge of “decadence” might also be a code-word for homosexuality, of which DuBois is well-known to have disapproved.⁸ And while DuBois does not mention Locke’s sexuality in his writings, Locke’s queerness was an open secret in the Harlem Renaissance.⁹ As A. B. Christa Schwarz demonstrates, the rejection of “decadence” in art by black Harlem’s institutional leaders, including DuBois, was tied to a decided refusal to acknowledge the links between sexual transgression and the political aims of the Renaissance (40-1).

DuBois’ position thus contains a paradox: he is “modernist” insofar as he calls for an urban minority to disrupt conventional power relations by creating its own transgressive art. But this modernism is couched within a retrograde fear of queerness, wedded to middle-class values that are more observable in literary realism than in modernism: verisimilitude and the representation of that which is “proper.”

DuBois’ paradoxical modernism is, in many ways, the subject of Nella Larsen’s two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). This is not to say that these texts are self-consciously and exclusively “about” DuBois and the artistic practices he tried to

⁸ Mason Stokes discusses DuBois’ homophobia in an article about the brief, failed marriage between DuBois’ daughter, Yolande, and the queer but closeted Countee Cullen. Stokes considers how DuBois, “that most heterosexual of heterosexuals” (309), was affected by an incident a few months before the wedding in which Augustus Granville Dill, *The Crisis*’ business manager, was arrested for “homosexual activity in a subway washroom” (309). DuBois fired him, citing a concern for Dill’s health, which he believed could be cured by “a loving sympathetic wife” (310). Although Wirth argues that DuBois “was perhaps motivated [to fire Dill] as much by the potential negative reaction of his readership as by his own personal disapproval” (22), Stokes makes the argument that DuBois’ regret over the incident years later – “I had before that time no conception of homosexuality....I dismissed my co-worker forthwith, and spent heavy days regretting the act,” he writes – demonstrates the connection between the incident and the firing (310).

⁹ See Hull, who writes about the “homosexual coterie of friendship and patronage” in which Locke worked, as well as the possibility of a sexual relationship between Locke and Langston Hughes (72). See also Wirth, pages 22-25 and 275, n. 25 and 26. Wirth shows that Locke was “a self-identified gay man” who perceived himself as “different from the majority” because of his sexuality (22). Also see Schwarz, pages 12-14.

cultivate in Harlem in the mid-to-late 1920s.¹⁰ But if the debate staged in the *Crisis* contributes to a modernist moment for the African-American novel, insofar as this debate presupposes a commitment by black writers to seizing the means of self-representation, it is a version of black modernism that Larsen's texts refuse or at least query. Like Cather's ironic treatment of autobiographical memoir in *My Ántonia*, the question for Larsen is not, "How shall the Negro be represented?" because her texts recognize that self-representation itself contains enormous complexity for black artists. Written at a time when a black urban middle class was emerging for the first time, *Quicksand* and *Passing* are anxious about access to a genteel privilege that seemed complicit with white stereotyping of black licentiousness, about the dangerous slippages between self-representation and self-commodification.

What is an issue for African-American politics is therefore also an issue for the African-American novel. The behaviours that so easily appear as "improper" to DuBois are also the improper stuff of realist fiction, whose readerly expectations demand both the unambiguous transmission of narrative truth and the crystallization of a fully-formed subject as the telos of its narrative purpose, which we might also call linear development of character. That which falls outside of these formal requirements – for example, the erotic revelry that Helga Crane enjoys with shame in a Harlem jazz club (59), which for us recalls Peter, Jim, and Ántonia's melon eating; the look on Clare Kendry's face that to Irene Redfield is "unfathomable" (172), recalling Latour's recoiling at the rumbling in

¹⁰ Nella Larsen was living in Harlem in 1926 and was aware of the *Crisis* debate. According to Davis, she allied herself with the side of artistic freedom (245). Davis shows that Larsen was proud of the outsider status afforded by her half-white lineage and distanced herself from uplift, holding "a fear of being absorbed into the [black] masses, which she viewed as having the potential to extinguish a concrete, autonomous, and productive self" (247).

Jacinto's cave – confounds the politics of art-as-propaganda by confounding the central values of realist fiction, taking the middle-class censure of “lower-class” black behaviour as its ironic subject. Instead of indulging the fear of sexual and novelistic practices that DuBois castigates as unrealistic and distasteful decadence, *Quicksand* and *Passing* suggest that that which appears as black impropriety might have a life somewhere else as something other than politically regressive stereotype.

If DuBois is anxious about the commodification of black bodies, so is Larsen, who goes to great lengths in both of her novels to depict its horrifying consequences (Helga's final resting place as an inert repository for the production of babies comes to mind). But whereas for DuBois the outside to this commodification lies in the depiction of middle-class blacks doing middle-class things, Larsen exposes the bourgeois black household, and by extension, the middle-class realist novel, as equally complicit sites of cooptation (is there really a difference between Clare's allegedly provocative outfits and Irene's allegedly urbane ones?). What appears to DuBois as the limit beyond which the logic that commodifies black bodies no longer holds appears in Larsen's fiction as merely one more false escape and attempts to guard its putative integrity as parochial and sometimes manic delusion.

If there is a place beyond which black bodies can be represented without being commodified, *Quicksand* and *Passing* suggest that this site is “unrepresentable” from the vantage point of DuBois, Irene Redfield, and the conspiracies between bourgeois aspirations and realist modes of fiction. This vantage point, these novels suggest, grasps those bodily practices, sexual and otherwise, that might offer an alternative to the false dichotomy between propaganda and apolitical decadence, as scandal, licentiousness, and

chaos. Quite literally, these practices confound realist habits of reading that expect hermeneutic disclosure, because they elicit confusion and ambiguity.¹¹ Moreover, if the *modus operandi* of the realist novel is to construct a coherent and self-aware individual, fully compatible with the world he or she inhabits,¹² these practices disrupt the interpellative mechanisms by which narratives produce such subjects. Helga's intense longings to occupy a stable middle-class subject position and Irene's frantic defenses against anything that threatens her conception of authentic black identity are arrested, if only briefly, by a subversive underside: bodily practices without discernible sexual or racial identity, at least according to the regime that assigns such identities, practices which in these novels take the form of meaninglessness and same-sex desire, and which constitute, in Cesare Casarino's terminology, the virtual other limit of representation and representability, the virtual other limit of the commodified black body.

Quicksand exposes the proximity between Helga Crane's desire for realist stability of representation, both aesthetic and political, and the seductive sway of Naxos, a stand-in for Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, suggesting that the conventional realist novel is Washingtonian in its devotion to individual self-interest and its willingness to accommodate itself to white aesthetic standards.¹³ As Helga seeks the

¹¹ Again, recall Latour's reaction to the rumbling in the cave here, and the incoherencies of readership and textuality that it allegorizes.

¹² Ian Watt argues that from its inception in the English language, the novel's "primary criterion was truth to individual experience – individual experience which is always unique and therefore new" (13).

¹³ In *Up From Slavery*, Washington writes:

I believe it is the duty of the Negro – as the greater part of the race is already doing – to deport himself modestly in regard to political claims, depending upon the slow but sure influences that proceed from the possession of property, intelligence, and high character for the full recognition of his political rights. I think that the according of the full exercise of political rights is going to be a matter of natural, slow growth, not an overnight, gourd-vine affair. (107)

limit beyond which the logic of race and racial oppression no longer holds, the novel demonstrates that self-representation is always already caught up in that which it seeks to outdo. In ironizing stereotypical depictions of black femininity, *Quicksand* ironizes the realist mode of representation, thus exposing its limits as a means to thinking the black body outside of the binary of oversexualized stereotype and commodified access to middle-class propriety.

Passing pits Irene Redfield's rage for regulated identities against the flux of Clare Kendry, whose racial passing and sexual ambiguity disturb Irene's carefully ordered world. Charged with shutting down Clare's queerness, Irene seeks to enforce the rigidity of racial categories by appealing to the seduction and reliability of bourgeois propriety and its concomitant mode of literary representation: realism. If Clare embodies practices, sexual and otherwise, that violate the integrity of realist representation, Irene's reaction is parallel to DuBois' homosexual panic in the face of Locke's queerness, which he can only understand as apolitical decadence. In this novel, Clare's self-fashioned beautiful body opens up vistas to desire that cannot be comprehended from the perspective of the regime of racial oppression with which Irene longs to be complicit. While Cather's novels locate the other limit of the drive for purity (sexual, representational) in an ironic form of love, Clare's refusal to mean under a rigid regime points us to the black body as pleasurable in itself, rather than as a marker of identity, as the queer grounds for a black modernism.

DuBois criticized Washington for accepting "the alleged inferiority of the Negro races," and for refusing to fight for political equality: "Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission" (*Souls of Black Folk* 50). Like realist fiction, Washington aims for incremental change while

Quicksand

DuBois reviewed *Quicksand* in *The Crisis* upon its publication and, not surprisingly, praised the book both for its truthful depiction of educated blacks – “Helga is typical of the new, honest, young fighting Negro woman.... White folk will not like this book” (“Two Novels” 202) – and for its example of black accomplishment, calling it “the best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnut” (“Two Novels” 202). According to Claudia Tate, DuBois’ attitude was typical of black reviewers, who valorized Larsen’s thematic focus on racial struggles (Tate 1995, 238) (white reviewers tended to praise the novel’s “universal” psychological themes [Tate 1995, 237]). Still, Tate notes that black reviewers were in a bind, because the novel features a protagonist who tries to “define herself independently of racial restrictions” (Tate 1995, 238), rather than protesting transparently against racial discrimination.

It is little wonder reviewers accustomed to didacticism had a difficult time with *Quicksand*. Rather than pitting the coherence of individual agency against the oppressiveness of an impersonal social structure, the novel adopts this realist convention ironically, using it and others to expose realism’s limitations in writing the contemporary African-American experience. What DuBois misses, that is, is the tension that *Quicksand* explores between race and consumerist self-fashioning.

Helga Crane embodies this crisis, the question that the novel asks throughout: how can the logic of race function when confronted with the desire to construct and adorn one’s own body? What do old standards of black and white mean when faced with a shiny array of beautiful objects that seem to imbue bodies with new and unimaginable

preserving the status quo, rather than calling for an upheaval of racial relations. For a concise summary of the ideological dispute between DuBois and Washington, see Bell, pages 70-1.

forms of life? Helga's solution for reconciling her competing desires for uplift and for things is simple, if unsuccessful: to construct fantasies of realist closure, the most apparent of which is her love affair with Dr. Anderson. These fantasies, as we will see, are outdone at every turn by the irreconcilable differences between the old and the new, between stable racial identity and desire under capitalism. For the novel, however, the passing of old identitarian strictures is not necessarily something to be lamented.

Although it is not until *Passing* that Larsen explores a subjective practices of desire that might step in to fill this breach, *Quicksand* points to the limits of realist representation in allowing for alternative forms of racial praxis, suggesting, ultimately, that new forms of desire and desiring bodies require a new form for the African-American novel.

Helga is uniquely situated to embody the modern crisis that is, in Casarino's terms, the forced cohabitation of the old and the new (35).¹⁴ She is, quite literally, black and white mixed together, and it is the scandal of her line – her black gambler father having abandoned her white immigrant mother (21) – and her lack of proven ancestry for which she blames her failure in Naxos and her perpetual unhappiness (8): she is “just plain Helga Crane, of whom nobody had ever heard” (8). There is a sense, therefore, that Helga is positioned outside of archaic forms of racial identity, endowed with what DuBois called “double-consciousness,”¹⁵ alienated enough from the black community to be free to experiment with new forms of desire, on the vanguard of identitarian claims that are, to the dowdy propriety of the Naxos faculty, scandalous and unimaginable.

¹⁴ Casarino attributes the diagnosis of this “modern problematic” to Ernst Bloch, which he believes Melville also performs: “What both Bloch and Melville share is an understanding of modernity as constituted by the violent impact of old and new, and by the ever-growing contradictions produced by their forced cohabitation” (*Modernity* 35).

¹⁵ See DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, page 3: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's self by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (3).

Helga's detachment from ancestry directs her toward these new forms of desire, which emerge in the novel's opening paragraph as the multi-coloured adornments of her room, contrasting the "[d]rab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown" that other female teachers wear (17), an affront to Naxos and its Washingtonian program of "uplift":

Helga Crane sat alone in her room, which at that hour, eight in the evening, was in soft gloom. Only a single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade, made a pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet, on the bright covers of the books which she had taken down from their long shelves, on the white pages of the opened one selected, on the shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums beside her on the low table, and on the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet. It was a comfortable room, furnished with rare and intensely personal taste.

(1)

It is not merely the tension between older forms of racial identity and Helga's desire for thingly beauty that is remarkable here, as these paradigms are on equal ground this early on. To Helga, that is, the personal nature of taste, the expression of audacious individual desire in the face of power, appears as an avenue toward emancipation.

While critics have argued productively over to what extent Helga has agency in this scene,¹⁶ it cannot go unnoticed that it draws links between Helga's thingly desire, the

¹⁶ See, for example, Silverman, who argues that the reading lamp is a figure for Helga herself, who is "a small light in the figurative darkness of Naxos" (607), and thus endowed by the setting with agency. Other critics, however, note how the opening scene encloses her ability to rebel within consumerist terms. Goldsmith argues that the metonymic listing of Helga's possessions shows that she can only establish her selfhood "through the ownership of things" (269). Rather than rebellion, Helga's room denotes that she is trapped between "the two poles of woman as consumer and woman as object of consumption," neither of which will yield the authentic selfhood that she desires (269). Similarly, Alissa Karl notes the irony in Helga's attempts to articulate "a distinctive racial identity" freed from capitalist commodification by fetishizing exoticized commodities from other cultures (124).

retrograde attitude of her Washingtonian colleagues, and the conservative tendencies of realist fiction. On its most basic level, Helga's marshalling of "personal taste" to combat the drab conformity of Naxos evokes a narrative of the individual in tension with a repressive social system, a realist narrative that the reader soon finds out is destined not to yield the subjective coherence that it seems to promise. But neither is Larsen a traditionalist, scolding her protagonist for daring to find pleasure in alluring things outside of her restrictive community. The novel's point is not that wanting beautiful objects is bad, but rather, that the two strains that pull at Helga in this opening scene are both informed by a Washingtonian politics of accommodationism. Helga's bourgeois aspirations, the novel argues throughout, are coextensive with a school that makes students ashamed of being black. It is no coincidence, moreover, that Helga's individualist expression of personal taste is to read, conveying a faith in the transformative properties of narrative fiction that is one of the central beliefs of the realist novel. Indeed, whiteness in this setting – the white pages of her book, the intense "white glare of light" with which Helga floods the room (4) – is the very thing that makes the transmission of literature possible. Literary realism and its devotion to individual self-expression, the novel suggests here, is complicit with Washington and his particular program of racial uplift, in that they both leave the status quo unchanged.

In exposing how Helga's ambitions participate in the aims of realist fiction, however, the novel risks undermining itself because it critiques realism through a narrative structure that is seemingly realistic. To find a way out of this paradox, *Quicksand* is quick to distance itself from the straight third-person voice and its pretensions of omniscience: "An observer would have thought her well fitted to that

framing of light and shade” (2). The casual mention that it is merely “an observer” who “would have” seen her in this way might seem out of place next to the description that follows, which works very carefully to objectify Helga’s body and her lack of agency: she has “narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate, but well-turned, arms and legs” (2), “soft, yet penetrating, dark eyes, and a pretty mouth, whose sensitive and sensuous lips had a slight questioning petulance and a tiny dissatisfied droop” (2), and hair that is “plentiful and always straying in a little wayward, delightful way. Just then it was tumbled, falling unrestrained about her face and on to her shoulders” (2).¹⁷ But this is just the point. To comment on Helga’s beauty, to suggest that she fits into this environment in a way that is simply “delightful” (2), is to be complicit in Naxos’ Washingtonian logic of uplift, which Helga unwittingly reproduces in her bourgeois aspirations. By ascribing these objectifications to an imaginary and non-present observer, the novel shows us that this voice is the domain of all realist fiction, while simultaneously distancing itself from these conventions.¹⁸

It is in this same spirit that the narrator tells us that Helga “was – to use a hackneyed word – attractive” (2). Again, the narrator comments on the process by which realist fiction objectifies its subject matter, while also critiquing its available language as worn out. Helga wants her self-fashioning to be transgressive, but the narrator shows us

¹⁷ Note that the agency that seems to imbue these descriptions – arms and legs used for mobility and acquisition, her penetrating eyes, her wayward and unrestrained hair – is immediately rendered innocuous and “delightful” to the observer, aestheticizing and thus neutralizing her body’s revolutionary potential.

¹⁸ Pamela Barnett argues that the reader is the “observer” upon which the narrator speculates. For Barnett, too, the narrator frames the image of Helga, portraying her in this scene and throughout the novel as an object of art. By laying bare this process, she argues, Larsen “critiques a tradition of representation that purports to be mimetic but actually reproduces stereotypes of the black female,” and in particular the stereotype of “the sexually voracious black woman” (577). Similarly, Maria Balshaw argues that Helga asserts herself *as* a spectacle in the novel, and especially in the opening scene. She points to the ironic smile on Helga’s face as she throws the papers into the bin as evidence that she is performing, aware that

both the complicity of realist narration in this process, and that her self-fashioning is part and parcel of the Washingtonian regime of accommodationism. In this sense, Helga is participating in DuBois' *Crisis* debates without knowing it. She craves the tools of self-representation, and specifically, the artistic freedom to represent herself as she pleases. And yet, as much as this parody of Lockean "decadence" might disappoint DuBois, Helga wants these things only insofar as she can represent herself as a bourgeois subject doing bourgeois things. In exposing the links between Helga's position, Washingtonian accommodationism, and the conventions of realist fiction, the novel draws attention to a paradox in DuBois' modernism, which also ensnares Helga here without her knowing it: in its middle-class call for freedom, it fears that which is counter to the realist plot of self-actualization. Helga might maintain pretensions of openness, but her teleological rigidity aims at a model of black subjectivity that cannot accommodate the scandal of sexuality or "lower-class" blackness that she will come to face.

Helga's craving for beautiful things, while appearing to her as a radical modernist break with racial essentialisms and historical ties, is therefore a craving for realist closure and its concomitant promise of subjective coherence. She wants "forgetfulness, complete mental relaxation, rest from thought of any kind" (2), and especially from the memory of the racist white preacher whose message of black acquiescence Naxos welcomes (3). It is not so much that Helga aims to do away with race – Larsen's text queries the concept of race itself – but with the *idea* of race and of race history, which she equates with conformity, and which she understands as responsible for her unsatisfying life at Naxos.

she is being looked at (60). According to this reading, Helga avoids being objectified by the narrator's gaze.

But the nature of what she aims at is less defined. She knows there is something outside of Naxos that she wants, but can articulate it only as

Happiness, she supposed. Whatever that might be. What, exactly, she wondered, was happiness. Very positively she wanted it. Yet her conception of it had no tangibility. She couldn't define it, isolate it, and contemplate it as she could some other abstract things. Hatred, for instance. Or kindness. (11)

Hatred and kindness, perhaps the polarities of Helga's conception of race relations, are at least understandable. We might therefore think of Helga's project in this novel not only as trying to attain some material expression of her subjective coherence, which appears as a series of unsatisfying geographical allegories (Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen), but as trying to understand what it means to be a stable subject, as if there is some precise thing or concept that when possessed would endow one with self-understanding. What Helga seeks, that is, is not only an escape from race and race history, but the limit beyond which the logic of perpetual dissatisfaction longer holds. In Casarino's terminology, she seeks its virtual other limit, but is a pursuer of last limits through and through, unable to distinguish one from the other, blind to the fact that the logic of perpetual dissatisfaction governs not only her life at Naxos, but the market to which she seeks entry. If Helga seeks individuality and hermeneutic stability, what she seeks is an entry point into a realist narrative,¹⁹ which the novel will eventually expose as a ruse. Its promise of

¹⁹ Laura Doyle notes that while the conventional English-language novel relies on the "freedom plot" of transnational mobility and racial freedom (543), Larsen depicts characters left outside this all-encompassing narrative:

Helga can find no freedom exactly because she lacks an embracing race community within which to pursue it. With no 'people,' Helga has no ready point of entrée into the freedom story. She cannot do 'uplift' into freedom if she is not fully identified or accepted by any race. (551)

delivering the limit beyond which oppressive social systems no longer function will be shown to be empty, designed to maintain representation as status quo.

If Helga seeks access to a realist narrative, however, this project is temporarily halted by her first encounter with Dr. Anderson, as her initial offense at his seeming indifference to her concerns subsides to make room for “a mystifying yearning which sang and throbbed in her” to serve Anderson and remain at Naxos (20).²⁰ What is it about this man that is so alluring to Helga that she is ready to abandon in an instant what the narrative has set up as the telos of her character’s journey? While it might simply be that Helga’s desires are easily swayed by his convincing rhetoric, what is worth noting here is that Helga agrees not out of perceived duty to her people, but out of allegiance to Anderson himself, to “this man who was talking so earnestly of his work, his plans his hopes” (20). Anderson, in fact, charges the scene with a “strangeness and something very like hysteria” for Helga, his initial blurred outline confusing her, but his “deep voice” echoing with a “particularly pleasing resonance” (19). What initially disturbs her is that he is “detached, too detached, . . . staring dreamily out of the window, blatantly

If we pursue this critical trajectory, it turns out that *Quicksand* exposes the implicit assumptions of realism by showing that the mode’s protagonists must *already* have access to a community, even if it does not crystallize until the novel’s end. The disillusioned realist hero, in other words, has an entry point into the realist plot through such identificatory features as whiteness in common with his or her society. Also see Brickhouse, who explores the intertexts between Helga’s time in Chicago and Carrie Meeber’s struggle to find work in Dreiser’s naturalist novel *Sister Carrie* (539-542).

²⁰ For this reason, it seems strange that so many critics have assumed that Helga’s movement toward self-actualization proceeds unimpeded. Bettye Williams, for instance, reads the novel as unproblematically progressive, failing to distinguish between Helga’s self-serving aims and Larsen’s putatively unambivalent politics: “Using Helga as her voice, Larsen challenges, resists, undermines, and assaults ideologies of African-American female victimization” (172), and further, Helga “moves from stereotype to self-actualization” (173). Similarly, for Cheryl Wall, even though Helga’s attempts at self-definition fail, “her struggle is nonetheless admirable” because her resistance of male definitions of black womanhood is forthright and intrepid (105). As with DuBois’ review of *Quicksand*, which praises the novel for a depiction of middle-class blackness that is unavailable for white consumption, these critics identify Helga as a pure counterexample to the stereotype of the lustful black woman. Helga’s strange yearnings, however, and her self-conscious obsession with trying to articulate them in clear and definable terms, cannot be ignored, because they contradict the rectilinearity of her race, class, and gender emancipations.

unconcerned with her or her answer” to why she is unhappy here, as if an affront to her individuality (19). This detachment, moreover, very quickly turns out to have been not indifference, but a kind of knowledge, an objectivity that Helga finds irresistible.

What wins Helga over for a moment, that is, is the allure of realist fiction itself, with Anderson as the paragon of objectivity and Washingtonian uplift. Even though Helga will later rewrite this desire as racial desire to be with her people in Harlem, we need to ask what the sudden appearance of realism’s seductive powers of appeal is doing at this narrative juncture. For Helga, it becomes a representational impasse – she is unsure of why she is so drawn to Anderson, and this not knowing – “Just what had happened to her there in that cool dim room under the quizzical gaze of those piercing gray eyes?” (22) – haunts her throughout most of the text. For the novel, conversely, this staging of Washingtonian seduction imbued with the properties of realist fiction draws an inevitable parallel: Helga is drawn to Anderson and the empty promises of realism just as bourgeois blacks are drawn to the indignity of accommodationism. This will be an important point to remember for *Passing*, in which Irene Redfield strives monomaniacally for a certain version of black identity, unaware of its political and philosophical affinities with Washington. Here, we can say that Helga stands not only for a way of reading and writing, but for an entire mode of identitarian engagement that Larsen finds lurking in an aesthetic problem.

Helga, of course, does not stay in Naxos, but leaves only because Anderson betrays a prejudice – “good stock” (21) – that reminds her that she is still the outsider, uniquely oriented toward new forms of desire. And yet, as we have seen, her turn away from Naxos and toward “individuality and beauty” (20) will turn out to be equally

accommodationist. Moreover, leaving Naxos allows Helga to try to bury her desire for Anderson and eventually rewrite it as sexual desire: at their re-encounter in Harlem, she feels a “sudden thrill” and a “peculiar, not wholly disagreeable, quiver” that makes her blush and feel faint (49), culminating in their kiss at the Tavenors’ party and her fantasy that they will be together (107). Side-by-side with her professional interpellation, then, the scene in Anderson’s office is the beginning of what Helga sees as a realist marriage plot, with Helga scripting herself as its heroine. If the marriage plot would give Helga what she desires – presumably, conventional closure in the form of self-fulfillment – the fact that the marriage plot fails is one more point of entry into a realist narrative to which she is denied access. While she manages to turn away from Naxos professionally, the marriage plot that begins here is similar to her near return: by pairing it with Anderson’s seductive allure, the novel queers the realist marriage plot, co-opting sexual desire scripted in this way as an approximation of bourgeois black longing for Washingtonian accommodationism.²¹

If Helga’s forward movement into a marriage plot is at the same time a backwards movement into the political landscape of Naxos that she tries to outrun, this has important implications for sexual desire in the novel, and especially sexual desire outside of the propriety of the marriage plot. The scene in the Harlem jazz club appears to signify the allure of illicit desire in this way, structurally so because it occurs in the narrative breach after Helga has “[given] herself up to daydreams of a happy future in Copenhagen, where there were no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice” (55), a fantasy of forgetting race and

²¹ Moreover, this all happens in the context of Helga’s engagement to the queer James Vayle, for whom Helga seems to be acting as a beard: they have merely “drifted into a closer relationship” after discussing “their work and problems in adjustment” (7), and she is “in but one nameless way necessary to him,” which

outrunning last limits, which is also the next instantiation of the marriage plot. The temporal exceptionality of this scene, in fact, is what makes it possible, with Helga already dreaming “of life somewhere else,” where “she would be permanently satisfied” (56-7), but her body still here, allowing the impropriety of the black bodies she has already imagined herself exempted from to slip past her defenses. The scene evokes a kind of impropriety merely in its setting and setup: it occurs after a dinner-party when “no one wanted to go home,” as if in violation of bourgeois custom; it is “a sulky, humid night, a thick furry night, through which the electric torches shone like silver fuzz,” a sentence whose rhythms, repetitions, and synaesthetic metaphors draw attention to themselves in ways that realist language should not; the revellers climb into taxis that are “rattling things which jerked, wiggled, and groaned, and threatened every minute to collide with others of their kind, or with inattentive pedestrians,” personifications that connote danger, touching, and the improvisations of jazz and the bodily dancing that accompanies it (58).

The jazz that splits Helga’s ears, the light that strikes her eyes (58), the table at which her and others’ “knees and elbows touched,” the flasks of alcohol they smuggle inside (59) culminate in Helga’s ecstatic dancing, for which she immediately feels shame:

She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed

“fill[s] her with a sensation amounting almost to shame” (8). Early on, then, marriage is a complicated series of half-truths that undercuts its efficacy as a mode of narrative closure.

it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature. She cloaked herself in faint disgust. (59)

Momentarily freed from the interpellative force of bourgeois convention and realist subject formation, Helga recoils in disgust at her participation in what she sees as low-down black ritual.²² What else is this moment but a staging of DuBoisian fear of the licentiousness of stereotyped blackness that should be expurgated from the domain of literary representation? This is not to say that the scene raises same-sex desire and codes it as frivolous decadence, but the sexuality is unmistakable: in addition to the “gyrating pairs” on the dance floor (59), the “bodily motion” to which Helga is initiated in the passage above occupies the same structural position as scandalous sexual contact: being “blown out, ripped out, beaten out” as physical pleasure which elicits feelings of shame, and which is associated with licentious black behaviour.²³

Helga's disgust with herself, however, is tempered by what she sees next: Anderson, whose look and smile make her blush and avert her eyes in modesty. Like his seductive appeal at Naxos, this scene appears primed to lead Helga toward an aestheticized acceptance, even devotion, to that which she had moments before condemned as beneath her. At the very least, his presence would seem to signify the advent of the next step in realizing the marriage plot toward which the narrative appears to be leading. Instead, however, Helga's investments in Anderson and the narrative telos

²² Recall, again, Latour's recoiling at illicit desire in the cave, and Casarino's assertion that this kind of recoiling in the face of the other limit is generative of new affects.

²³ Defalco and Hostetler see in Helga's dancing a productive moment of liberation. For Defalco, the scene represents Helga's being “overcome by her own physicality, ecstatically immersed in the sensuality of music and dancing, thus allowing her briefly to overcome “the repression that functions to protect her subjectivity” (27). For Hostetler, her dancing is a moment of participation in black culture, in contrast to her status of “detached observer” of the minstrel show in Copenhagen (40).

he signifies are arrested by the woman that accompanies him, on whom Helga's eyes "immediately" fix:

[She] sat indifferently sipping a colorless liquid from a high glass, or puffing a precariously hanging cigarette. Across dozens of tables, littered with corks, with ashes, with shriveled sandwiches, through slits in the swaying mob, Helga Crane studied her. (60)

The woman, who will turn out to be Audrey Denney, is associated with the squalor of the cabaret and its remnants of enjoyment, available to Helga only through the swaying mob, as if the dancing mass of bodies is her frame. But there is something about Audrey here that does not disgust Helga. The colourlessness of her drink should not go unnoticed, because colours saturate the extended description that follows:

She was pale, with a peculiar, almost deathlike pallor. The brilliantly red, softly curving mouth was somehow sorrowful. Her pitch-black eyes, a little aslant, were veiled by long, drooping lashes and surmounted by broad brows, which seemed like black smears. The short dark hair was brushed severely back from the wide forehead. The extreme *décolleté* of her simple apricot dress showed a skin of unusual color, a delicate, creamy hue, with golden tones. 'Almost like an alabaster,' thought Helga. (60)

The red lips and curving mouth, the long lashes and short hair seem to signify sexual appetite, or at least sexual invitation, that would offend bourgeois sensibility (it certainly offends Anne Grey, the epitome of the middle-class prude, who will not tolerate sexuality on any level). Helga, however, is transfixed, and it might have to do with her pale,

“almost deathlike” skin colour, her “unusual...creamy hue, with golden tones,” so alluring that makes Helga come up with her own dreamy simile for it.

In this moment, Audrey signifies to Helga an alternative to the licentious blackness of the “jungle” that disgusts her, made illicit by Anne’s condemnation of Audrey and her scandalous habit of going to interracial parties (“And the white men dance with the colored women. Now you know, Helga Crane, that can mean only one thing” [61]). Given the above description, however, it is difficult not to read Audrey as Helga’s fantasy of being un-black. Audrey, that is, appears to Helga as having achieved the “forgetfulness” that she longs for in the novel’s opening scene, of having forgotten her racial identity, of having reached the limit beyond which the commodification of black bodies no longer applies. Here is Audrey, after all, adorned with beautiful colours, sipping her drink “indifferently,” as if unaffected by the mob around her, practicing individuality with “the assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers,” flaunting her sexuality ostentatiously without worrying about being reduced to gendered racial stereotype, something Helga can only admire and envy from a distance (62). If this is a new idea, however, one that should open up alternative forms of desire outside of the interpellative forces of gender and race, it appears to Helga in the same terms as her room at Naxos: an array of exotic colours rounded out by whiteness, individuality as aspirations toward racelessness, and therefore part and parcel of Helga’s desired entry into the realist plot of self-actualization. She holds Audrey discretely above the depersonalized mob of blackness that so conveniently provides a background,

condemning the mob as licentious rather than exploring its potential for an alternative to individuated subjectivity itself.²⁴

As quickly as Helga seems to have discovered in Audrey the virtual other limit of the logic of race and commodification, something happens to change the scene:

At the next first sound of music Dr. Anderson rose. Languidly the girl followed his movement, a faint smile parting her sorrowful lips at some remark he made. Her long, slender body swayed with an eager pulsing motion. She danced with grace and abandon, gravely, yet with obvious pleasure, her legs, her hips, her back, all swaying gently swung by that wild music from the heart of the jungle. (62)

Again, Audrey displays her sexuality – the “eager pulsing motion” of her body, the “obvious pleasure” with which she dances – and yet does so without eliciting the same disgust from Helga that she has for the dancing mob. Audrey, that is, seems to strike the perfect balance between enjoyment and self-control, dancing with abandon, but doing so “gravely,” as if seriously enough not to lose herself.²⁵ As quickly as Helga fixates on what appears to her as sexuality without the putative shame of impropriety, however, her attention shifts to Anderson again, who, as we have seen, signifies the realist marriage plot and the bourgeois seduction of accommodationism:

Helga turned her glance to Dr. Anderson. Her disinterested curiosity

²⁴ Mary Esteve argues that crowd’s anonymity in *Quicksand* explores a mode of subjectivity that correlates with Williams James’ idea of “pure experience,” eluding the capture of both social determinism and “monadic individualism” (272). For Esteve, Larsen evokes spontaneity as divorced from self-consciousness and self-determination, casting it instead as an unpredictable and anarchic energy (284) that suspends human identity, resulting in the crowd as pure “matter in motion” (279).

²⁵ For Sherrard-Johnson, Audrey is the one character in Larsen’s fiction “that successfully transcends race” (860). While Sherrard-Johnson shares Helga’s utopian vision of Audrey as “free self-expression,” which is ultimately unavailable in the novel, she ignores the irony of Helga’s idealizing perspective.

passed. While she still felt for the girl envious admiration, that feeling was now augmented by another, a more primitive emotion. She forgot the garish crowded room. She forgot her friends. She saw only two figures, closely clinging. She felt her heart throbbing. (62)

What transpires in this scene is a renewal or resurgence of the realist marriage plot that appropriates what appears to Helga as the other limit of commodification. Her sexual desire and her sentimentality rise simultaneously – the “more primitive emotion,” the “throbbing” of her heart – co-opting whatever transgressive potential Helga’s vision of Audrey might seem to have held. Instead, Audrey becomes merely a murky figure in the realist marriage plot, a symbol of Helga’s bourgeois longings, signifying fantasies of both the realist closure to which she is barred, and the ever-receding other limit to race and commodified bodies that she thinks she can outrun.

The degree to which these two fantasies are connected, in fact, will become apparent through Helga’s subsequent attempts to approximate the ideal of an Audrey lost before it could be possessed. Helga’s idealized vision of Audrey and the emptying of this fantasy is the last thing in the narrative before her departure to Copenhagen; Copenhagen thus becomes an important milieu in the novel for understanding how Helga’s movement away from Harlem, its licentious associations, and the failed fantasy of transcending them repeats the simultaneous forwards and backwards movement we have already observed, and entrenches the paradox of DuBois’ modernism. On the way to Copenhagen, Helga feels “like a released bird,” as if she has ceased to be black anymore, revelling in the feeling of “belonging to herself alone and not to a race” (64). Copenhagen comes to signify the individuality, the consumerist self-fashioning, the attainment of beautiful

objects that Helga understands as in opposition to the accommodationism and black licentiousness she feels she must escape: “not money, but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things” (67). Helga, however, does not become the self-possessed individual, exercising her modern agency by pursuing pleasure while freed from historical and racial ties. She becomes, more accurately, the well-decorated object of pleasure for the gaze of others, excited by “the unusual pleasure of having so many new and expensive clothes at one time,” giving herself up “wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired” (74).

The extent to which the sexualized objectification that Helga so enjoys is also a racial objectification is made apparent by her involvement with Axel Olsen, whose masculine attentions come as the culmination to her being looked at at the Dahls’ party. At first, Helga feels like “a veritable savage” in the streets because of “the many pedestrians who stopped to stare at the queer dark creature, strange to their city” (69), like “some new strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited” by the Dahls to their friends (70). Quite soon, however, “in spite of the mental strain” of playing this role, Helga “enjoy[s] her prominence,” coming to relish the exotic role she occupies, “thankful for the barbaric bracelet, for the dangling ear-rings, for the beads about her neck” (70) that she wears at the party. Olsen sweeps into the room in an “affected” and “theatrical” way (70), a worldly aesthete who takes Helga as his latest and most beautiful object of art and desire: ““Superb eyes...color...neck column...yellow...hair...alive...wonderful...”” (71, ellipses in original). As Helga comes to enjoy this role, she understands it as “compensation” for all the racial suffering she has endured, and Denmark as a post-racial

locale, away from “the New World of opportunity and promise forced upon Negroes” (75).

Helga’s falling for Olsen, and especially her wish to marry him, thus appears as a dialectical solution to her race problem, a solution she relinquishes in advance of its attainment, again seeing her blackness as a barrier to permanent satisfaction: “a feeling, intangible almost, that, excited and pleased as he was with her, her origin a little repelled him” (84). Like Anderson’s slip-up in his office, the circus she attends, which features stereotyped “cavorting Negroes,” reminds her of “something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget,” makes her “shocked at the avidity at which Olsen beside her drank it in” (83). His marriage proposal falls short as a solution because she is repulsed by him, unable to separate herself from her race. Olsen, in turn, is “repelled by something suddenly wild in her face and manner,” as if some stereotype of blackness that she cannot escape pervades his view of her, as both the exoticism of ““the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa”” and the oversexualization of ““the soul of a prostitute”” that he sees in her (87). This culminates in Olsen’s portrait, which depicts Helga as “some disgusting sensual creature with her features,” and which attracts “much flattering attention and many tempting offers” from collectors (89). Try as she might, the narrative seems to suggest, Helga cannot fashion an autonomous self independent of her blackness. Her pursuit of this closure, her aggressive and failed line of flight from the logic of race and racial embodiment, is coextensive with regression into stereotype. She cannot outrun the discourse of race through self-fashioning, because self-fashioning only sucks her further down into the stereotype of the oversexualized black female. We might therefore say that Helga treats a last limit – the attainment of closure that she lacks – as if

it were the other limit, pursuing marriage as the outside to race, not realizing that the self-fashioning she undertakes to fuel this pursuit only leads her further back into racial embodiment, and her eventual disgust with Olsen only marks the failure of this line of flight.²⁶

This action is repeated at the Tavenors' party back in Harlem, where the failed marriage plot with Anderson comes to a close. It is an expressly realist and middle-class setting: the house is "large and comfortable," the food and the music "always of the best," even the drinks are "sure to be safe" (98). Here, Helga positions herself as removed from bourgeois wants and desires by hoping that Anne Grey is not here, by protesting too much that she does not want to be married ("As if anybody couldn't get married" [98]). Most importantly, she has her only other encounter with Audrey Denney here, an occasion for her to have an expectation of liking her (100). As in the jazz club, Helga wants to see in Audrey an alternative form of subjectivity, outside the interpellations of race and gender, sensuality without commodification, sexuality without scandal. She observes her "poised, serene, certain, surrounded by masculine black and white" (99). If Audrey is entrapped by the sexualizing gaze of men of both races, she is a doppelganger for Helga, who also seems to crave this attention, yet imagines the possibility of being so objectified while maintaining poise, serenity, and certainty. It is the same fantasy of soliciting the attentions of men without being reduced to racial

²⁶ This dynamic recurs upon Helga's return to America, where she again wants to give herself wholly over to something, this time to "the miraculous joyousness of Harlem" (95-6). She craves the "heedless abandon" of the people here, the "care-free revel" of losing her intellectual integrity into a mass experience (96). But she longs for authentic community only in the same way that she longs for authentic commodities in Copenhagen, evoking blackness romantically as an essence to yield self-coherence. Just as Helga tries to outrun her race in Copenhagen by turning to what presents itself to her as its structural opposite, here, the ties "of the spirit" (95) seem to be the other limit of subjectivity, but Helga will explore it only to the extent that it becomes subjectivity's guarantor.

stereotype that she produces at Naxos, in Harlem, in Copenhagen (to be Olsen's object as long as she is not his racial object).

Not surprisingly, Helga asks to be introduced to Audrey, but later, and not “so – er – apparently by request, you know” (99). This meeting never takes place, because her attention is interrupted by James Vayle, who now personifies southern accommodationism, having become assistant principal at Naxos, and expressing a hatred for Harlem, especially “the rush, the lack of home life, the noisy meaninglessness of it all”²⁷ (102). Most of all, like Anne Grey, James is against racial mixing (observing Helen conversing with a white guest: “I don't like that sort of thing. In fact I detest it” [102]), and associates black female sexuality with scandal: “You know as well as I do, Helga, that it's the colored girls these men come up here to see” (103). As if overcome by the impropriety of Audrey, Helga argues against marriage and procreation, shocking James with her rhetorical question, “Why *do* Negroes have children? Surely it must be sinful” (103). But although Helga appears to indulge pleasure for its own sake and scandalous sexuality, her bourgeois and proprietary impulses are not far away. Her professions against marriage and access to the middle-class plot that it enables, that is, seem disingenuous, as we know from earlier scenes, and from her rapid turn to fantasizing about these in her subsequent encounter at the party with Anderson.

The way Helga scripts the kiss seems in line with these claims:

Later she had to go upstairs to pin up a place in the hem of her dress which

²⁷ For Doyle, the interruption of Helga's encounter with Audrey, first by Vayle and then by the kiss with Anderson, saps the narrative of the queer potential that such a meeting might have engendered by replacing it with a conventional “swoon moment,” returning Helga to the ordered world of heterosexual desire (555).

had caught on a sharp corner. She finished the temporary repair and stepped out into the hall, and somehow, she never quite knew exactly just how, into the arms of Robert Anderson. She drew back and looked up smiling to offer an apology.

And then it happened. He stooped and kissed her, a long kiss, holding her close. (104).

The tearing of Helga's dress and its mere "temporary repair" is a disrobing that primes the scene for her encounter with Anderson. As with her apprehension of Audrey, Helga seems to associate the climax of this scene with transgressive sexuality: her dress is torn, she kisses Anderson as if in complicity with her rejection of James' proprietary enforcement of convention. For Helga, sexuality is a transgressive act, insofar as it expresses individual desire against a repressive social system, personified here by James Vayle.

We should not forget, however, that Locke's support for the sort of artistic freedom that Helga pursues here is expressly political, artistic freedom only insofar as the artist should be free to depict the improper, and to do so toward political ends. Helga, on the other hand, is after Lockean decadence as DuBois unfairly castigates it: artistic freedom without its social responsibilities, the apolitical individuality that she thinks she is being denied by the likes of Anne Grey. Helga pursues Locke's integration of illicit desire and sexuality, but only insofar as it will lead to realist closure. The kiss with Anderson is therefore a teleologically linear culmination to this scene: Helga seems to want to be objectified by the men in the room, to indulge her sexuality, but only as a stepping stone toward the kind of "proper" relationship of which even James Vayle

would approve: the “long-hidden, half-understood desire” that wells up within her, seeming to instantiate fulfillment and closure of a long-denied desire (104). Her return to the party embodies this paradox, which ensnares her vision of Audrey without her knowing it: “She pushed [Anderson] indignantly aside and with a little pat for her hair and dress went slowly down to the others” (104). She walks down to the party, as if an independent woman exercising her agency, oriented away from Anderson and the regression that might ensue from becoming attached to his accommodationist agenda, but also toward him, insofar as she returns to the party to be the society woman with proper hair and dress.²⁸

It is this dual bind that haunts Helga throughout the narrative: to move away from the South is also to move toward it, insofar as Larsen exposes the realist conventions endemic to both the individualism of Washington and the propriety of DuBois’ call for class ascension. To be a sexual object for men might seem to Helga to be an act of transgression in the context of Anne Grey and James Vayle’s prudishness, but to be surrounded by masculine black and white is simply to accommodate oneself to the objectifying gaze of realist fiction. Even Helga’s putative entry into the realist plot of marriage turns out to be fleeting, the “uncontrolled fantasies” of being Anderson’s true love just fantasies indeed. Denied the closure she seeks, Helga slaps Anderson “savagely” (108), a descriptor that turns her into black stereotype, oversexualization without the realist “redemption” that she sees in it. In a repetition of the scene in Anderson’s office, the novel ties the allure Helga feels for Anderson to the allure both of

²⁸ This scene is strikingly similar to Clarissa’s descending the stairs while returning to the party at the end of Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. As with Helga, Clarissa’s seeming exercise of her individual agency is undercut by Peter’s apprehension of her – “For there she was” (213) – which attempts to contain her as an object of masculine desire. For a fuller discussion of this scene, see Chapter 4.

realist fiction and of Washingtonian accommodationism, and the empty promises they proffer. Only here, in ostensibly rejecting that which she discovers to be regressive, she is left without anywhere else to go, and can thus only imagine “an endless stretch of dreary years” (108).

Instead, Helga turns to religion for the mass experience that would dissolve her intellectual integrity into its flux, again, not toward the political ends that Locke has in mind, but for ends coextensive with the conventions of realism. Like her other vain pursuits, the church appears to her as a beyond of full satisfaction: “Things, she realized, hadn’t been, weren’t, enough for her. She’d have to have something else besides. It all came back to that old question of happiness. Surely this was it” (116). More importantly, Helga’s religious conversion is also the beginning of a movement away from the northern black middle-class that DuBois considered the proper material of fiction, and toward its putatively regressive opposite: the rural black South, where the uneducated folk speak in dialect and are fooled into acquiescent accommodation by Christian dogma.²⁹ To this extent, Helga’s marriage to the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green is not only an approximation of the scandalous Audrey that she thinks she knows; it is an exaggeration of it, taking it to the next lowest level. It is scandal beyond oversexualized indulgence and illicit desire, that which, to DuBois, should not be represented in African-American fiction, and which the text ties explicitly to sex: “even if protestations [to Green for marriage] were to fail, there were other ways” (117).

²⁹ The novel’s rural setting in this section ironizes a tradition in black fiction of representing “folk” culture as a means for the middle classes to establish authenticity and credibility. For a summary and analysis of this tradition, see Favor, pages 1-23.

In place of sex, however, Helga's body becomes occupied with childbearing and its concomitant sickness. These regressive bodily practices take the place of the scandalous sexuality Helga had tried to inhabit, but ironically so: bodily exhaustion, getting used up physically by doing something scandalous to middle-class values. Helga is now constantly thinking of her body, not as something to decorate, but as a material burden. Her surfeit of babies in this way approximates the fantasy that she sees in Audrey: inhabiting scandalous black stereotype as a means to escaping blackness. Only here, she becomes that which she sought to pass through, no longer able to play at it without becoming it. She achieves the realist closure she had sought – marriage and a place within a racial community – but only formally and ironically, as her dissatisfaction only heightens (135). Instead of becoming the middle-class heroine of a middle-class novel, she is returned to a hyperbolic version of Naxos, saturated in Washingtonian accommodationism.

Larsen's intervention in the history of black novel writing is therefore to ironize black stereotype and the stereotypical depiction of blackness, and especially black femininity. *Quicksand* depicts precisely those elements that DuBois would have found scandalous – blacks as simple, sexual, or lower-class – without either endorsing their status as the proper stuff of fiction nor fearing the licentiousness they might promote. By suspending itself ironically between these two poles, the novel writes the limits of the African-American novel, while at the same time opening up potential for the other limit, that is, gesturing toward another mode of writing that would explore the waste of the dialectical processes through which Helga tries to make her integrity cohere. The novel, in other words, gives us the ability to see limits beyond Helga's limits, making the failure

of her quest for “[h]appiness, ... [w]hatever that might be” into a resource for orienting us toward the limits of writing about identity, the limit beyond which the African-American novel would no longer be concerned with producing characters as stable subjects, but with exploring the non-mimetic affects of the black body as a mode of racial being.

Passing

DuBois also reviewed *Passing* in *The Crisis*, praising its faithful depiction of educated black society and the psychological dimensions of racial passing. The novel’s great innovation, he intimated, is that it interrogates “under what circumstances would a person take a step like this and how would they feel about it” (“Passing” 98), defying stereotype by expounding a black interiority. For DuBois, Larsen’s novel proved that black writers could be as sensitive to middle-class problems as white ones, through its “sincerity, its simplicity and charm” (“Passing” 98). As *Quicksand* demonstrates, however, Larsen is anything but sincere in her construction of character.³⁰ *Quicksand*’s Helga tries to use “low-class” blackness as a stepping stone toward proper realist closure, not realizing that the scandalous elements of black culture are a kind of quicksand. As she is sucked deeper and deeper in, the novel widens the ironic gap between Helga’s material circumstances and her fantasies of escape, an irony made only deeper by an ending that gives Helga a version of closure without the middle-class propriety that DuBois might have envisioned for her.

³⁰ DuBois is not alone in failing to notice Larsen’s irony. While other early reviews were disparate in their evaluations of the novel – it was said to contain both “firm, tangible prose” (“Beyond the Color Line” 85), and a “certain artificiality in this writer’s style” (“The Dilemma of Mixed Race” 89); both power in its ending (Seabrook 91), and a troubling lack of resolution (Rennels 85) – these reviews hold in common a singular faith in the consistency of the novel’s subject matter: Clare as the main character, Irene as passive medium of narrative transfer. Critics in the 1970s who rediscovered the novel began to focus on Irene as an ironic viewpoint whose narratological biases colour the novel’s action. Mary Mabel Youman insists that the novel is ironic because it is Irene, “the true protagonist,” who passes by losing the “spiritual values of

In *Passing*, Larsen gives us Irene Redfield, a character wholly committed to achieving narrative closure. Wedded to the idea of middle-class access to consumer culture as the ultimate expression of black emancipation, Irene seeks to guard the integrity of her bourgeois household against the incursion of Clare Kendry, whose ambiguous identity threatens to expose race as a set of historical conventions. Because this move shakes the very foundations of Irene's epistemological apparatus, the narrative charges Irene with the doomed-to-fail task of making Clare mean something definite, while shutting down what she appears to bring with her: pure self-interest, a decadent and improper form of black identity that belongs neither in middle-class black circles, nor in the African-American novel. Unable to see the Washingtonian affinities between Clare's radical individualism and her own, Irene unwittingly shows herself to be complicit in the very logic she seeks to arrest. What Irene will not acknowledge, however, and what the novel compels us to notice, is another body in the text whose presence disturbs the very idea of subjectivity itself: Clare not as the self-interest with which Irene myopically associates her (and which DuBois homophobically associated with Locke), but as an anti-mimetic play of surfaces, as same-sex desire and its refusal to mean under a rigid regime of signs. Instead of Irene's castigation of Clare as decidedly not-black, the novel compels us to think of her as outside of subject-formation, embodying a decadence that opens up the potential for practices of desire and of race that rewrite the field of sexual and racial subjectivity. To this extent, the novel refuses the so-called debate between propaganda and artistic freedom in the representation of blacks, showing that both are invested in

Blackness" (235), while Claudia Tate suggests that the novel's "real" story is Irene's "emotional turbulence" (Tate 1980, 143).

subject-formation, and pointing us instead to the non-mimetic as a resource for racial and sexual embodiment, and for black literary modernism.

The novel's opening scene pits Irene's world of regulated identities against the free play of meaning that Clare's letter embodies:

It was the last letter in Irene Redfield's little pile of morning mail. After her other ordinary and clearly directed letters the long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it. A thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender. Not that she hadn't immediately known who its sender was. Some two years ago she had one very like it in outward appearance. Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Purple ink. Foreign paper of extraordinary size. (143)

Without a return address "to betray the sender," neither "clearly directed" nor easily legible, the letter stakes a claim against realism's faith in discernible origin and unified and discoverable meaning. In so doing, it undermines DuBois' call for transparent and didactic political propaganda with the danger of artistic freedom, apolitical and "decadent" in its self-interest. And yet, for all this troubling uncertainty, Irene insists that she knows its contents: "She was wholly unable to comprehend such an attitude toward danger as she was sure the letter's contents would reveal; and she disliked the idea of opening and reading it" (143). Less surprising than Irene's attempt to stop the letter's semiotic play, however, is the grammatical slippage between knowledge and taste: Irene is sure she knows what the letter contains, she dislikes the idea of reading it, clauses

rendered equivalent by their apposition. That which is distasteful to Irene is also that which is inscrutable or not immediately knowable; that which defies hermeneutic stability is also that which offends bourgeois taste. The unrepresentable, therefore, will appear to her as improper, an important matrix to keep in mind, because the black body with which Irene will inevitably come into contact – the black body enjoyable in and of itself outside of interpellative structures, the virtual other limit of the commodified black body – will appear to her as a violation of good taste.

To the extent that the novel aligns epistemic and social impropriety in Clare – the sexuality implicit in the furtive, flaunting letter should not go unnoticed – we might think of Irene as a guardian of the realist household setting and, synecdochically, of the realist novel itself.³¹ This is key, because it makes her register a violation of its genteel borders – signifying language, the pursuit of a totalized view of the social that restricts difference

³¹ Much of the contemporary debate on *Passing* has paid little attention to these literary implications, focusing instead on to what extent Clare's passing is emancipatory. One side of this debate is comprised of such critics as Martha J. Cutter and Samira Kawash, who argue that Clare harnesses the possibilities of a plural and social conception of self to, respectively, "escape the enclosures of race, class, and sexuality" (Cutter 84), and destabilize the hegemonic relation between seeing and knowing blackness (Kawash 134). Similarly, for Lori Harrison-Kahan, both Irene and Clare use passing to subvert the racializing and sexualizing white gaze, themselves becoming spectators of whiteness who resist stereotypical representations of black womanhood (131). Critics on the other side argue that passing in the novel illustrates the impossibility of transgressing the asphyxiating enclosures of race and gender. Jennifer Brody suggests that Irene and Clare are discursive positions "locked in a struggle for dominance" (1053); while Clare represents the revolutionary potential for emancipated blackness, Irene's snobbish passing triumphs in the end, foreclosing the actualization of such potential (1064). Similarly, Sara Ahmed argues that it is through the destabilization of identity occasioned by passing that relations of power congeal and fortify themselves (89). For Ahmed, as much as passing undoes fixed discursive positions, its ostensible transgression requires a legibility of race that might only serve to expand "the terms of surveillance" that organize social identities (91).

Out of this fraught conversation, however, emerges a theoretical dynamism that sees race in *Passing* as an empty centre that cannot be filled, despite Irene's best efforts at epistemic certitude. While Cutter, in other words, looks to Clare's passing as a mechanism for overcoming the naturalistic forces of race, gender, and class, she nonetheless describes race as "a gap in this text, a mystery, something completely unfathomable" that confounds Irene's attempts to read her situation realistically (88). Similarly, Kawash argues that race in *Passing* is a "nothingness" that exposes the potential untruth of all apparent truths, thus foreclosing "the possibility of narrative itself" (164-5). (See also Jenkins, who argues that the novel turns blackness into an inscrutability that whites can never fully grasp [144].) For these critics, the ambiguity of race surfaces in the unreadability of Clare, an insistent reminder to Irene of that which cannot be figured, yet also cannot be forgotten.

(Kaplan 23) – as a violation of self.³² As such, Irene sees the transgressive qualities in Clare as a lack of self-sacrifice, the decadence of pure self-interest:

And for a swift moment Irene Redfield seemed to see a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together, while her drunken father, a tall, powerfully built man, raged threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses and making spasmodic lunges at her which were not the less frightening because they were, for the most part, ineffectual. Sometimes he did manage to reach her. But only the fact that the child had edged herself and her poor sewing over to the farthest corner of the sofa suggested that she was in any way perturbed by this menace to herself and her work. (144).

The scene conjured here is less memory than Irene's way of understanding Clare: someone pursuing ostentatious beauty in the face of oppressive social circumstances and masculine power, succeeding because her activity is so focused so as barely even to notice the man lunging at her. What is surprising in what follows is not the daring agency of young Clare as she makes a dress with materials bought from her wages, "in spite of certain unpleasantness and possible danger" (144), but Irene's framing of this audacious act:

There had been, even in those days, nothing sacrificial in Clare Kendry's

³² See Thaggert, who argues that the novel disrupts racial and sexual legibility "by simultaneously hindering the reader's act of interpreting Clare and making the reader question the interpretive practices of Irene" (3). From this perspective, *Passing* pushes Clare's unreadability into a critique of the realist novel, demonstrating instead the fallibility of its conventions. Steven J. Belluscio also suggests that Irene's failure to account for Clare is "a failure of literary realism with its complicity in upholding Irene's sense of propriety and stability" (245).

idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire. She was selfish, and cold, and hard. And yet she had, too, a strange capacity of transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes almost on theatrical heroics. (144)

What should appear as a triumphant moment of feminist emancipation appears to Irene as selfishness, obduracy, and deceit. Even the bright-coloured dress that carries Clare's resistance to patriarchy is merely "that pathetic little red frock" (144). In this light, it seems less propitious than disturbing to Irene that Bob Kendry's fists are unable to reach Clare, as if she longs for the long arm of the law to have put Clare in her place long ago. Irene thus positions herself as complicit and commensurate with the regime of power that quells difference, an important moment this early in the novel that anticipates Irene's attitude toward John Bellew.

Irene's memories that follow extend this script. Of the teenaged Clare's reaction to her father being "brought home dead," Irene remembers the blank disdain in her eyes before she suddenly erupts in tears that cease "as abruptly as [they] had begun": "She glanced quickly about the bare room, taking everyone in, even the two policemen, in a sharp look of flashing scorn. And, in the next instant, she had turned and vanished through the door" (144). In this memory, Clare comes across as wily, manipulative, resentful, shifty. She is full of malice, as Irene remembers her – "Seen across the long stretch of years, the thing had more the appearance of an outpouring of pent-up fury than of an overflow of grief for her dead father" (144) – buried anger that might surface at any time if provoked, regardless of danger or consequence.

According to the language of these descriptions, moreover, Clare's selfishness is a particular threat to Irene because of its proximity to the low-class black stereotype above which Irene is trying to rise. Just as Locke's idea of a cultural pluralism leads to DuBois' sexual panic in the face of what he can only see as self-indulgent and apolitical decadence, Clare embodies for Irene something scandalous, preoccupied with lavish preening that, according to the track that Irene pursues, can lead only to degradation. Irene's memory scripts Clare as overly emotional, sexual, violent, and resentful, falsely occupying individualism only as a means to fulfill petty desires. Just as DuBois fears that artistic freedom leads inevitably to depictions of blacks as licentious drunkards and thieves, Irene's fear is that Clare brings with her an element of blackness she would rather not acknowledge or grant entry into her bourgeois world.

If Clare is an allegory for what is unthinkable to Irene – both her own complicity in that which she scorns, and an alluring body of alternative desire that she can only apprehend as scandal and stereotype – the Drayton offers a setting of white realist narrativity that represents Irene's desire to escape the world of bodily contact by transcending and looking back down upon it. Irene feels “disagreeably damp and sticky and soiled from contact with so many sweating bodies” in her memory of Chicago (147), a street scene in which physical conditions are so intensely hot that a man becomes “an inert crumpled heap on the scorching cement” in front of her (146). Her stop at the Drayton offers respite from this messy world of physicality: “It was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below” (147). The rooftop signifies respite, perpetual satisfaction (her tea is “all that she had desired and expected” [147]), and

omniscience, as she gazes down “at the specks of cars and people about in streets, . . . thinking how silly they looked” (148). It is a setting of whiteness as distinct from the black world below (Irene has to pass as white to enter),³³ and of narrative realism, both in terms of its genteel characteristics and its seemingly omniscient viewpoint. It opens itself to Irene, in other words, as a place beyond dissatisfaction and last limits.

The legibility that the setting seems to promise is quickly disrupted by Clare’s incessant staring, which reminds Irene of her own blackness and leads to a conversation during which she is simultaneously attracted to and repelled by Clare. While the intricacies of this encounter will have to be examined closely, what matters for now is how Irene manages her polarized affective response: she ascribes her oscillating confusion to Clare’s “having way” (153), shorthand for the same constellation of apolitical decadence and low-class black stereotype that should keep someone like Clare out of this bourgeois setting. The “having way” metonymizes the letter’s self-indulgence, the catlike response to Bob Kendry’s death, and extends to Clare’s brash exposure of Irene and her friends to John Bellew’s racism without warning. Irene sums up Clare’s “having way” most baldly at the beginning of the novel’s second section, as she struggles to understand why she had not spoken up to Bellew:

She had to Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever. . . .

³³ A variety of critics have noted Irene’s hypocrisy in condemning Clare for passing while undertaking the same practice at the Drayton. Most pertinently here, Goldsmith remarks that while both characters use passing to secure class mobility and self-commodification, Clare accepts the relationship between these

No, Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it.

(182)

While Clare is alleged to embody pure self-interest, divorced from any social, political, or affective ties of race, using blackness only to the extent that it can benefit her tawdry tastes, Irene sees herself as authentically connected to blackness, so loyal and selfless a political member of the group that she will not break its ties even when it means submitting to racist discourse.

By staging Irene's reaction to Clare while ironizing its totalizing paranoia, the novel articulates a two-sided racial modernity: the fluidity of identity that Clare's emancipation from old forms of racial subjectivity enables, and the taint of the market that underwrites it, and which Irene seizes upon as ineluctably corrupting. The text extends Clare as the harbinger of new forms of identitarian engagement, the possibility of shifting seamlessly between, for instance, black and white; it also proffers Irene, who is obsessed with expounding the cost of such mutability and arresting its movement. If racial identities can be inhabited as one chooses or bought in a marketplace, Irene discovers, then they cease to mean anything at all, perhaps an exciting prospect for some, but to her a terrifying one. Irene thus sees herself as an agent charged with shutting down the fluidity that Clare ushers into her world, mandated with guarding stable racial identities against the putatively corrupting influence of the market, which believes racial identities can be fashioned or purchased almost at will.³⁴

terms, while Irene denies it (278). Goldsmith points out that Irene's evocation of the "magic carpet" justifies her passing to herself as "a magical self-transformation in which she has no agency" (279).

³⁴ On Clare's resistance to commodified blackness, see Dawahare, who argues that Clare's passing allows her to circulate like money, "to become acceptable everywhere" (35).

As we have intimated, however, Irene operates according to the very principles she aims to shut down: Clare's "having way," which is another way of saying the pursuit of last limits *ad infinitum* and the perpetual dissatisfaction that accompanies it. Clare embodies for Irene a kind of capitalist desire run rampant: radical self-interest, the emptying of stable values and categories of identity, the attempted purchase of all that is sacred, the submission of race to the instability and fickleness of the market.³⁵ Clare has a having way, but so too does Irene, whether she will acknowledge it or not. Her passing for white at the Drayton is merely one instance, which is as much about purchasing a racial identity – in her case, one beyond the commodification of black identity – as is Clare's. The fullest expression of Irene's genuflecting to that which she denounces is in her longing for a beyond of absolute safety and satisfaction, which we have already seen in the Drayton scene, and grows into her mania for the security of her bourgeois household:

to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life. Not for any of the others, or for all of them, would she exchange it. She wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband. (235)

"Security" is a word that accrues a surfeit of meaning in the text as it begins to carry the burden of the practices that sustain it as the ever-fading hope for permanence.

These practices, which act out Irene's ironic disavowal of self-interest, take multiple forms. Like the despot who restricts freedom in the name of public safety, Irene must quell anything that threatens her middle-class household. To this end, Brian's

³⁵ Compare to Jim Burden's hypocritical denunciation of Larry Donovan's capitalist valuation of *Ántonia*, as discussed in Chapter 1.

“queer, unhappy restlessness” (178) stalks Irene’s sense of stability, such that she must treat it as an uncanny adversary: “The thing, this discontent which had exploded into words, would surely die, flicker out, at last” (187) (note the vague descriptor, “the thing,” identical to the description of the unnameable set of affects Irene remembers in Clare’s reaction to her father’s death). Brian longs to go somewhere “strange and different” (178), to Brazil where he can be with other blacks away from the racism in America. It is an alternative to the fluidity of racial identity that Clare brings, but one that concretizes stable categories by removing the possibility of “upward” mobility, of becoming middle-class by imitating white standards. It is Brian, after all, who points out to Irene that blacks passing as white ““always come back”” because they are unsatisfied with whiteness, invoking some unknowable yet essential quality as the reason: ““If I knew that, I’d know what race is”” (185). This suggests that Brian already knows what Irene will not acknowledge: that there is no beyond of full satisfaction, that racial embodiment in America is a fact that cannot be discarded or disavowed, despite Irene’s attempts to do so. To subdue Brian’s queer desire to abandon the pursuit of white-centred forms of identity, to expurgate Clare herself, the embodiment of racial fluidity and destabilized identitarian engagements, is the dual action that Irene understands as the other limit of commodified racial identity, the limit beyond which unimpeded and unadulterated security beckons.

We might therefore say that Irene attempts to escape the market by unwittingly harnessing its very logic. She is the panicked voice of the modern, sensing in Clare the threat that her own power will dissolve because it is founded upon a retrograde definition of identity that demands the strict epistemological separation of black and white. In this

regard, Clare is also a question put to DuBois, asking his figure how long the self-teleological power of realist propriety, buttressed by a middle-class version of black identity, can last. Even more terrifying to Irene, however, is what might come after this collapse: the horrific absence of meaning whose prospect she can only intimate hyperbolically as the “anything” that “might happen” were Clare to be freed from Bellew’s repressive power (236). It is in this historical abyss that Irene senses the collapse of all values, giving way to an unimaginable and infinite spectrum of ghastly possibilities.³⁶

What distinguishes Larsen from DuBois in this regard is her ironic representation of the ideological presuppositions that support Irene’s panic in the face of this collapse. This is the point that Brian Carr makes in his psychoanalytic reading of *Passing*, marshalling the idea of the Lacanian nonobject to demonstrate that Irene seeks to turn the “nothingness” of unreadable desire into a definite something, a strategy of reification designed to fill the gap between desire and its impossible object (284).³⁷ That Irene’s reification takes the form of an imagined and exaggerated adulterous affair between Clare and Brian suggests that she sees the problem of power in terms of race: Clare becomes the stereotype of the oversexualized black female, her propensity to steal one’s husband commensurate with her “low-class” black identity. The prospect of this chimera being granted the agency to have full and unfettered access to everything in Irene’s world, to be

³⁶ See Casarino’s reading of whiteness in *Moby-Dick*, and how a similar collapse of meaning and value horrifies Ishmael (94-5).

³⁷ In light of Carr, other criticism that tries to discover precisely “what” in Clare attracts Irene misses the point. Critics have sought not only to determine *what* in Clare attracts Irene, but also to define with precision the realm of the unrepresentable that Larsen’s text leaves in dynamic openness. David Blackmore, for instance, argues that Brian’s desire for Brazil is a desire for “a homosexual life [that] would free [him] from his own unsatisfying role in bourgeois Harlem society” (481). While he provides convincing evidence for this reading, Blackmore’s interpretation reproduces Irene’s literalist tendencies by foreclosing the multiplicity in Brian’s desire that Larsen evokes.

able to use her self-fashioned black body as a free bidder on the open market, makes the cause of this impending collapse some strange mixture of racial impropriety and capitalist greed.

But Carr's analysis and the tradition of psychoanalytic criticism that it extends³⁸ stops at a diagnosis of Irene's mania and its implications for critical reading practices,³⁹ without allowing us to think in precise terms what the virtual other limit of this paranoid reading might look like. Butler, for instance, does a compelling job of expounding Irene's simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from black female sexuality, but can only intimate, rather tenuously, that the "political promise" toward which the novel gestures is of "a solidarity yet to come" among black women, figured in the text as the identification between Clare and Irene (276). Similarly, the sometimes-overlapping tradition of queer theory that brings out the implied lesbian erotics between Irene and Clare has tended to prioritize same-sex desire in the novel, romanticizing it as a curative to Irene's panic while ignoring its important connections to the politics of representation. In addition to McDowell's seminal reading, which articulates the "double burial" by which the erotic subplot is hidden beneath the "safe and orderly cover" of race (xxx), David Blackmore suggests that Irene longs for a freer "socio-sexual system" in which she can express her same-sex desire (475) as an alternative to her "emotionally empty existence" (481); Lori Harrison-Kahan argues that Irene and Clare's desire shifts back and forth between

³⁸ Deborah McDowell's influential study argues that the novel itself "passes," as the plot of same-sex desire between Irene and Clare is packaged "in the safe and familiar plot of racial passing" (xxx). Judith Butler broadens the terms of inquiry, arguing that Irene's disavowal of Clare is a repression of "the social constraints on black women's sexuality," a "psychic ambivalence" toward a character who violates the propriety of racial affiliation by transgressing such constraints (276). Butler thus suggests that Clare is a kind of tragic utopian figure in the novel, "the promise of freedom at too high a price, both to Irene and to herself," who must be exiled or killed to preserve the primacy of the white masculine order (280).

³⁹ According to Carr, critics also have been guilty of Irene's "paranoid interpretation" in insisting that the novel is "about" sexuality (288).

heterosexuality and homoeroticism, exposing identity as a multiple and continual process (117). Even while the latter attempts to destabilize identificatory binaries, it participates in the process of reification that understands oblique suggestions of same-sex desire and erotics as instantiations of knowable and representable sexual identities. This critical trajectory, I am suggesting, indulges Irene's realistic mode of representation in two ways: aesthetically, by assuming that Irene and Clare have real and readable desires, implying that they have existence outside of their textual productions; and politically, by staging an axis of sexual identity on which subjects can be produced and understood, even if only provisionally.

We might instead think of same-sex desire in this novel as an arresting of the process by which characters are produced as realist subjects in fiction, rather than a rescripting of it. This other body, readable to Irene only as chaos, also tantalizes her in disturbing moments such that she must expunge it, offering us an alternative to her investments in psychological depth, in hermeneutic reading, in mimesis, in interpellation and the formation of realist subjectivity. It is an aporia into the virtual other limit of the commodified black body – not to kill, expel, subjugate its queerness, or make its refusal to mean signify something – but the black body as a site of pleasure free from the force of interpellation. It is that which DuBois homophobically associates with apolitical decadence, but which has a political orientation in serving no other master but its own pleasures, including the dual masters of identity and subjectivity. We have already seen it in Clare's letter, with its illegibility and lavishness, its over-the-top passion, “[s]heets upon thin sheets of it,” that make Irene act out of instinct rather than reason in guessing its “carelessly formed words,” that inspire “[b]rilliant red patches” that flame in her

cheeks (145). We have seen it in Irene's "memory" of Clare as a child, seeking to gratify her own desire rather than carefully negotiating the most logical path to survival (144).

We see it also in Irene's first glimpse of Clare atop the Drayton, not simply a matter of fascination nor easily reducible to lesbian desire, but with far more serious narrative implications for the pleasure Irene seems to derive from looking and being of the "opinion" that the receiver of her glance is "attractive-looking" (148). Importantly, hearing Clare's voice, smelling her "sweetly scented" perfume, seeing her flowery dress as "a reminder of pleasantly chill spring days" distracts Irene from her thoughts that immediately precede it: the impossibility of finding a book for Ted, which leads Irene to thoughts of Brian, "[f]or ever wanting something that he couldn't have" (148), the logic of perpetual dissatisfaction, endemic here to her identity as a bourgeois race woman looking for a final beyond of pure satisfaction. In this brief interlude, Irene appears to abandon her obsessive pursuit of last limits. There is something, for instance, that makes her hesitate to name Clare's smile as "a shade too provocative" (149), temporarily arresting her bourgeois propriety. This something, which cannot be named but which stops Irene from characteristically regulating sexual desire, does not activate her mania for trying to make mean that which refuses to mean, but inspires a simple and non-committal answer: "A certain impression of assurance, perhaps" (149): just a "perhaps" of an impression that Irene leaves as such, without trying to dig deeper. It is only, tellingly, when Irene becomes once again aware of herself, "conscious that she had been staring," that "[h]er mind return[s] to her own affairs": she settles, "definitely," which frock is the "proper" one to wear to a bridge party, and the troubling question of Ted's book (149). Returned to her subject-centred universe, aware of her own thoughts and

seemingly in control of them, Irene is restored to her domain of comfort: absolute definition, bourgeois propriety, and the manic pursuit of the forever-distant limit beyond which lies full satisfaction.

What is this thing that begins to stare at Irene atop the Drayton, so powerful that it interrupts her rage for interpellation and subject-formation, so “caressing” (148) that she does not even seem to notice? In this moment, it is not the impending collapse of her power, as she will later decide, that she sees and that sees her. Feeling “her colour heighten” (149), Irene first assumes she must have her hat on backwards, that there must be something wrong with her dress, that, in other words, she has failed to fit in with the setting of whiteness and the subject position with which she longs to be congruent. Irene assumes, that is, that the staring is the gaze of the white society she is trying to accommodate herself to, about to recognize her as black and cast her out, both literally and metaphorically. It is for this reason that Irene is “seized by a desire to outstare the rude observer” (150), as if such a demotion can be overcome by returning and outpacing its own regulation of identities. Clare’s staring, however, operates according to no such logic, undoing rather than perpetuating the production of identity, disarming Irene’s “suspicions and fears” through a smile whose “charm” cannot be resisted, making Irene surrender to it “instantly” (150). As critics have pointed out, Clare insists on calling her “Rene,” eliding the “I” of subjectivity (150),⁴⁰ and that Irene stay seated after she recognizes her (151), as if to obviate any assertion of self. Clare, the personification of

⁴⁰ See Harrison-Kahan, who goes on to say that *Passing* is the story of Irene’s attempt to reclaim her “I” (110). Harrison-Kahan argues for the emancipatory potential of Irene’s quest “to become a self-making subject instead of a fixed object, or stereotype” without investigating Larsen’s critique of subjectivity itself (110). Jennifer DeVere Brody argues that Irene’s acquisition of the “I” since her youth, during which she was known as “Rene,” suggests that she has abandoned her African heritage in favour of “absorption or assimilation” into the white world. Clare “ironically infiltrates a particular segment of dominant American society” by reminding Irene of her old nickname (1059).

this undoing who “had gone completely from Irene’s thoughts” (154), makes her give in to “impulse” in inviting her to Idlewild (156), gives her “the sense of being petted and caressed” (161). By the end of the encounter, the thought of not seeing Clare again, of never again being in the presence of this occasion for the leave-taking of subjectivity, is “dreadful” to Irene (162).

Irene, of course, tries to close down this sudden eruption of the virtual other limit of subject-formation – “She was through with Clare Kendry” (163) – but this diremption continues to resonate and is recoded by Irene as threat, as we have seen. The scene that has become the critical touchstone for the disclosure of Irene’s lesbianism is crucial in this regard: Clare enters Irene’s room without knocking and “drop[s] a kiss on her dark curls,” inspiring “a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling. Reaching out, she grasped Clare’s two hands in her own and cried with something like awe in her voice: ‘Dear God! But aren’t you lovely, Clare!’” (194). As with the scene at the Drayton, it will do us little good to try to settle the question of Irene or Clare’s sexual identity.

Rather, the significance of this moment is in what it interrupts – Irene’s bourgeois preening followed by her rehearsing telling Clare to stay away:

[she] stood up, smoothing out the tumbled green and ivory draperies of her dress with light stroking pats. At the mirror she dusted a little powder on her nose and brushed out her hair.

She meant to tell Clare Kendry at once, and definitely, that it was of no use, her coming, that she couldn’t be responsible, that she’d talked it over with Brian, who had agreed with her that it was wiser, for Clare’s own sake, to refrain –

But that was as far as she got in her rehearsal. (193-4)

Irene smoothes out the wrinkles in her appearance, whose metaphorical resonance suggests a straightening of the improper, puts powder on her nose as if to lighten the colour of her skin, brushes out her hair as if to make it appear more European than African. The word “rehearsal,” moreover, associates this preening with her attempt to regulate Clare’s movement by suggesting that she is making herself up before a staged performance (or a rehearsal thereof). If this, therefore, is Irene practicing being the regulator of identities, practicing being white, as it were, Clare’s sudden entrance pre-empted the rehearsal and, to this extent, interrupts Irene’s accommodationist pronouncement.

The result of this protracted failure is that Irene consents to allow Clare to come to the Negro Welfare League dance, the description of which is supposed to be entirely focalized through Irene’s perspective (each paragraph describing Irene’s memories of the dance begins, anaphorically, “She remembered”). But there is also the sense that the description of Clare outdoes Irene’s attempts at maintaining control:

Clare, exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet; her glistening hair drawn smoothly back into a small twist at the nape of her neck; her eyes sparkling like dark jewels. Irene, with her new rose-coloured chiffon frock ending at the knees, and her cropped curls, felt dowdy and commonplace. (203)

There is something lavish in the string of adjectives and clauses, building Clare with an over-the-top piling up of descriptors that call attention to themselves through the

apposition but also through the repeated sounds of *f* (“fragrant,” “flaunting,” “taffeta,” “folds,” “feet”), *s* (“exquisite,” “stately,” “shining,” “skirt,” “graceful,” “slim,” “glistening,” “smoothly,” “small,” “sparkling”), *g* (“golden,” “gown,” “long,” “graceful,” “golden,” “glistening”), and *n* (“nape,” “neck”). These, and the exaggerated imagery of Clare as a golden, shining, sparkling object seem to outstrip the mode of realist representation that Irene finds so proper. Indeed, in the paragraph that follows, Irene feels scorn for Clare’s hyperbolic way of using language: “All those superlatives!” (204). While the initial description may be the narrator’s way of translating Irene’s perspective into language that is more suitable for something so radiant, it also suggests that once again, Irene unwittingly practices that which she also condemns, is caught up in the surface effects of language and meaning more than she knows or is willing to acknowledge.

If Irene’s realist proclivities – in terms of diction, of the bourgeois mode of fiction that provides closure, and of the production of subjectivity that these require – begin to fray, if she is unknowingly seduced into participating in some improper mode which she has been denying herself, and which Clare reminds her of as the voice of that which she has forgotten (“Don’t you know me? Not really, ‘Rene?’” [151]), where can Irene turn for sympathy? To what can she look as an outpost of realist representation and the strict maintenance of epistemic and racial order that would maintain her tenuous subject position? It should come as little surprise that this aggregate of aesthetic and political values finds a home in John Bellew. Bellew, who also fears the infinite and inarticulable horror that blacks carry with them: “I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people. And,’ he added darkly, ‘worse’” (172). It is both easy and difficult to

imagine what Bellew has in mind here, his version of Irene's "anything," designed to evoke an entire spectrum of terrifying possibilities, and especially, so it seems, sexual ones. And while the price for this paranoia is clearly visible in his "unhealthy-looking dough-coloured face" and eyes that "mov[e] ceaselessly between thick bluish lids," there is, Irene decides, "nothing unusual about him" (170). Even though this occurs before Bellew reveals his racism, it suggests that Irene is, if not favourably disposed to, then at least undisturbed by the signs of obsession that mark his body.

Even after his racist rant, moreover, Irene negotiates a sympathetic opinion of Bellew: "Irene had to concede that under other conditions she might have liked him. A fairly good-looking man of amiable disposition, evidently, and in easy circumstances. Plain and with no nonsense about him" (173). These features that Irene valorizes should resonate doubly: as the opposite of her view of Brian: moody, irascible, uncomfortable with his circumstances and thus unordinary and full of a nonsensical (to Irene) desire to leave the pursuit of middle-class white comfort; also as the paragon of the literary-aesthetic values of realism – unadorned and to the point – that Irene clings to so desperately. While she is quick to insist to herself that she does not like Bellew under present conditions, it seems an inadequate protest in comparison to his stately position as just the kind of person, embodying just the kind of social and aesthetic values, that she prizes. Instead of blaming Bellew for her discomfort at the entire encounter, she blames Clare, for having taken "a chance, and not at all consider[ed] anyone else's feelings" (175).

Irene's desperate hope that Clare remain in Bellew's grasp, as we have seen, is therefore merely the most extreme expression of an attitude she holds from the beginning.

It is remarkable that the criticism on *Passing* has not devoted more energy to what is surely one of the most disturbing aspects of the narrative: rather than celebrating the potential liberation of Clare as a racial identity yet-to-come, Irene longs to be fully compatible with the regime of racial oppression that would keep it subdued. Rather than looking forward to the day when bigotry might be erased, Irene prays for the continued dominance of racist, white, masculine power, because its alternative is too horrific to contemplate.

Such complicity becomes only fully necessary because of the “affair” between Clare and Brian, itself the imagined result of Irene’s inability to quell Brian’s queer longings. This longing, the desire to take leave from Irene’s pursuit of last limits, however, is also a function of Irene’s paranoia in the face of meaninglessness. We are told that since “that long-ago time of storm and strain, of hateful and nearly disastrous quarrelling” when Brian first expressed his desire to move to Brazil, there has been “no other talk of it” in the intervening years (187). And yet,

because, so she insisted, the bond of flesh and spirit between them was so strong, she knew, had always known, that his dissatisfaction had continued, as had his dislike and disgust for his profession and his country.

(187)

If Larsen’s fiction teaches us anything, it is to be suspicious about claims of absolute knowledge, especially from an ironic protagonist, and especially when her insistence is so emphatically foregrounded. The narrator ramps up the ironic interplay between Irene’s claims of privileged knowledge and their elusive object in the paragraph that follows:

A feeling of uneasiness stole upon her at the inconceivable suspicion that

she might have been wrong in her estimate of her husband's character. But she squirmed away from it. Impossible! She couldn't have been wrong. Everything proved that she had been right. More than right, if such a thing could be. And all, she assured herself, because she understood him so well, because she had, actually, a special talent for understanding him. It was, as she saw it, the one thing that had been the basis of the success which she had made of a marriage that had threatened to fail. She knew him as well as he knew himself, or better. (187)

Irene's hyperbole – "Impossible," "Everything proved," "More than right" – only serves to undermine her position of certainty by exposing her desperation in her protestations of knowing Brian better than he knows himself, of being more than right.

But "more than right" about what? There seems to be a dual trajectory to Irene's certainty here: both that staying in America was the best thing for Brian, even if he does not see it, and that his desire to leave remains intact. These two elements crystallize in Irene's putative understanding of him, but both are put into doubt by the hyperbolic rhetoric of this passage. Irene has no evidence that he is better off for having stayed, except the enigmatic "[e]verything" that seems to suggest their material comfort, which she cannot conceive of here without seeing its potential disappearance; she has no proof that Brian still wants to go to Brazil, except for her "special talent" that tells her so, and which is supposed to have saved their marriage. This "inconceivable suspicion," then, away from which she must squirm, a metaphor that emphasizes the uncomfortable contortions she must undergo to convince herself, is that her faith in realism has led her astray. Irene's knowledge of her husband's queer desires and the intrepid necessity of

killing them form the basis, so she tells herself, of the secure middle-class life she has fashioned. But Irene touches here upon the inconceivable suspicion that her knowledge amounts to speculation, that she is ruled more by feeling than by fact, and consequently, that the very foundations of her bourgeois subjectivity are as unreliable as Clare's deceptive theatrics.

Witness then the tenuous grip that Irene maintains over Brian's spectral longing, whose presence she can only divine through a *feeling* of knowledge.⁴¹ In order to kill it, she knows that something will have to be "offered in its stead" (188) as a distraction: the "queer ideas" about sex Junior has picked up at school through "[d]readful jokes, and things like that" (189). While she brings this up as "an opening for what she had intended to suggest: some European school for Junior next year, and Brian to take him over" (190), it only serves to demonstrate her lack of control, because Brian takes the opposite view:

'The sooner and the more he learns about sex, the better for him. And most certainly if he learns that it's a grand joke, the greatest in the world. It'll keep him from lots of disappointments later on.' (189)

As a ploy to distract Brian from his alleged longings and maintain the security of her bourgeois household, Irene grossly misreads what she perceives as her opponent by assuming that Brian shares her valuation of propriety. In fact, the very basis of her appeal is unfounded, because Brian has already vacated its terms: sex becomes not something to be indulged and celebrated, as we might expect from Clare, but starts to

⁴¹ In the chapter that follows, we will see how Fitzgerald counterposes feeling to realist understanding. Specifically, Fitzgerald's novels, especially *Tender Is the Night*, proffer a kind of queer sensitivity, as opposed to indicative knowledge, as a way of allegorizing queer forms of reading.

occupy a cultural position that is part and parcel of the interpellative momentum of middle-class accommodationism. To treat sex as a “grand joke,” therefore, is to arm oneself against co-optation by white institutions of power. In terms of Irene, the exchange further exposes the unreliability of her realist self-conception. While it is Brian who makes the ploy blow up in her face, it is she who decides to use sex as a decoy in the first place. Irene claims that her true intention is to pacify Brian by giving him some time away in Europe, but her impulse to control and regulate desire suggests that it is she, and not Brian, who is fixated on sexual impropriety.

The same goes for the affair between Clare and Brian that Irene, in her overdetermined way, is sure is taking place: “She knew it, and knew that she knew it” (234). On one register, the affair literalizes Irene’s dystopian fantasy of Clare’s destruction of her bourgeois coherence. Instead of figuring herself as the heroine of the realist marriage plot, as Helga does, Irene situates herself as its jilted lover. But we might also think of the affair as a particular reaction to a set of epistemological circumstances. As Carr notes, Irene “knows that ‘nothing’ substantiates her belief” that Clare and Brian are lovers (291): “Nothing. She had seen nothing, heard nothing” (223). For Carr, this episode demonstrates Larsen’s insight that all “knowledge” pursues an impossible object, can never be fulfilled or fully substantiated by demonstrable evidence (294). There is, however, something about this nothingness that takes on its own existence. It begins with the continuation of Irene’s horrifying suspicion that the tools of realism have betrayed her:

She thought: ‘If I could only be sure that at bottom it’s just Brazil.’

She thought: ‘Whatever it is, if I only knew what it was, I could manage

it.’

Brian again. Unhappy, restless, withdrawn. And she, who had prided herself on knowing his moods, their causes and their remedies, had found it first unthinkable, and then intolerable, that this, so like and yet so unlike those other spasmodic restlessnesses of his, should be to her incomprehensible and elusive. (214)

To be sure that “it’s just Brazil” is to be sure that her interpretive capacities can be relied upon. Like Clare’s letter, the presence of some other unnameable desire is both “unthinkable” and “intolerable,” both inscrutable and distasteful. What Irene sees in the nothingness is the absence of meaning itself, and by extension, the collapse of her own power, which relies upon her ability to find the cause behind effects and to distinguish between the proper and the improper.⁴²

This place of meaninglessness, the starkest manifestation of which we have already seen in the prospect of Clare freed from Bellew, is what Casarino calls “the final horizon of hermeneutics”: the terrifying absence of meaning that signifies the collapse of all values (92). In this regard, criticism that seeks to determine the cause of Brian’s mood, the existence or absence of the affair, or, for that matter, Clare’s precise racial or sexual identity, misses the point by reproducing Irene’s very interpretive mechanisms. Instead, we need to understand the nature of the relationship between this absence of

⁴² This prospective collapse is tied to the narrative mode according to which Irene operates. With mere snippets of Irene’s party conversation as she goes through the motions of decorum, the narrator shifts to a more impressionistic mode to accommodate the fact of her being overwhelmed:

Chatter, chatter, chatter. Someone asked her a question. She glanced up with what she felt was a rigid smile.

‘Yes...Brian picked it up last winter in Haiti. Terribly weird, isn’t it?...It is rather marvellous in its own hideous way....Practically nothing, I believe. A few cents....’ (218, ellipses in original)

meaning and the affair, and I will suggest that it is the same relationship between the last limit and the other limit that Casarino also raises:

The last limit is the expression of capital's dread in the face of the other limit. The expansionist march of capital – its serial strategy of confrontation and deferral of last limits – unfolds a trajectory that constitutes the converse projection of the other limit's furious and expectant stillness within each drumbeat of that very march. In each and every last limit, capital acts as its own exorcist: in positing the last limit, capital attempts the impossible task of conjuring up and expelling from within itself the other limit, that is, the absent presence of its own unthought. (98)

Faced with the other limit of her dialectical logic of appropriation and expansion, of corrupted and commodified racial identity, of full security and the bourgeois subjectivity on which it depends, Irene's response is to erect a last limit as an alibi. If the spectre of meaninglessness threatens the entire scaffolding upon which her subjectivity is built, her only recourse is to conjure meaning where there is none, to construct a limit that *can* be named, understood, and surpassed, first by hoping to expose Clare to Bellew, and then by expelling her from the narrative entirely.

This movement, from disruptive meaninglessness to disruptive meaning, is observable in the way Irene characterizes Clare and Brian's faces at the party she hosts immediately after she "discovers" the affair:

Clare's ivory face was what it always was, beautiful and caressing. Or

maybe today a little masked. Unrevealing. Unaltered and undisturbed by any emotion within or without. Brian's seemed to Irene to be pitifully bare. Or was it too as it always was? That half-effaced seeking look, did he always have that? Queer, that now she didn't know, couldn't recall. Then she saw him smile, and the smile made his face all eager and shining. Impelled by some inner urge of loyalty to herself, she glanced away. But only for a moment. And when she turned towards them again, she thought that the look on his face was the most melancholy and yet the most scoffing that she had ever seen upon it. (220)

It is not merely the meaninglessness of Clare's unrevealing face, of Brian's "half-effaced" look, that forms the other limit of Irene's bourgeois subjectivity here. Rather, that these failures of meaning make Irene doubt all of her previous characterizations and perceptions of consistency are what make her sense of self, reliant on knowledge and memory, tenuous. There is something "[q]ueer" in the fact that she cannot know or recall what her husband looks like, so far away is she from the grip on household security after which she has lusted. Irene's cognitive faculties are at a crisis. In asking herself if Brian's face is "as it always was," she asks not only if he is cheating, but if she has any capacity left at all for realistic apprehension of knowledge. And yet, the next moments seem to tame this queerness, as Brian's "eager and shining" smile seems to confirm for Irene the affair's existence, forcing her to turn away. And to what does she turn, in this brief moment of respite from the last limit raised up before her? She turns to herself, "[i]mpelled by some inner urge of loyalty" that we might characterize as a Washingtonian moment in its fetishizing of self-reliance. This turn toward the self

operates as a moment of refuelling, arming Irene with the self-possession and readerly agency necessary for rewriting Brian's eager desire as both "melancholy" and "scoffing," as both discomfort with his marital circumstances and recalcitrance toward her efforts to subdue his desire to leave.

In this context, the affair makes blackness, rendered frighteningly inarticulate by Clare's lavish impropriety and Brian's putatively cynical desire to go to Brazil, into something knowable to Irene. Clare becomes the personification of black oversexualized self-gratification, a racialized apotheosis of her "having way"; Brian becomes the marker of her own middle-class black identity, tempted away by this image of Clare, a possession whose loss would signify the permanent breakdown of the epistemological racial order. Ironically, Irene is willing to "do anything, risk anything" (236) to prevent Bellew from finding out and having Clare freed, ironic because such a limitless commitment to self-interest is precisely how Irene defines Clare's having way.

Bellew, of course, does find out, and in the moments after he enters the Freeland's apartment, there is something about Clare, and especially her smile, that angers Irene:

Clare stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full, red lips, and in her shining eyes.

It was that smile that maddened Irene. (238-9)

Clare's seeming indifference to the havoc that she has created finds full articulation to Irene in the smile that materializes *on* Clare's "full, red lips," gaudily oversexualized in

their provocation, and *in* her “shining eyes,” appearing as flashy and tawdry accoutrements. A closer look, however, suggests that the smile is the culmination of a description of Clare’s failure to mean, rather than the meaning upon which Irene fixates. Clare stands *as if* everyone were *not* staring at her, *as if* her life were *not* lying in fragments. What the overwrought diction seems to be doing here is constructing Clare as unreadability itself, or readability only by speculative approximation. What does it look like, in other words, for someone to be as if not being stared at, a description occulted twice over by a simile and a negation? She *seems unaware* or *uncaring*, wearing a smile that is but “faint.” Ostensibly freed from Bellew’s grasp, according to the terms Irene has set up, Clare all but disappears from the narrative as an object of knowledge, presenting herself as Casarino’s final horizon of hermeneutics, the place where realistic techniques of reading come to die. For Irene, however, Clare’s face is the apex of sexual and racial impropriety, selfishness and self-gratification that revels in being finally free of social constraint, a last limit erected in the “face” of meaninglessness.

To seek to discover whether or not Irene “actually” pushes Clare to her death, in this regard, is to reproduce Irene’s realist tendencies, to fail to heed the lessons that Larsen’s text teaches about knowledge and knowing. Of much more significance is the way in which Irene scripts the fall retrospectively: “One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone” (239). Here Irene appears to impose on the event a limit to realist comprehension: there is nothing more to know than the fact that Clare “just fell, before anybody could stop her” (242). And yet, it is also one more attempt on Irene’s part to expand her narratorial power into uncharted dominions. Like the “magic carpet” that seems to bring Irene to the rooftop of

the Drayton through no agency of her own, the memory excuses Irene of any culpability. It naturalizes the expulsion of queer meaningfulness, making her a non-actor in a ritual sacrifice that happened as if by inherent consequence of its own existence. The death, that is, is scripted to signify the teleological fate of Clare's own hubris, the inevitable extinguishing of a flame that burned too brightly. As such, it should restore the default order to both Irene's household and her epistemic apparatus.

Her thoughts, therefore, turn to Brian's comfort above all else: "Brian! He mustn't take cold. She took up his coat and left her own" (240). But while she has "a great longing to comfort him, to charm away his suffering and horror" (241), Irene has already lost the power she seeks to hold onto, much as Brian's "great coat" trails "a little on each step behind her" as she runs down, clutching to it desperately (240). His attempt to comfort her when she breaks down is only a "slight perfunctory" one (241), suggesting that the narrative denies Irene the conciliatory closure she seeks:

‘She just fell, before anybody could stop her. I –’

Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything went dark. (242)

Irene's final spoken word, "I," is an attempt to assert her bourgeois agency through the primacy of the self. But Irene's "I" remains inactive, whatever verb it might have taken severed by the crisis of her "quaking knees." Like Helga at the end of *Quicksand*, she is firmly of her body despite her repeated attempts to transcend its physicality.

Nonetheless, Irene is lifted up by “strong arms,” some agency without name that arrests and even reverses her fall. The uplift that is performed here, however, does little to restore the bourgeois order that Irene has lost: she is only “dimly conscious” of it, rather than in control of her subject-centred universe; “everything” goes “dark,” a shuttering of the possibility of realist knowing that also suggests the presence of undeniable blackness. Instead, the narrative ends with this action, whose obscurity and lack of individuality defy the conventions of realism. Irene is not actualized as a subject, but supported by something other than the epistemological and proprietary support whose stability she has sought. She retains a vestige of her consciousness, but only in the brief moment before darkness, and only consciousness *of* the asubjective and inscrutable strength that steps in to fill the breach left by the collapse of certitude.

Larsen dedicated *Passing* to Carl Van Vechten, that propagator of stereotype, according to DuBois, whose *Nigger Heaven* he considered “a blow to the face” (“Books” 81). While Larsen herself may have been sympathetic to Van Vechten and black artistic “freedom,”⁴³ the point is not that she indulges the stereotype that DuBois sees there, but that she is writing about representation on another level entirely. If *Quicksand* and *Passing* interrogate the limits of writing about black identity, both texts are about the future of African-American literature. In *Quicksand*, Larsen begins this project by writing that full satisfaction is beyond her writing, that Helga can only ever find metonymic approximations of the identity she strives to actualize in each next locale. The novel exposes the limits of realism, but does so by using the conventions of realism ironically. In this sense, *Quicksand* attempts to reconcile the debate between propaganda

⁴³ Larsen defended Van Vechten’s novel against its vociferous critics. See Davis, pages 208-214.

and artistic freedom, marshalling what appears on its surface as straightforward reverse-propaganda – recall DuBois’ overly favourable review – toward rather radical ends. Thinking beyond subjectivity itself, the novel suggests, is not necessarily the exclusive domain of the avant-garde.

In *Passing*, Irene fetishizes freedom *from* so much – from stereotype, from commodification, from sexuality – but it is here that Larsen also begins to think in terms of freedom *to*: the unnamed agency that lifts her up at the end of the narrative opens up the realm of asubjective desire as a new footing for engagement with blackness, one not reliant on an idea of epistemic and racial security that is always already lost. Irene’s ambivalence about taste is perhaps the unspoken discourse of freedom-to in *Passing*. Good taste for Irene is the marker of bourgeois subjectivity, allowing her to distinguish between proper and improper, between authentically black and scandalously low-brow. As much as Irene therefore deploys taste toward realist goals, there is also, however, something utterly irrational about taste, an exercise of enjoyment that would seem to be inimical and oppositional to any notion of reasonable rational propriety. The freedom to exercise taste, and Irene’s unwitting ambivalence about this tension between the enjoyment of taste and tasteful enjoyment, suggests that for Larsen, the irrational is to be found lurking at the centre of the putatively rational. If the African-American novel, moreover, is caught up in the debate between the representation of good taste and bad, Larsen shows us that this debate is structured around the exclusion of that which nonetheless lies at its heart: blackness without identity, and the aesthetic and political commitments that interrupt and disturb narratives of bourgeois propriety.

Taste is also at issue in Fitzgerald, at least for the protagonists of *This Side of Paradise* (Amory Blaine) and *The Great Gatsby* (Nick Carraway), characters with whom some surprisingly productive links with Irene Redfield exist. If Irene possesses a manic desire to guard her good taste, and the good taste of the realist novel, against the racial and sexual impropriety of Clare Kendry, something similar might be said of Amory and Nick, both of whom try to hold themselves snobbishly above the ugliness of mass culture, and its racial and sexual implications. As with Irene, however, the irrationality of good taste cannot help but emerge as the virtual other limit to such propriety, coded in Fitzgerald as the queerness of feeling as apprehension, so different from the putative straightness of indicative knowledge, mimetic representation, and realist subjectivity. This sensitivity finds its most productive expression in *Tender Is the Night*'s Dick Diver, whose disappearance at the end of the novel allegorizes queer practices of reading.

Chapter 3: F. Scott Fitzgerald: Sensation, Sensitivity, and the Crisis of Manhood

In an oft-quoted passage from his 1936 autobiographical *Crack-Up* essay, F. Scott Fitzgerald writes of his “two juvenile regrets – at not being big enough (or good enough) to play football in college, and at not getting overseas during the war” (70). Aside from ironic self-mockery about his physical stature, the remark betrays an awareness on Fitzgerald’s part about his naïve and unabashedly romantic illusions of youth, which easily juxtaposed the staged violence of sport with the very real violence of the battlefield. For the Fitzgerald of the twenties, he tells us here, it is as if World War One existed as a horizon in the past, unconquerable due to its temporal location, yet impossibly alluring as a rite of manhood.

While World War One forms an important backdrop for the narrative action of all three novels under consideration here – *This Side of Paradise* (1920), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and *Tender Is the Night* (1933) – this chapter is not concerned with war in and of itself, but with this horizon that it metonymizes and the naïveté of trying to surpass it.¹ Rather than a transcendental signifier suggesting some essential truth, World War One manifests in these texts as the occasion for an invisible yet palpable fracture between two worlds, begetting a generation overcome by anxieties, much like encroaching materialism in Cather, or emerging self-commodification in Larsen around the new black middle class. Such anxieties surface, for instance, in Amory Blaine’s xenophobic disgust with “the heavy scent of latest America” (147) and Dick Diver’s nostalgic lamentation for his own youth (200), both of which look longingly to a time of innocence before the fracture of World War One.

¹ This is in contrast to critics such as James H. Meredith, who take war as a critical end in itself in Fitzgerald’s fiction. See Meredith’s “Fitzgerald and War,” especially 167-192.

This crisis, more germanely, is a crisis for the formation of subjectivity, especially as it relates to narrative's ability to produce psychologically coherent characters.

Paradise makes this relationship explicit, as the novel closes with Amory's declaration, "I know myself...but that is all" (282), in which the protagonist insists a little too fervently on his inability to speak for his disillusioned generation. In *Gatsby*, Nick Carraway is a fractured subject looking to reconstitute himself through the act of storytelling, a project undercut by his encounters with a queer register of desire. If, as critics have suggested, Dick represents the failure of masculine integrity in *Tender Is the Night*, his mere ability to stand for a cultural crisis presumes a model of subjectivity that takes for granted psychological interiority and a signifying outside, and relies upon the narrative energy of dialectical expansion, appropriation, and novelistic resolution of such a crisis.

This Side of Paradise attempts to resolve the cultural crisis of youth that Amory embodies through dramatic irony and linear character development. As the narrator chastises him for his immature effeminacy, for his Princeton snobbishness, for his quasi-socialist naiveté, Amory comes into putative self-knowledge by the novel's end. In *Gatsby*, Nick deploys the trope of solitude to signify a privileged awareness of the modern world's gaudy emptiness. To be irrecuperably alone, Nick suggests, is the price to be paid for having gone to war and come back disillusioned, a condition that, paradoxically, seems to unite Nick and Gatsby in the end. The narrators of both these novels seek the representation of crisis as Casarino's last limit, and find compensation for their ostensible failure to find its adequate expression in this failure itself: just as Amory's declared inability to speak for his generation *is* to speak for his generation (in

sympathy with a complicit narrator), Nick's awareness of the alleged failure of Gatsby's escape from post-war alienation is what allows narrative closure. In *Tender Is the Night*, as the effects of war are rendered more manifest through explicit and implicit allegories, the novel's narrator problematically laments the feminization of culture and the loss of masculine vigour without hope of recovery. As Dick's epic inability to restore an older and purer version of America proceeds, Dick's only option appears to be to disappear, a self-effacement that critics have tended to regard with disappointment.

From another perspective, however, Dick's ironically legible disappearance, along with similarly readable figures of incoherence and abjection in *Gatsby* and *Paradise*, open up an alternative form of modernism: modernism as the story of deviant desire for same-sex intimacy, as the narratological and characterological desire for anonymity as the virtual other limit of subject-formation.² Whereas the narrator of *This Side of Paradise* attempts to render the long process of character development as a curative to the difficulty in representing crisis, Amory's queer performance of Wildean aestheticism, his intimate relationship with Tom D'Invilliers, and his frightening encounters with the phenomenon of the crowd all suggest forms of modernist desire that are realistically implausible. In *Gatsby*, Nick is a fastidious parody of impressionist story-telling, his obsession with efficiency overwhelmed by the romanticized inefficiency of his language, especially when confronted with Gatsby's lavish performances, which he both scorns and imitates. Such narratological unproductivity, which works against narrative closure, illuminates Nick's suppression of queer desire, which in turn suggests a

² Recall Cather's Navajo in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, who believe in "pass[ing] through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water, or birds through the air" (233).

mode of queer understanding based on sensitivity rather than mimesis. In *Tender Is the Night*, same-sex desire is already named and coded by the discourse of psychoanalysis. As the narrator appears to put little faith in the possibility of escape from cultural malaise, the novel builds on the idea of sensitivity that appears in *Gatsby*, impelling its reader to see character as assemblages of depersonalized affect, rather than as coherent models of psychological depth.

This Side of Paradise

Despite the dearth of recent criticism on Fitzgerald's first novel, *This Side of Paradise* was received with a surfeit of praise in 1920. Reviewers valorized its newness,³ its liveliness,⁴ its realistic depiction of post-war youth.⁵ In later years, Fitzgerald reflected on his early success, casting himself as the bearer of the burden of speaking truth about a generation fractured by war, left without an outlet for its directionless vitality.⁶ If early critics were astounded by its structural and thematic innovations, however, the novel eventually fell into critical disrepute, thanks in part to James Miller's comprehensive study of Fitzgerald's technical development. In *The Fictional Technique*

³ From the *New York Morning World*: "He tells a story in a new way, without regard to rules or convention, and it is an interesting story" (Benchley 43).

⁴ From the *New York Evening Post*: "*This Side of Paradise* is a very enlivening book indeed, a book really brilliant and glamorous, making as agreeable reading as could be asked" ("A Remarkable Young American Writer" 41).

⁵ Kirk Curnutt notes that readers in 1920 "were shocked by the realism of Fitzgerald's portrait of teenage life," and most especially by its ambivalent ending, which, instead of moralizing on the "civic responsibilities of adulthood," depicts Amory as "no longer a boy but not quite a man, uprooted from the past but uncertain of the future" (31). Margaret Emerson Bailey, writing in *The Bookman*, calls the novel "a convincing chronicle of youth by youth" (Bailey 47). Bailey's review goes so far as to encode the struggle to depict this new generation in war metaphors: "Mr. Fitzgerald...gives the impression of being still in the thick of the fight, and of having the fierceness of combat. The dust of conflict is still in his eyes and he does not even see very clearly. At times he cannot distinguish youth's friend from its foe or perceive where it has met with defeat and where conquered. The battle is on and the besetting forces loom very large" (Bailey 46).

⁶ In 1937 Fitzgerald writes, "my point of vantage was the dividing line between the two generations, and there I sat – somewhat self-consciously" ("Early Success" 87). Later in the same essay, he writes of the novel's popularity: "The dream had been early realized and the realization carried with it a certain bonus

of *F. Scott Fitzgerald* (1957), Miller recasts the shift from *Paradise* to *Gatsby* as Fitzgerald's formal movement away from the novel of saturation and toward the novel of selection.⁷ Seen in this light, *Paradise* becomes an early, immature experiment in expansiveness, a stepping stone Fitzgerald had to touch and move past in order to become the "modernist" that could write the terse, detailed, and ironic *Gatsby*.⁸ While early reviewers praised *Paradise* for its experimentality, Miller exposes the novel's seeming fragmentation as well within the conventions of the novel of saturation,⁹ showing that its lack of structural unity was not radical, but a retrograde technique in the tradition of Wells, whom Virginia Woolf castigates as an "Edwardian" in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (70).

and a certain burden. Premature success gives one an almost mystical conception of destiny as opposed to will power – at its worst the Napoleonic delusion" (89).

⁷ Briefly, the former, expounded by H. G. Wells, should be a discursive discussion of social problems (3), a putatively faithful imitation of life (7) that eschews unifying purpose in favour of linear character development and a controlling narrative voice that represents the author (3). Miller notes four consistent features of the novel of saturation: "character as the center of the novel, very little or nothing as irrelevant in the novel, author-intrusion as a virtue in the novel, and the novel as a vehicle for problem-discussion" (4). The latter, argued for by Henry James and elaborated by Wharton and Conrad, regards the novel as a work, in the sense of something wrought by the writer's careful selection of detail (9) to convey the *effect* of life, without the pretense of providing a literal transcription (8). (James pointed out that *all* fiction is selection, in that even in the novel of saturation, the writer must select a method of cutting the "slice of life," and has the choice "either of recognising this inevitability, and consciously making the slice blindly" [Miller 5].) For James, all fiction requires a frame (8), and narrators must therefore be considered distinctly from their authors, making discursive or didactic pronouncements a violation of the "general law of fiction" (9). For more on this, see James' preface to *Roderick Hudson*: "Art would be easy indeed if, by a fond power disposed to 'patronise' it, such conveniences, such simplifications, had been provided. We have, as the case stands, to invent and establish them, to arrive at them by a difficult, dire process of selection and comparison, of surrender and sacrifice" (6).

⁸ The dichotomy between saturation and selection is roughly in line with that between Howellsian realism and modernism developed in the Introduction. While the former seeks to encapsulate all of life within its pages, the latter marshals ambivalence and irony to foreground the impossibility of knowing the world in its totality. Cather's *O Pioneers!*, we should recall, was long thought of as a novel of saturation, until such critics as Marilee Lindemann pointed out its ironic critique of realism's propensity for totalized knowledge, as allegorized by the figure of the pioneer.

⁹ "The techniques Fitzgerald uses in the representation of events are, in one sense, as conventional as those he uses in manipulating point of view. The happenings are related chronologically, not in a tightly-knit plot sequence but, in the tradition of the saturation novel, in a series of independent scenes only loosely related" (Miller 33).

Miller's reading of *Paradise* has persisted, in both condemnatory and putatively value-neutral criticism. Brian Way, in *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Art of Social Fiction* (1980), disparages the novel as "formless, pretentious, sentimental, self-indulgent and intellectually weak" (49), "a story of education and youthful initiation" irredeemable by contemporary critical standards. Its value, for Way, is to be found only in that it sheds light on Fitzgerald's artistic development, if only by contrast to his later, more mature works (50), "the kind of bad first novel which nevertheless gives promise of future achievement" (49). Writing in 2004, David W. Ullrich summarizes the novel as follows:

Amory develops through two separate narratives: the flappers' world of romance, sexual exploration, and changing sociosexual mores and the philosophers' world of the history of ideas. Amory can mature only insofar as he moves away from the shaping paternal influences of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin....[Fitzgerald] presents Amory as exploring these issues within a dialectical framework. Amory finally rejects his earlier positions and comes to recognize Princeton's 'local snobbishness,' where people are 'barred because of the color of their neckties and the roll of their coats.' (54)

Both Way and Ullrich take for granted the novel's dialectical movement as a coming-of-age narrative, as Amory proceeds ever forward up the ladder of maturity, obliterating each preceding self with each discovery of a new one, until he achieves full self-knowledge in becoming aware of his inability to speak for his generation.¹⁰ For both

¹⁰ Although he does acknowledge that "the many moral, political and sentimental issues" fail to resolve in *Paradise*, the precariousness of Amory's final "false bravado" (54) is still within the paradigm of dialectical character development and is not enough to make Ullrich cast doubt on the primacy of the *Bildungsroman* plot.

critics, *Paradise* should be read as a sincere novel of saturation whose primary motive is the linear development of Amory's character.

Without question, *This Side of Paradise* resolves dialectically, if only through a concretization of youthful uncertainty. This resolution, however, need not amount to a thorough expenditure of everything that the text brings forward, even those things that are only suggested obliquely. As much as the novel's forward momentum leads us on toward Amory's heterosexual and masculine development, what are we to make of those moments in the text where this momentum appears arrested by same-sex desire? It is necessary, that is, to confront what Casarino calls "the waste of dialectical processes," and which he explains as "those leftover energies that remain unusable and unrecognizable within such processes" (192).¹¹ This is not to suggest that Fitzgerald's text performs on the same register of queerness as Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* (Casarino's object of study) or that whatever unused and unresolved energies we might locate constitute a revolution against "modernity" (if we can speak of such a monolith) or even against the history of modern identity formation. Rather, as we shall see, the narrative momentum of *Paradise* is directed teleologically toward the recuperation of masculine agency, cultural integrity, and characterological coherence all at once; the same-sex desire that is unable or unwilling to be swept up in this forward movement overwhelms these conventional features of the *Bildungsroman* with the aesthetic impressionistic *durée* of unfixated experience

¹¹ For Casarino's analysis of the closet and its sublime affects, these amount to the multiplicity of sexual pleasures that do not get incorporated into the binary of homo- and heterosexualities; to the extent that the historical moment when the dialectic becomes "the dominant mode of production" of such identities constitutes modernity's moment of origin, these excesses represent "an escape from modernity as we know it – a cunicular network of a subterranean history of the body threatening suddenly to erupt through the ground of modernity and to materialize that which never would or will be modern" (192).

An unlikely source directs us to the presence of unexplained and inexhaustible forms of desire that do not get resolved by the narrator's insistence on closure. Toward the end of his less-than-favourable review, Heywood Broun registers his discomfort with a particular scene:

The thing that puzzled us most was the author's description of the violent effect of the sex urge upon some of his young folk. On page 122, for instance, a chorus girl named Axia laid her blond head on Amory's shoulder and the youth immediately rushed away in a frenzy of terror and suffered from hallucinations for forty-eight hours. The explanation was hidden from us. It did not sound altogether characteristic of Princeton.

(40)

The mere fact that the reviewer is so troubled by that which lacks explanation demonstrates the kinds of reading habits and readerly expectations that the novel of saturation solicits; Broun's frustrated puzzlement should indicate not that *Paradise* is a flawed saturation novel but that it contains at least one jarring brake to its dialectical momentum. Broun is referring to the famous scene in which Amory's vision of the Devil forces him to flee from heterosexual fulfillment (113); what is it that he finds so puzzling that he must denigrate the scene as both unrealistic and improper (not "characteristic of Princeton")? Pearl James reads this scene as Amory's most exemplary moment of homosexual panic, as his description of the devil, who turns out to be the apparition of the dead Dick Humbird, for whom Amory has felt a deep admiration, is "part of a homophobically coded description of homoerotic desire" (16).¹² While the exuberance of

¹² The devil's feet are "all wrong...with a sort of wrongness that he felt rather than knew," "one of those terrible incongruities," "unutterably terrible" (113, ellipsis in original).

James' reading will have to be examined and perhaps tempered, her analysis opens at least two possibilities: firstly, that Amory's crisis is, for Fitzgerald, a crisis in conventional forms of heterosexuality, and secondly, that deviant desire haunts a seemingly conventional narrative, threatening to trouble its teleology, and therefore must be quelled by the dialectical impulses of such narrative. The novel, in contrast to its narrator's aims, will turn out to pursue not only deviant sexual desires but non-teleological experiments in the incoherence of selfhood which form the virtual other limit of dialectical character development and self-actualization. Layered over the recuperation of masculine, cultural, and characterological fracture that the novel appears on its surface to indulge, *Paradise* seeks a modernism constituted by the radical multiplication of subjectivities.

From early on, *Paradise* troublingly equates the crises of post-war cultural alienation and post-war masculinity by ironizing the norms of fatherhood. Amory's father is "an ineffectual, inarticulate man with a taste for Byron and a habit of drowsing over the *Encyclopedia Britannica*" (3), habits, in addition to his inherited wealth (3), that suggest passivity on their surface, and represent, for James, "the emergence of a leisure class [that] occasioned a widespread loss of national virility" (James 5). From his father, Amory has inherited only two traits: an unavoidable physical one, "his height of just under six feet" (3), and a feminized indecisiveness, "his tendency to waver at crucial moments" (3). Beatrice, Amory's active parent, is a cruelly and crudely feminizing influence, cultivating in him a snobbish decadence which leaves Amory without the tools to adopt a conventional masculine identity: at age five, he possesses "a facile imaginative

mind and a taste for fancy dress” (4).¹³ This figure of the too-powerful woman, which will resurface as Elsie Speers and Baby Warren of *Tender Is the Night*, is Fitzgerald’s sexist shorthand for the usurpation of masculine power, and the narrator’s ironic praise of her – “But Beatrice Blaine! There was a woman!” (3) – underscores her ostensibly frightening potency. As the embodiment of this supposed cultural crisis, Amory will seek self-knowledge and masculine self-actualization through the pursuit of characterological coherence.

Moreover, as James suggests, the novel’s three-part structure – Book I: The Romantic Egotist; Interlude: May 1917-February 1919; Book II: The Education of a Personage – indicates that Amory will achieve this coherence by passing through the trope of war, that “the youthful ‘egotist’ will be transformed into a ‘personage’ via an intermediary historical ‘Interlude’” (James 7). Structurally, that is, the narrative understands and uses World War One as both a crisis of the masculine self and the possibility of cultural regeneration. The narrator thus deploys dramatic irony to mark the distance between Amory’s elitist mystifications and the self-knowledge he is destined to attain. The short section “Historical” exemplifies this approach:

The war began in the summer following his freshman year. Beyond a sporting interest in the German dash for Paris the whole affair failed either to thrill or interest him. With the attitude he might have held toward an amusing melodrama he hoped it would be long and bloody. If it had not continued he would have felt like an irate ticket holder at a prizefight where the principals refused to mix it up.

That was his total reaction. (55)

¹³ James suggests, “It is as if Beatrice raises Amory as a girl” (5).

The narrator is clearly in a position of knowledge with respect to Amory, commenting upon his benign sensationalization of the war with the compact second paragraph, the ironic brevity of which suggests there is another way to react to the war's cultural upheaval that Amory cannot yet understand. As this gap begins to close, Amory passes through admiration for American soldiers in France (109), an attraction to political activism at Princeton (123), enlistment followed by an alcoholic disillusionment with the war (157, 199), a tentative embrace of socialism (269), and finally, a seeming awareness of his own subjective and representational limitations, as he stretches out his arms "to the crystalline, radiant sky" and cries, "I know myself...but that is all" (282).

If Amory's final claim to know only himself is the culmination of this dialectical process of character development, it is ironic, as we have seen, insofar as knowing only oneself *is* the condition of his generation, for which he can ultimately speak. Amory appears on his surface to emerge as a conventional masculine narrator, wielding his representational power as a curative to his earlier feminized and ineffectual decadence. As with both *Quicksand* and *Passing*, however, the striving toward realist closure can be seen as an alibi to mask encounters with queer potential. Much as Helga Crane treats consumerist self-fashioning as the other limit to racial embodiment, unaware that it only pulls her deeper into it, Amory's final claim attempts to stage a drama of masculine, heterosexual, and realist resolution. This ending, however, is an alibi, directing attention away from the virtual other limit of such resolution – same-sex desire and its queer implications for the project of modernist storytelling. The narrator chastises Amory for holding himself above the masses, above foreigners (118), above the poor (256), until an ending that seems to temper these elitisms. But Amory's implicit acceptance of the

masses which he earlier scorned upholds the coherence of selfhood as the novel's *telos*, as this is the ostensible curative to his egoism. The eventual coincidence between Amory's and the narrator's perspectives, in other words, resolves the novel's structural irony, but it is beyond this drama of individualistic self-knowledge that the novel opens up the other limit, at once more radical and more difficult to figure.

If there is a queer narrative in this novel that operates as a non-dialectical counterweight to the project of masculine subject formation, one of its aporias is the presence of masculine same-sex desire. James points to the novel's dual and duelling epigraphs to demonstrate the tension between these two registers. The first is by Rupert Brooke: "...Well this side of Paradise!.../ There's little comfort in the wise." For James, it signifies, both textually and biographically, youthful masculine rebellion against conventional wisdom (1) – Brooke himself was a middle-class hero in Georgian England (Perkins 208) – and romantic support for the war.¹⁴ The second, by Oscar Wilde, is a mocking treatment of "the principle of development based on error and reflection, the principle undergirding the bildungsroman" (James 1): "Experience is the name so many people give to their mistakes." An ironic take on the sincerity that Brooke represents, the epigraph ridicules the dialectical plot of subject formation; the figure of Wilde, it need not be said, evokes same-sex desire as the subversive underside to the iconic persona of conservative masculine heroics that Brooke inhabited.¹⁵

¹⁴ Brooke was "a high-minded and brave soldier, handsome and vital, [who] symbolized to his contemporaries the brilliant youth of England sacrificed in the war" (Perkins 207-8). For a well-known example of his romanticized treatment of World War One, see Brooke's sonnet "The Soldier."

¹⁵ James also suggests that *both* Wilde and Brooke were "effete writers with ambiguous sexual identities" (2), betraying Fitzgerald's anxiety about the masculine coming-of-age narrative. Indeed, Perkins points out that Brooke assumed an "aesthetic-decadent pose" as a teenager, discarding it at Cambridge for the more-fashionable Fabian socialism (208). These details suggest that the linear story of youthful masculine rebellion and the overcoming of barriers to self-knowledge is a pose whose coherence depends on the suppression of a queer subtext.

The suppression of such a queer subtext, for James, comes out in Fitzgerald's attempt to distance himself from the "feminized dandy" with which he risks identifying in invoking Wilde. The novel, that is, repeatedly produces scenes of same-sex desire, only to have Amory do away with their danger by turning to the discourses of history and heroism in order to articulate his desire as conventional masculine heterosexuality (17). She directs us to two such scenes. The first is the section entitled "'Ha-Ha Hortense!'" depicting the Triangle Club's rehearsal of a musical at Princeton, the second Amory's encounter with the demonic ghost of Dick Humbird, discussed above. For James, certain details in the first scene raise the threat of "same-sex passion" (10): Amory playing a chorus girl (55), the men being called "ponies" (55), the leading "lady's" "atmospheric mince" (55). James' reading, however, relies on historical evidence of "the homosexual atmosphere of boarding school and college life" to illustrate the "homoerotic potential" of the drag performance (11). While gender bending certainly occurs in this scene, James' impulse is to romanticize same-sex desire in itself as a curative to the coming-of-age plot, compelling her to try to make Amory speak his "true" sexual identity. In the devil scene, James' reading is at times more precise, demonstrating how the available language of homophobia steps in to code Amory's fear as homosexual panic, and how the trope of war emerges as the appropriate metaphor to tame the eruption of same-sex desire. Here too, however, James' primary concern seems to be to prove, once and for all, "the potential homosexuality of Amory's effeminacy" (10). Such an approach misses the point by merely reversing the terms of inquiry, while relying on the identical habits of literalist reading.¹⁶ The point, at the very least, is to allow these moments that try to

¹⁶ See discussion in Chapter 2 of a similar critical tradition in relation to Larsen's *Passing*, which attempts to establish Irene Redfield's lesbianism. As I argue, this method of reading fails to heed the lessons of the

express a desire, without the language to express it, to destabilize the conventions of the dialectical coming-of-age story by showing that *all* such stories have to grapple with the subversive presence of such inexpressible desire.¹⁷ The disclosure of same-sex desire, in other words, is not the end of critical analysis but just its beginning.

An earlier scene that James passes by evokes same-sex desire as subversion of the narrator's representational project which will ironize the hetero-masculine constitution of Amory by demonstrating his excessive desire. Amory's introduction to the poet Tom D'Invilliers at Princeton is an early and important experiment with queerness, tying together same-sex desire and deviant forms of reading:

One day in March, finding that all the tables were occupied, [Amory] slipped into a chair opposite a freshman who bent intently over a book at the last table. They nodded briefly. For twenty minutes Amory sat consuming bacon buns and reading 'Mrs. Warren's Profession' (he had discovered Shaw quite by accident while browsing in the library during mid-years); the other freshman, also intent on his volume, meanwhile did away with a trio of chocolate malted milks.

By and by Amory's eyes wandered curiously to his fellow-luncher's book. He spelled out the name and title upside down – 'Marpessa,' by

novel, which warn against literalist reading.

¹⁷ I borrow this very productive critical passageway from Casarino, who makes a similar argument about Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*: "Conrad's engagement with the linguistic and narrative conventions of romance, far from constituting a mere adaptation of those conventions, reveals instead that there never was such a genre as a definitionally *heterosexual* romance to begin with, since its conventions are shot through with refractory shards of that unmentionable desire and with the very matter of its unrepresentability. In this context, *The Secret Sharer* could be said to show that the modern genre of romance is a series of linguistic and narrative conventions whose primary problematic consists of, on the one hand, the dialectical symbiosis between a representable, prescribed heterosexual desire and an unrepresentable, illicit same-sex desire, and, on the other hand, the necessary deployment of homophobia as the main regulative articulation

Stephen Phillips. This meant nothing to him, his metrical education having been confined to such Sunday classics as ‘Come into the Garden, Maude,’ and what morsels of Shakespeare and Milton had been recently forced upon him.

Moved to address his vis-à-vis, he simulated interest in his book for a moment, and then exclaimed aloud as if involuntarily:

‘Ha! Great stuff!’

The other freshman looked up and Amory registered artificial embarrassment. (49-50)

Bearing the hallmarks of a pick-up – their fortuitous proximity brought on by outside circumstances (all the tables are occupied), Amory’s curious glances toward Tom, his performed spontaneous exclamation so as to begin a conversation – this scene constitutes Amory’s initiation into a register for which he is not prepared, yet which he finds impossibly alluring. To Amory D’Invilliers is like himself, a joyful and ravenous reader of literature. Their eating in concert with their intent reading suggests over-abundance: Amory makes use of a “limitless charge account” at the restaurant (49), meaning his supply of bacon buns need not have an end; Tom “does away with a trio” of chocolate milks. The setting, “Joe’s,” is a lurid locale (it is “unaesthetic and faintly unsanitary” [49]) for excess consumption of pleasure away from the judgments of convention (it has “the additional advantage of seclusion from curious upper-class eyes” [49]). What this moment signifies, what is at stake in the curious wandering of Amory’s eyes, is the

of both these inextricable desires and of all the regimes of production and control that such desires are made to service” (224).

discovery of shared excess pleasure, which here, takes the form of a love for literature lying outside that prescribed by their “metrical education.”

This love of books as a queer sharing of the enjoyment of excess continues:

[Tom] liked books, and it seemed forever since Amory had met any one who did; if only that St. Paul’s crowd at the next table would not mistake *him* for a bird, too, he would enjoy the encounter tremendously. They didn’t seem to be noticing, so he let himself go, discussed books by the dozens – books he had read, read about, books he had never heard of, rattling off lists of titles with the facility of a Brentano’s clerk.

D’Invilliers was partially taken in and wholly delighted. (50-1)

Temporarily freed from the interpellating gaze of Princeton society, here Amory discovers the virtual other limit of masculine subject-formation, briefly abandoning the last limit that the dialectical narrative requires him to try to surpass, instead abandoning *himself* to a climax of narrative chaos.¹⁸ It is not simply that Amory tells of his favourite books: in “let[ting] himself go,” he touches the limit beyond which he must become something other than himself. It is thus that he can discuss “books he had never heard of,” a temporary leave-taking of the subject that antagonizes the foundations of the novel of education, the slow constitution of its protagonist, and the interpretive habits of reading that it requires. Amory’s outburst operates according to an affect of spontaneous pleasure rather than rational and acquired knowledge (recall also the title “Marpessa” which means “nothing” to Amory).¹⁹ The syntax here produces this line of flight: “books

¹⁸ Recall the scene on the rooftop of the Drayton in *Passing*, in which Irene is so allured by Clare’s affects that she temporarily suspends her rage for regulating racial and sexual identities.

¹⁹ Stephen Phillips’s “Marpessa” is a poem about the princess Marpessa from Greek mythology. She and Idas, passionately in love, flee her unrelenting father, Evenus. Eventually, Marpessa must choose between

he had read, read about, books he had never heard of.” If we begin within the confines of Amory’s rational, subject-producing education, we are taken quickly to a register of understanding that lies on the border between the educated subject and its outside (books Amory had “read about”), and then further into a realm that ironizes narrative progress and the constitution of subjectivity (“books he had never heard of”).²⁰ Instead of circling toward self-knowledge, Amory moves centrifugally away from it, even if he is not entirely separate from it in this moment.

The sharing of queer excess pleasure culminates, fittingly, in a discussion of Wilde, which prompts Tom to invite Amory up to his room (51). After measuring Tom’s “undoubted attractions and value against the menace of cold eyes behind tortoise-rimmed spectacles that he fancied glared from the next table,” a month-long love-affair with Wilde and the aesthetes begins, in which Amory is “keen on naught else” (51). The goal of Amory’s deviant “education” is not to acquire knowledge, but to become the writers he reads (“he tried hard to look at Princeton through the satiated eyes of Oscar Wilde and Swinburne” [51]). Because it involves excess and experimentation (he reads “enormously every night,” a “heterogeneous mixture” of writers [51-2]), it initiates Amory into something completely new (“he suddenly discovered that he had read nothing for years” [52]). Still, these experiments are risky ones for Amory to undertake, and conventional masculinity exerts pressure on his and Tom’s Wildean queering of subject-formation:

the mortal Idas and the god Apollo. She chooses the former (Graves 246-7). Phillips’s poem is a passionate evocation of the forbidden love between Marpessa and Idas, which is allowed to triumph in the end. It is thus fitting that Amory enters this scene of initiation without prior knowledge of this poem of excess passion.

²⁰ The virtual other limit that constitutes the outside of the subject is also the virtual other limit of the novel of saturation. Not only is its central feature, the linear development of its protagonist, put into danger here, but the presence of precise details that demand careful and precise analysis forces the novel of saturation to slip into a mode of discourse that is more at home in the novel of selection. In this moment, the saturation novel becomes the selection novel, making *Paradise* a zone of indiscernibility between the two.

Tom D'Invilliers became at first an occasion rather than a friend. Amory saw him about once a week, and together they gilded the ceiling of Tom's room and decorated the walls with imitation tapestry, bought at an auction, tall candlesticks and figured curtains. Amory liked him for being clever and literary without effeminacy or affectation. In fact, Amory did most of the strutting and tried painfully to make every remark an epigram, than which, if one is content with ostensible epigrams, there are many feats harder. 12 Univee was amused. Kerry read 'Dorian Gray' and simulated Lord Henry, following Amory about, addressing him as 'Dorian' and pretending to encourage in him wicked fancies and attenuated tendencies to ennui. When he carried it into commons, to the amazement of the others at table, Amory became furiously embarrassed, and after that made epigrams only before D'Invilliers or a convenient mirror. (52)

Tom is an "occasion" to Amory, but an occasion for what? The meaning of the word in this context is never quite explained, but it implies that he *is* what Amory *does* in these weekly meetings: he is the portal into affected practices of aestheticism (decorating the walls, for instance, with "imitation" tapestry), and moreover, into aestheticism performed in togetherness. But if the sharing of queer excess pleasure erupts here as the other limit of subject-formation and of the saturation novel, Amory is dutiful in his role as a character in wait of development, that is, in rediscovering the next last limit to be overcome. Amory likes Tom "for being clever and literary without effeminacy or affectation," an infidelity to the shared desire for pleasure in itself, insofar as he subjects such pleasure to the norms of gender and sexuality. He does not surpass the

Bildungsroman, but strives to act in accordance with its proprieties by finding it in aestheticism's customs: after his classmates make fun of his queer epigram-making, Amory closets this practice, indulging it only in front of a "convenient mirror." This "convenient mirror" reflects back to Amory the version of himself he finds acceptable. In this mirror, epigrams are merely "clever and literary" feats of verbal wit, rather than Wildean practices of "effeminacy" and "affectation"; in this mirror, Amory and Tom are conventionally masculine friends, rather than queer sharers of excess pleasure; and, to take the argument a little further, by way of this mirror, the narrator can rely on a passive readership accustomed to the novel of saturation, content to reflect back the primacy of dialectical subject-formation that the straight narrative requires for its protagonist.

At home with this mirror of convenience, Amory leaves behind his aesthetic experiments in favour of writing romantic poetry. Whereas with Tom, Amory decorates walls and puts on clever personae, here Amory is "suddenly unable to bear walls" (53), wandering the campus alone for inspiration: he is, once again and comfortably, the self-sufficient subject that contains his fully formed future self in latency, striving to actualize it by surpassing social limits. Amory becomes the cloistered artist, at home with Princeton's Gothic buildings "and all they symbolized as warehouses of dead ages" (54), rather than the closeted aesthete, indulging hidden experiments in artifice. The "upward trend" of the Gothic towers becomes his symbol for "the transiency and unimportance" (54) of university hierarchy, and he resolves to overcome the "chastity of the spire" (54) by leaving school for the working world, a difficult but necessary step in his development that, the narrator assures us, will "make him aware of his own impotency and insufficiency" (54).

The return to dialectical character development, however, is not as successful as Amory and the narrator might suppose. Rendered as a collision between same-sex desire and the sharing of excess pleasure, the taking apart of the subject cannot help but resurface as the virtual other limit of Amory's development. The crowd emerges as the locus of desire for an alternative to the recuperation of selfhood and of narrative. What the reflection of Amory's convenient mirror both obscures and produces as his allegorical alterity is the desire for asubjective intimacy that occurs when one abandons one's self to the anonymity of the crowd, and the narrative desire for non-signifying practices of writing required to register this waste of dialectical processes. While Amory tries to harness the crowd as a background against which he can actualize himself – and the narrator's chastising of this hubris forms the catalyst for narrative development, insofar as the narrative teleology is directed toward closing the gap of dramatic irony – his self-reflection will always be haunted by such leftover energies:

Turning on all the lights, he looked at himself in the mirror, trying to find in his own face the qualities that made him see more clearly than the great crowd of people, that made him decide firmly, and able to influence and follow his own will....

Silently he admired himself. How conveniently well he looked, and how well a dinner coat became him. (89)

As Amory snobbishly positions himself as the unique hero of a *Bildungsroman*, distinct from the amorphous “crowd of people” unblessed by individual agency, he searches for physical markers of the traits evoked in the novel's first line, signifying his will

independent of either his father or mother.²¹ What he finds, of course, is how “well” he looks, an adjective evoking both health and good taste. But if we read “well” as an *adverb* describing the manner in which Amory engages in the act of seeing, then “conveniently” becomes a sly call-back to the “convenient mirror,” indicating that it is ironically convenient that Amory figures himself so properly as an active agent in his own development. The *inconvenience* of looking *improperly*, that is, might result in Amory noticing the “stray” and “inexpressible” elements that would lead him away from subjectivity, rather than toward it.²²

This pattern recurs throughout the novel: a conjuring of the crowd’s anonymity, overlaid by Amory’s scorn for the same, at each step treating the other limit as a last limit to be surpassed, all the while oblivious to the detritus of subject-formation allegorized within it. The scene in which Amory encounters the Devil, for instance, which Broun finds so objectionable and James reads as the exemplary manifestation of Amory’s homosexual panic, is bracketed by this dynamic. It begins with Amory, Fred Sloane,

²¹ “Amory Blaine inherited from his mother every trait, except the stray inexpressible few, that made him worth while” (3). Although Amory would like to understand these traits as allowing him to reject the legacy of his feminized upbringing, having come from outside the genetic source of his crisis, the terms in which the narrator describes these traits suggests something else is at work, because simply surpassing the limit that Beatrice represents requires adherence to the very same logic according to which she operates. To conquer cultural elitism by asserting the integrity of the self would only perpetuate new elitisms, because selfhood is the foundational condition for holding oneself apart from the crowd. Furthermore, the investment that a compliant reader like Broun puts into Amory’s ability to overcome these oppressive obstacles, in return for a degree of hermeneutic certainty, would seem at odds with a series of traits that are, quite literally, “inexpressible.” The sudden mention of these occulted characteristics, therefore, disrupts both the narrative’s dialectical energy, and the culturally acquired reading habits that the novel of saturation demands: they resist representation, in the sense of both the political – these traits “stray” from the order of subjective development – and the aesthetic – their inexpressibility confounds modes of interpretation that demand that the inexpressible be explained. These traits thus constitute the unthought of the dialectic between the cultural trope of diminished virility, and the humanistic possibility of surpassing it; in so doing, instead of asking to be discovered and made present, they invite an investigation into how such non-representational affects operate in Fitzgerald’s text.

²² Given the earlier intertext with Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, moreover, we might think of the mirror as a version of Dorian’s portrait, housing an ironically idealized version of him, but which is saturated by aesthetic affects.

Axia, and Phoebe feeling “ridiculous with surplus energy, and burst[ing] into the café like Dionysian revellers” (109), “sail[ing] off” into the “muddled crowd” that “whirled and changed and shifted” (110). It ends with Amory’s sudden disgust with the mass culture of New York, which manifests as classism, sexism, and xenophobia: he scorns Sloane by “class[ing] him with the crowd” (117), is sickened by “[t]he presence of a painted woman” on his Princeton-bound train (118), and seeks relief from “the smells of the state’s alien population” (118). What occurs in between to occasion this dramatic shift, from quasi-anonymous revelry to the snobbish assertion of self above the crowd? As the group finishes dancing, Amory notices “that someone at a nearby table was looking at him,” a middle-aged man “sitting a little apart at a table by himself and watching their party intently” (111), which unsettles him enough to castigate the man as a “pale fool.” The queer implications of this gazing and Amory’s panicked reaction are apparent: “At Amory’s glance, [the man] smiled faintly” (111). Amory is being cruised.

The key, however, is that this occurs in the context of Amory attempting to construct a coherent and hetero-masculine version of himself. In addition to his quick reaction to being watched, Amory has already decided to remain sober, to be “reasonably discreet” in the party and “to keep an eye on Sloane” (111): he will be the group’s rational element, a phylactery against Dionysian revelry. If alcohol therefore signifies potential immersion in the crowd, Amory’s second vision of the demonic man, as he is about to take a drink, takes on more importance:

Amory hesitated, glass in hand.

There was a minute while temptation crept over him like a warm wind,

and his imagination turned to fire, and he took the glass from Phoebe's hand. That was all; for at the second that his decision came, he looked up and saw, ten yards from him, the man who had been in the café, and with his jump of astonishment the glass fell from his uplifted hand. (112)

It is a stunning coincidence that the apparition arrives at the very moment that Amory is about to drink, "at the second" when he is on the verge of entering a world of praxis in which the self – the fundamental unit of the novel of saturation – would be put at risk. The man looks coolly at him with "steady gray eyes," and "with just the shade of a questioning expression" (113). As James suggests, the man personifies queerness, a particular "wrongness that he felt rather than knew" (113). The man witnesses Amory's attempt at self-fashioning, thus exposing it as a performance.²³ To Amory, being cruised by a man while trying to erect a coherent version of a hetero-masculine self overwrites this self-fashioning, queers the process of subject-formation that is central to the *Bildungsroman*.

Perhaps predictably, Amory tries to expunge this event from his history. We are told that in retrospect, he "never thought of it as experience" (110-1): it lies outside the dialectical process by which events are coded as teleological progression toward the actualization of self and should therefore also remind us of Wilde's epigraphic queering of this process: "Experience is the name so many people give to their mistakes." If this episode does not get sublimated into experience, then for Amory it fails to mean as education or history and is thus something "to which he never succeeded in giving an appropriate value" (108). And what is reason's answer when faced with what Casarino

²³ The "glass" in Amory's hand is also a call-back to his mirror of convenience and emphasizes Amory's attempt to construct a coherent version of himself here.

calls “the final horizon of hermeneutics” (92)? It is to insist that it knows, to produce excess meaning where there is none to be found: the narrator tells us, “that [the scene] meant something definite he knew” (111); in the alley, Amory also “*knew, for the half instant that the gong tanged and hummed, that it was the face of Dick Humbird*” (116, emphasis in original). When confronted with reason’s outside, Amory produces a convenient mirror, allowing him, as James argues, to manage contradiction, as “Dick’s loss becomes the event around which Amory discovers [the] consoling discourse” of history and warfare (James 16). Amory’s recourse to escape this other limit is to distinguish himself from the crowd through classism, sexism, and xenophobia, a remarkable insight on Fitzgerald’s part as to what may motivate these hysterical chauvinisms. From the troubling irony of Wilde, showing that experiential development is but a convenient narrative convention, Amory retreats to Wells for his sanity, “and if he won’t do I’ll read Rupert Brooke” (118).

Such a retreat, however, far from concretizing Amory’s subjectivity as coherent, heterosexual, and masculine, will only multiply its productions from a variety of discursive angles. Amory’s recourse to Wells and Brooke, and the section’s resolution, takes place in a setting Amory and Tom share. They also share discomfort over the troubling episode. When Amory returns, Tom is relieved, having had “a hell of a dream” that Amory was in trouble (118). Later, Tom sees someone looking at Amory through the window pane, who vanishes when Amory turns around: “‘It’s gone now,’ came Tom’s voice after a second in a still terror. ‘Something was looking at you’” (119). As a reproduction of Amory’s strange encounter, Tom’s witnessing of the witnessing of Amory occurs on a register different from Amory’s own. Instead of historical and

perceptive, Tom's is affective, occurring in a dream and through an irrational momentary vision of pure fear. Far from being simply the rational subject that he hopes to be, Amory becomes the screen onto which variations of subjectivity are projected: he is at once the dialectically constructed version of himself he tries to uphold, but also the affective Amory caught in a drama of queer desire.

These multiple productions continue in the end of the section, with Amory relating the story of his strange encounter:

And he gave Tom the story. It was midnight when he finished, and after that, with all lights burning, two sleepy, shivering boys read to each other from 'The New Machiavelli,' until dawn came up out of Witherspoon Hall, and the *Princetonian* fell against the door, and the May birds hailed the sun on last night's rain. (119)

Here, Amory narrates the overlapping witness passages, as if to domesticate its events by turning its affects into a juvenile ghost story: the boys shiver, as if scared, and read to each other.²⁴ At the same time, however, we are not given the semantic content of Amory's narration, but only its performance's affects, which are at once evocative of the safe homosociality of the *Bildungsroman* and suggestive of an erotic encounter: Amory *gives* Tom the story, a verb that connotes an intersubjective transmission of tangibility and ownership, rather than the more innocuous "to tell," which suggests only a performance of narrative that preserves the telling subject. Amory's "giving" goes on until midnight, after which the lights are burning, evoking passion, and the boys become

²⁴ Wells' *The New Machiavelli* follows the life of Richard Remington, a man frustrated by his society's devotion to Victorian social codes. According to Richard Hauer Costa, the novel is a "pessimistic commentary on the chances of idealism when in conflict... against irrational impulses within the idealist"

“sleepy” and “shivering,” descriptors that also suggest post-coital denouement. While Amory’s story and its ensuing affects are attempts to code his mistakes into the reliable discourse of “experience,” his productions of subjectivity are again multiplied by affective registers that surround him.

Similar queer practices of desire that multiply the productions of subjectivity persist as the affect of the crowd that Amory refuses to think. This occurs in no place more apparently than in his final moment of disgust before his “conversion” to socialism which, as we have seen, constitutes the dialectical overcoming of elitism, portending his final articulation of selfhood, complete in its professions of incompleteness (and reinforced by the title of this final chapter, “The Egotist Becomes a Personage”). As Amory stands on the street in New York, with “the heavy roaring of a rising crowd and the interlaced clatter of many voices” behind him, he moves to the side to let the “throng” pass him by (255). Amory’s disdain for the “scattering of people,” the “dense strolling mass,” and the “thick crowd” that emerges from the theatre is observable in the description, focalized through Amory, of the city’s lack of vitality: “New York seemed not so much awakening as turning over in its bed” (255). This is a vision of the city’s impersonality as “unpleasant” and “ghastly,” of people jammed together in the “stinking crush of the subway,” people “too hot or too cold, tired, worried” (255). Imagining the disgusting lives that these poor abjected urbanites lead, Amory offers some compensation in the separation of the sexes:

It was not so bad where there were only men or else only women; it was

(64). To this extent, the presence of Wells’ novel mirrors Amory’s own naïve idealism, while also evoking the irrational and Byronic impulses that he attempts to contain. See also Esty, pages 30-1.

when they were vilely herded that it all seemed so rotten. It was some shame that women gave off at having men see them tired and poor – it was some disgust that men had for women who were tired and poor. It was dirtier than any battle-field he had seen, harder to contemplate than any actual hardship moulded of mire and sweat and danger, it was an atmosphere wherein birth and marriage and death were loathesome, secret things. (256)

Hyperbolically, poverty and cultural stagnation become worse than the horrific deaths of World War One, the material instantiation of that which cannot be thought (“harder to contemplate”), merely an “atmosphere” that renders invisible and occult the primary markers of subjective social development (“birth and marriage and death”). If among these illicit and unthinkable people relations between men and women are so corrupted that their only offspring is shame and disgust, Amory touches on the unthought of the dialectic between the sexes without giving it its proper due. What does it mean for it to be “not so bad” when there are “only men or else only women”? This is the secret question that this text cannot help but ask, over and over again. For Amory, the spectre of gender segregation is a safety he can retreat to because it signifies only, and conveniently, two boys reading Wells together, learning to become heroes of the novel of saturation. What he resists seeing, and what the novel compels us to notice, is same-sex desire as the other limit of subject-formation, where “birth and marriage and death” are mere conventions in narrative development that must repress the multiplications of seemingly unified subjectivity that results from queer desire.

The Great Gatsby

It is no coincidence that *Gatsby* begins with an epigraph from the fictional Thomas Parke D'Invilliers: "Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;/ If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,/ Till she cry 'Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover,/ I must have you!'" A more glaring *crie-de-coeur* for the acquisitive pursuer of last limits might not seem possible than these lines, encouraging their implied listener to stop at nothing to win the love of his desire's object. If this imperative seems at one with Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy, however, it should seem incongruous with Nick Carraway's less-than-successful romances, whose exigencies are delivered through a panicked oscillation between despair and feigned detachment. Moreover, the placing of D'Invilliers' name at the novel's outset not only indexes the playfulness of this narrative, in contradistinction to the professed seriousness of its narrator's tone, but it prompts us to consider the hidden presence of the name's bearer throughout the pages of *Gatsby*. I am suggesting, in other words, that the relationship between Amory and Tom, which signifies the eruption of queer desire and the attempt to mask it, is a productive matrix for reading the relationship between Nick and Gatsby. (And for that matter, so are the relationships between Latour and Vaillant, and especially between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry.) The parallels are striking, if oblique: just as Tom is the "occasion" for Amory's affected aestheticism and epigram-making, Gatsby is the occasion for the outbreak of Nick's narrative desire and his own queer "epigrams," those terse and hackneyed nuggets of homespun wisdom that keep popping up ("life is much more successfully looked at from a single window" [4], to name just one); just as Amory likes Tom "for being clever and literary without effeminacy or affectation," an injunction that

makes queer desire present by declaiming it, Nick likes Gatsby for being romantically responsive without the “flabby impressionability” that is said to debase so much passion; and just as Amory requires a “convenient mirror” to reflect his own affectations as hetero-masculine subject-formation, Nick requires a convenient readership to reflect back faithfully his own desired version of selfhood, a safe alibi that will allow him to admire without being presumed to adore. As with our reading of *Paradise*, the aim here is not to “out” Nick or to suggest that sexuality occupies a primary position in this novel.²⁵

Rather, as a starting point, it *is* to suggest that Nick goes to great lengths to resolve his story dialectically, and this resolution comes at the cost of deviant desire, the foreclosure of which does not exhaust its sudden and unresolved eruptions. As we will see, it is Nick, like Amory, who ends up doing most of the “strutting” in this novel, performing lavishly in defiance of his professed commitments to realism and narrative efficiency, and thereby evoking the virtual other limit of desire and of writing.²⁶

²⁵ Again, this goes for *Passing*'s Irene as well.

²⁶ Keath Fraser's groundbreaking study (1979) is the first to take note of the implied homoeroticism between Nick and the artist McKee (68). For Fraser, Nick's seemingly innocuous observations both disclose and conceal the play of sexuality in the novel, which, when we pay attention to the “curious conjunctions” (64) that Nick proffers in supposed innocence, turns *Gatsby* into “a narrative of potency and impotency, of jealous sex and Platonic love” (65). Some critics who take up these observations, however, read the novel's sexual implications as an end in itself. Edward Wasiolek, for instance, argues that both Nick and Gatsby suffer from “repressed homosexuality,” explaining Nick's intense feelings for Gatsby as “the sympathy of one homosexual for another” (18). The upshot of Wasiolek's psychologizing of both characters is to treat them as real people with real sexual identities that must be revealed by critical analysis. Frances Kerr, similarly, conflates gender and sexuality in her reading, while also psychologizing the novel in terms of Fitzgerald's biography. Still, Kerr suggests that Nick's narrative mode is a performance of hetero-masculine desire (409) that allows him the freedom to imagine “escaping to a different kind of masculinity altogether, one that can accommodate his ‘feminine’ emotional excesses and his occasional, casual attraction to men” (411). This argument at least takes us to the starting point of an analysis of this “other” mode of desire that cannot be grasped from the vantage point of hegemonic sexuality, gender, and realist character development and resolution.

To the extent that these critics consider Nick as a deceiver of both himself and of the reader, the history of *Gatsby*'s sexuality is an outgrowth of a critical tradition that begins in the 1950s, which recognizes the irony in Nick's narrative voice. In addition to establishing *Gatsby* as the novel of selection, Miller compares Nick to Niel Herbert of Cather's *A Lost Lady* to demonstrate the irony of a protagonist who “carries within himself an illusion” (77). (According to Robert Seguin, Fitzgerald read *A Lost Lady* in 1924 while he was writing *Gatsby*, after which he wrote to Cather to acknowledge his debt [Seguin 920-

Let us therefore imagine that Nick represses not some sexual imperative that would be legible under a regime of signifying identities but that he is the novel's occasion for repressing the other limit of desire for its narration to cohere and resolve, an occasion that exposes such fragile coherence as a performance. But what does this performance look like, and how does it operate? As in *Paradise*, World War I forms the backdrop for a fractured world, the overcoming of which provides a narrative *telos* to which Nick looks for dialectical resolution. In short, Nick adopts a pose of post-war cynicism, disgusted with the gaudiness of contemporary material culture. A culturally alienated soldier returned to a fallen world in which he can no longer believe, Nick shares an ostensible authenticity with Gatsby, in that both are isolated from others. Set apart from others, Nick experiences solitude as a kind of compensation, insofar as being distinct from others may seem to imply psychological and characterological wholeness. As the price that must be paid for an authentic existence, solitude is the theme Nick tells about himself and about Gatsby, and which will ultimately connect them as culturally disjointed hetero-normative veterans.

We see this theme throughout the entire narrative. Nick's opening monologue casts him as a loner, unfortunately and accidentally privy to "the secret griefs of wild, unknown men" (1), snobbishly derisive of "privileged glimpses into the human heart," except when it comes to Gatsby (2). We see it in Nick's cryptic reference in Myrtle's apartment to being "the casual watcher in the darkening streets, . . . looking up and

21].) Stallman, calling Nick's identity "[c]onfused and divided" (qtd. in Tredell 63), labels Nick "a defunct archpriest in the confessional-box, a prig with holier-than-thou airs" (qtd. in Tredell 62). Gary Scrimgeour's 1966 account asserts that Nick "refuses to admit that his alliance with Gatsby, his admiration for the man, results from their sharing the same weakness" (qtd. in Tredell 97). For Scrimgeour, Nick is the self-deceived and dishonest narrator who comes to learn nothing by the story's end.

wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (35). As a reference to Nick’s own narratology,²⁷ this passage suggests that Nick understands himself as both of the world, and in a privileged position outside of it, alienated sufficiently to comment upon it. We see it in Nick’s meditation on his age – “Thirty – the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair” (135) – and in his final, solitary contemplation of the island, emptied, through a backwards temporal telescoping, of people and of culture (180). Solitude also persists in Nick’s descriptions of Gatsby: from his first glimpse of him staring at the green light, apparently “content to be alone” (20), to his position as sober non-participant in the dancing at the first party Nick attends, “standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes” (50), to Nick’s feeling, after the murder, “of scornful solidarity between Gatsby and me against them all” (165).

To the extent that Nick tells the story of Gatsby’s failed attempt to recapture a fantasy of social integration before the war, we might say that Gatsby, for Nick, embodies a failed line of flight from solitude, and therefore, a failed line of flight from the condition of modernism itself (insofar as dialectical modernism in Nick’s story *is* this cultural fracture).²⁸ In this sense, *The Great Gatsby* lays bare the irony behind Amory’s

²⁷ This passage has attracted a wealth of scholarly attention over the years. Fred Carlisle writes in 1966 that this scene merges Nick the participant with Nick the observer (353), an important step in the dramatization of making the novel’s “unifying centre” (351). For both Barrett and Schreier, this passage underlines Nick’s narratological ambivalence, either a moment of simultaneous enchantment with and revulsion toward Gatsby’s world (Schreier 164), or one more example of Nick dissociating himself from his own life (Barrett 548). Writing in 2007, John Hilgart argues that this passage constitutes the most “poignant moment of self-exposure in the novel,” in which Nick creates a “spectatorial self” to understand his self in the apartment, “disabled by [Lacanian] lack,” as “full and satisfied” (100). Hilgart, however, notes that Nick the narrator understands and comments knowingly on his former self’s illusions (101).

²⁸ I borrow this phrase from Casarino, whose argument on *Moby-Dick* centres around “Ahab’s failed line of flight from capital” (104).

final gesture in *Paradise*: the pose of the solitary artist, fractured so as to be isolated from his generation, is a pose of authenticity that seeks resolution in the failure to overcome nostalgic longings.

Nick's narratological strategy, however, is dual: he wavers between the seemingly independent registers of romance and irony, of solitary contemplation and mocking wit. Critics have long suggested that the relationship between these registers is one of (sometimes productive) antagonism, in which Nick uses irony to distance himself from the sudden outbreak of emotional cathexis or something of this sort. Stouck and Giltrow are exemplary on this point, arguing that Nick, both attracted to and repelled by Gatsby and the gaudiness he represents, deploys maxims "grounded in paternal authority and wisdom" as a device to regulate his strange attraction to "riotous excursions" for which he has so much condemnation (487).²⁹ Indeed, Nick's entire narration appears to be designed to position himself as an outsider, emotionally uninvested in the post-war world of inauthenticity. Thus, Nick speaks in sardonic humour, wild hyperbole, and trite generalizations to construct a witty persona detached from the narrative action. He calls the war from which he has just returned, "that delayed Teutonic migration" (3), exaggerates that his books on investments promise "to unfold the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew" (4), that the man who asks him for

²⁹ David Stouck also writes in 1971 that Nick turns to the pastoral mode to overcome the dialectic between romance and irony, insofar as "vivid romantic descriptions do not always yield to ironic awareness, but sometimes blossom into brief, fantastic daydreams" (67). These fantasies allow Nick to escape reality for a time, achieving a sort of narrative suspension in which acceptance, rejection, and withdrawal from the world are all in play (67). For Barrett, Nick vacillates between the two narratological impulses of reporting and the universal, of factual observation and artistic rendering (548). For Seguin, Nick "attributes *ressentiment* to all those around Gatsby," while reserving "the more lyrical and romantic registers" for Gatsby and himself (924). Finally, for Hilgart, these contradictions in tone and style *are* Nick's technique, which he uses to mount a critique of commodity culture (88). Nick's lyrical conceits, that is, are usually followed by a realist deflation of the description, evoking the reader's desire only to frustrate it, and thus mimicking the commodity form and its empty promise of consumer fulfillment (94).

directions in West Egg makes him feel like “a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler” (4), an over-insistence that he feels at home here (“as I walked on I was lonely no longer” [4]). He displays his wit about Tom and Daisy – “They had spent a year in France for no particular reason, and then drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together” (6) – to demonstrate his condemnation of their vacuous idleness, exaggerates Tom’s overly masculine body to suggest that he is an aging brute (7), elides the servants in their house – “the four cocktails just in from the pantry” (10) – to show how false is their world of empty material comforts.³⁰ Nick’s irony has perhaps its most consistent expression in the constant reversion to maxims that Stouck and Giltrow point out, which package the world into digestible bits of trite wisdom:³¹ “most affectations conceal something eventually, even though they don’t in the beginning” (57), “No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart” (96), “It is invariably saddening to look through new eyes at things upon which you have expended your own powers of adjustment” (104), among others. These generalizations are a way for Nick to understand, for instance, Gatsby’s excessive desire, to package its lavishness as consistent with the world as he sees it.

If Nick employs these linguistic strategies to exempt himself from emotional involvement, I resist the notion that his lyrical register is a result of the spontaneous

³⁰ Nick further exaggerates the possibility of romance so as to undercut it when in New York with Tom – “We drove over to Fifth Avenue, so warm and soft, almost pastoral, on the summer Sunday afternoon that I wouldn’t have been surprised to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner” (28) – and, at least initially, displays his scorn for the lavish consumption at Gatsby’s first party, again eliding the servants to highlight the falsity of the atmosphere – “A tray of cocktails floated at us through the twilight” (43) – and ironizing the partygoers’ drunken amazement: “I had taken two finger-bowls of champagne, and the scene had changed before my eyes into something significant, elemental, and profound” (47).

³¹ Stouck and Giltrow argue that this is a speaking style that Nick adopts from his father, whose maxim – “Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone...just remember that all the people in the world haven’t had the advantages you’ve had” (1) – begins the novel (486).

eruption of emotional indulgence which he must quell to maintain his detached objectivity. As we have seen, the moments in which Nick's voice seems to display the most romance are rhetorically useful to his dialectical project of storytelling. One more example will suffice. As Nick finishes describing the first party at Gatsby's, he insists that the events he has reported up to this point "were merely casual events in a crowded summer, and, until much later, they absorbed me infinitely less than my personal affairs" (55-6). Whether we choose to believe Nick is less important than a careful consideration of his rhetoric, which seems overly concerned with demonstrating his emotional distance from Gatsby's party. Fine. We have suspected as much already. But his account of these "personal affairs" elicits one of the most passionate moments of seemingly sincere lyricism the text has to offer. Nick tells of imagining romantic encounters with women he spies on the street, until he feels a "haunting loneliness" in sympathy with the "poor young clerks" who dine alone (56), culminating in the following description:

Again at eight o'clock, when the dark lanes of the Forties were deep with throbbing taxicabs, bound for the theater district, I felt a sinking in my heart. Forms leaned together in the taxis as they waited, and voices sang, and there was laughter from unheard jokes, and lighted cigarettes outlined unintelligible gestures inside. Imagining that I, too, was hurrying toward gayety and sharing their intimate excitement, I wished them well. (57)

Sad as his loneliness may seem, Nick is *performing* solitude for us (note that he is careful to place himself away from the "theater district"), acting the desire for cultural and sexual integration (the erotic implications of this passage should not go unnoticed:

"unintelligible gestures," "intimate excitement," "throbbing taxicabs" that are "hurrying

toward gayety”). If Nick uses a moment of passion to illustrate his cultural alienation, and also to regulate his passion for Gatsby’s party, then it appears that the critics have it wrong: neither Nick’s irony *nor* his romance locates “true” moments of emotional sincerity.

Rather than searching for such sincerity in a narrative that is so layered with irony as to all but exclude its possibility, it is more productive to contend with Nick as the novel’s occasion for wishing possible the affectations of sincerity without the concomitant emotional intimacy. Nick, in other words, is attached to his pose of detachment, trying, like Amory, to pull ever closer to Gatsby while maintaining the allegorical distance necessary to narrate it as a relationship of the masculine overcoming of post-war solitude. And as with Amory, Nick’s affective performances unwittingly open up multiple registers of the production of subjectivities. One feature of Nick’s narrating strategy is his “must have” statements, which occur when he makes assumptions about events he has not seen, but knows “must have” happened for one reason or another. Some of these occur as Nick’s retrospective attempts to fill in gaps in his knowledge, as with his assertion that Myrtle’s sister Catherine “must have broken her rule against drinking” the night of the car accident (156), or that, based on where and when Wilson was seen during his murderous search for Gatsby, he “must have been tired and walking slowly” (160). Other times, Nick uses it as a jumping-off point for one of his lyrical departures: “Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets” (35). Given the use to which Nick puts these lyrical moments, as we have seen, it is important to keep in mind that “must have” betrays Nick’s impulse to establish a

plausible story where there is no basis for one, even when it is couched in the language of meditative or romantic poesis. This is key, because “must have” surfaces in some of the most significant passages of Nick’s narration, passages that go a long way to cementing Nick’s vision of himself and Gatsby as complicit and alone in a failed and normalized project of cultural recuperation. The first of these occurs during Gatsby and Daisy’s re-encounter:

Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams – not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. (95-6)

The lyrical tone in this passage is unmistakable, from its images of striving (“tumbled short,” “thrown himself”), to its exuberant metaphors (“every bright feather”), to its syntactical repetition that suggests reaching for the inarticulable (“beyond her, beyond everything”). Oddly, however, the passage puts this lyricism to use as insistence on the failure of Gatsby’s romantic ideals. Rather than devoting it to romantic ends, in other words, Nick directs his lyricism toward realism, not in the sense of verisimilitude, but of the inevitability of thwarted dreams. Herein lies the paradox of Nick’s narration: the teleology that it imposes on Gatsby’s narrative arc provides closure for Nick through its lack of closure.

Such closure is observable in Nick’s depiction of Gatsby’s death, which makes use of another “must have” to establish the teleology of this failure:

I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe [a message from Daisy] would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he *must have* felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He *must have* looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. (161, my emphasis)

Again, Nick's ironic wit is suspiciously absent from this passage that undercuts the romance of Gatsby's naïve dreams. Here, as Nick states his belief that Gatsby has come to recognize the failure of his ideals, he enshrines this failure in a series of images that would not be out of place in romantic poetry: the sky, the leaves, the rose, the sunlight, the grass. As Nick insists on Gatsby as a figure for the failed line of flight from the modernist crisis of cultural alienation and solitude, he summons the very rhetorical tropes that this crisis, one might think, would render unworkable.

On the final page of the novel, then, Nick makes Gatsby stand for humanity's naïve condition of thinking it possible to escape the crisis of a fallen world by recapturing the past, the "transitory enchanted moment" toward which Nick's attention turns, in which man came "face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" (180). Gatsby, too, "did not know that [the dream] was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city" (180). As Nick seems to romanticize the long-dead possibility of not knowing the prefigured failure of ideals, he thus positions himself as uniquely aware of this crisis, the lone survivor left to tell the tale, since Gatsby dies soon after he "must have" come to a similar realization.

In this sense, the novel's ending unites Gatsby and Nick as inseparable and mutually necessary sides of the modern: the failed striving to overcome crisis, which results in death (Gatsby), and surviving past death to tell the story (Nick). Nick and Gatsby are ostensibly conjoined as dialectical closure, taking the form of cultural alienation signified by solitude, and the agency to narrate this story from its critical outside.

There is, however, something else going on. After all, like the surmised scene of Gatsby's death, the ending is rendered through two "must have" moments: "for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent," and Gatsby's dream "must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it" (180). If Nick's irony appears to recede with the "orgastic future" upon which he meditates, Fitzgerald's certainly does not. The resonance of "must have" links this scene to its earlier uses, which, as we have seen, highlight Nick's insistence on filling an interpretive gap. What, then, does this insistence cover up in this final scene? If the ending of Nick's narrative connects him with Gatsby in such a way as to produce dialectical closure, where might we locate, to use Casarino's terminology, the waste of this dialectical process? Nick produces this final lesson as a lesson about the folly of approaching a last limit as if it were the other limit. To win Daisy's affection, or to dock and colonize the "fresh, green breast of the new world," he tells us, is already to have pushed this limit forward into perpetual futurity, to defer the satisfaction of desire indefinitely, producing further dialectical desires and projects. And yet Nick's own narrative does not heed this lesson, because it uses this moral to overcome cultural fracture dialectically. Nick's final sentence, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (180), is, in one sense, his version of "I know

myself, but that is all,” exposing the limits of selfhood as a means to delivering the fulfillment of representation. If the human condition is to lie in wait for meaning, it is Nick who comes away with this knowledge, concretizing the deferral of last limits as the outcome of his story, and positioning himself as uniquely aware of it.

As with *Paradise*, however, there is an altogether different limit that Nick’s dialectical narrative tries to bury. If for Nick solitude signifies post-war alienation, its virtual other limit is not the overcoming of such alienation, at which Gatsby is alleged to have failed. Rather, this other limit appears in registers of affective modes of sensitivity and sensation that are legible through instances of same-sex desire and which multiply the productions of Nick’s subjectivity. Nick’s attempt to narrate a relationship of disembodied homosociality with Gatsby unwittingly produces a queer space of the closet that both characters share. In this closet of Nick’s own making, bodies resonate through an affective register that undermines the commitment to indicative knowledge upon which his storytelling project relies.³²

We begin, perhaps unsurprisingly, at the novel’s opening, where Nick is quick to denigrate “the intimate revelations of young men” and their terms of expression for being “usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions” (2). Conveniently, Nick holds himself above such obfuscation, casting himself as possessed of the knowledge to render it “obvious.” Moreover, Nick blames his father’s advice – “Whenever you feel like criticizing any one, . . . just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the

³² Eve Sedgwick conceives of the closet as a structure of relations, “the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo-heterosexual definition” (3), a structure that forms a crucial theoretical backdrop for my analysis of Nick’s performance. For Sedgwick, the point is not to locate and identify a particular closet’s structure, but to think through “closetedness” as “a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence” (3), a strategy that will go a long way toward understanding some of Nick’s narrative silences, especially when it comes to scenes concerning male bodies.

advantages you've had'" (1) – for subjecting him to such lies by having instilled in him an unfortunate generosity: "In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me" (1). And yet, Nick also tells us that he has been "turning over" this advice for years, and that he "understood that [his father] meant a great deal more than that" (1). Reverberating behind this statement is the silent utterance of another "must have," in which Nick assumes and extrapolates what his father must have meant by this terse proverbial statement. It would seem, in other words, that Nick, in producing this version of his father, is responsible for opening himself up to intimacy with men.

Still, we need to dig deeper, for Nick tells us that he is exposed to "curious natures," to "abnormal mind[s]," to "the secret griefs of wild, unknown men" (1), characterizations that suggest queerness of one sort or another.³³ Contrary to what he would like us to believe, Nick's relationship to this queerness is not as dispassionate or objective as it might seem. After all, if the suppressions of the intimate revelations of young men are "obvious" to Nick, it must mean that he is well acquainted with this sort of intimacy and that they are not suppressions at all. In short, the terms in which Nick regulates his relationship to deviance raise more questions than they answer:

Most of the confidences were unsought – frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon. (1)

Does "Most" suggest that *some* of the confidences *were* sought out? And if so, what are we to make of the instantaneous elision of these, in favour of the confidences that were

³³ Fraser argues that Nick's calling these men "abnormal" indicates that they are sexually attracted to him (60).

unsolicited? In these, moreover, Nick detects some “unmistakable sign” that indicates the approach of an intimate disclosure. As with “obvious,” we are compelled to ask what it is that makes the advent of this intimacy so “unmistakable.” How can a revelation quiver? We cannot know, but the image suggests emotional involvement counter to the detached objectivity that Nick professes about himself. What is the “horizon” that Nick conjures here? Is it a last limit, bearing some confidence that might be temporarily disavowed once disclosed, or is it the other limit, beyond which lies an unthinkable world of radically different intimacy? The point is that for someone who claims to be so far removed from male intimacy, Nick is an excellent reader of its signs, is, in fact, overly attuned to them.

Such attunement suggests what we might term a queer sensitivity, queer insofar as it delineates a mode of perception, even of reading, that operates on the register of affect rather than indicative knowledge. Early on, Gatsby bears signs of a similar sensitivity to Nick: “there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away” (2). If Nick, however, is quick to mark Gatsby’s talent for sensing that which is otherwise imperceptible, he is even quicker to name it as decidedly unqueer:

This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of the ‘creative temperament’ – it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again.

(2)

Nick wants, as it were, to have his cake and eat it too by making sure that we know that the responsiveness for which he admires Gatsby is neither decadence (“flabby impressionability”) nor pointless sensitivity (“creative temperament”), but a teleological and efficient impulse directed toward overcoming solitude by attaining Daisy.³⁴ The issue, however, is not whether or not Gatsby indulges this sensitivity, but the ways in which Nick’s sudden declaiming of it multiplies productions of subjectivity by marking what it professes not to notice. (This is, after all, Gatsby-for-Nick, the only Gatsby available to us.) Nick’s constant denials of queer excess and queer sensitivity construct a Sedgwickian closet where speech acts of rigidly enforced silences demarcate a space to contain, and ostensibly absent, these queer practices of desire.

One such silence surrounds the scene with the artist McKee, whose erotic implications, first noted by Keath Fraser, arrive by innuendo:

‘Come to lunch some day,’ he suggested, as we groaned down in the elevator.

‘Where?’

‘Anywhere.’

³⁴ Nick’s own narrative, as we have seen, is “flabbier” than he might allow, given that he spends nearly two pages justifying such acceptability. Similarly, although Nick mocks classist decadence by hyperbolically stylizing the elision of servants at Tom and Daisy’s house and at Gatsby’s party, he is equally scornful in his assessment of the labouring classes, represented by George and Myrtle Wilson, whose breakdown of vitality is in concert with their barren setting, the Valley of Ashes. George is “spiritless” and “anaemic” (25), and, as Fraser notes, seemingly impotent, at least according to the double-entendre of his wife’s observation that he knows nothing about “breeding” (34), as if he is one step away from becoming one of the “ash-gray men” himself (23). If George suffers from a wasting-away, Myrtle embodies “waste” in the opposite, yet equally corrupted, sense: over-expenditure without return. Unlike George’s emptiness, she has “an immediately perceptible vitality about her,” but so much vitality that it is “as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering” (25). Like the “flabby impressionability” for which Nick condemns so many of his generation, she has “surplus flesh,” even if she carries it “sensuously as some women can” (25). If Wilson barely clings to his physical existence, Myrtle has an overload of physicality and sensuality, but without beauty. Accordingly, Nick associates her apartment with the kind of gaudy death-in-life that permeates his vision of the post-war east: crowded with furniture “entirely too large for it,” as if

‘Keep your hands off the lever,’ snapped the elevator boy.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Mr. McKee with dignity, ‘I didn’t know I was touching it.’

‘All right,’ I agreed, ‘I’ll be glad to.’

...I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands.

‘Beauty and the Beast...Loneliness...Old Grocery Horse...Brook’n Bridge....’

Then I was lying half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station, staring at the morning *Tribune*, and waiting for the four o’clock train. (37-8, ellipses in original)

Conveniently, Nick has already told us that he was drunk the day of this incident, “so everything that happened has a dim, hazy cast over it” (29), although he narrates the scenes in Myrtle’s apartment that precede it with a suspiciously higher degree of descriptive and factual precision. The innuendo in the elevator is followed by the scene in McKee’s bedroom, which are both marked by a silence: the closeting of a desire that Nick will not name. The entire passage resembles the bedroom scene in which Amory and Tom calm themselves down by reading Wells together, a scene ostensibly about the juvenile enjoyment of books as a step toward realist self-actualization. Here, Nick and McKee share another series of texts whose titles correlate with Nick’s professed project of narrating and overcoming solitude: “Beauty and the Beast,” perhaps Daisy and Tom’s dysfunctional relationship, emblematic of the East’s emptiness, perhaps the ugliness that

to illustrate the folly of consuming wastefully for its own sake, and a table populated by the “scandal magazines of Broadway” (29).

Nick detects underneath the gaudiness of the modern world; “Loneliness”; “Old Grocery Horse,” signifying an aging and outmoded technology; “Brook’n Bridge,” whose homonymic association with “broken bridge” suggests communication severed. These metaphorical resonances, however, are at odds with the metonymic positioning of the photographs, which suggests not two men commiserating about their loneliness, but an excessive sharing of an unnamed desire. McKee holds the “great portfolio in his hands” and seems to give the titles to Nick, each followed by an ellipsis whose silences resonate as the unspoken aftermath of each. Does McKee speak these titles? Does Nick? Are they narrated in retrospect? Or, is it all three at once, a shared space in which Nick and McKee give them to each other by speaking them, and their accompanying pauses, in unison?

What we do know is that the scene with Nick and McKee occurs immediately before the scene of Gatsby's first party, where Nick and Gatsby meet face-to-face for the first time. In some senses, the bedroom scene prefigures the relationship that is about to begin, and about which we have already been reading. Nick’s wavering between Gatsby-as-fraud and Gatsby-as-genuine-article, as we have seen, is temporarily arrested when Nick discovers his excess is directed toward obtaining Daisy: “He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor” (78). For Nick, Gatsby’s careful way of choosing his words (48), his collection of memorabilia to prove his fantastical stories (67), his transformation into “Jay Gatsby” aboard Dan Cody’s yacht (98) are redeemable because they are functional, designed to fulfill a lack, making Gatsby a pursuer of last limits as he tries to overcome his alienating solitude. The togetherness that Nick thus imagines between himself and Gatsby, which he sees as a union of two

men sharing a unique experience of solitude, but which also conceals a closeted space of queerness, finds its fullest expression in and after Gatsby's death, because the failure of his line of flight is integral to their communion. The scene depicting Gatsby's dead body in his swimming pool presents the duality of these two modes of togetherness:

There was a faint, barely perceptible movement of the water as the fresh flow from one end urged its way toward the drain at the other. With little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves, the laden mattress moved irregularly down the pool. A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg of transit, a thin red circle in the water.

It was after we started with Gatsby toward the house that the gardener saw Wilson's body a little way off in the grass, and the holocaust was complete. (162)

Nick is careful to emphasize the diminutive modesty of the signs surrounding Gatsby's body: the "barely perceptible" movement of the water that merely "urges" toward the drain, the "little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves," the "small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface," the "touch of a cluster of leaves" that revolves the mattress "slowly." All conspire to depict Gatsby's death as consummate with some larger narrative or dialectical order, a giving-back to nature in a death that Nick thereby deems proper and productive.³⁵ As the "fresh flow" of water moves toward the drain to

³⁵ See the discussion of Cather's *O Pioneers!* in Chapter 1. The narrator of *Pioneers*, similarly, tries to enshrine the murder of Emil and Marie in a larger dialectical framework that settles its queerness. Also, compare Jim Burden's metaphorical resolution of Shimerda's death in *My Ántonia*.

evoke cleansing or renewal, the repetition of “accidental” suggests that the mattress moves as if on its own, as Gatsby surrenders his agency to the larger forces of death and rebirth. Indeed, the most conspicuous thing about this description is the absence of Gatsby’s body: it is nowhere to be found, metonymized only by the mattress, by the water’s flow, by the leaves that trace its outline. As if to insist on the metaphysical propriety of Gatsby’s death, this disappearance, which we might more accurately call an elision, becomes the ultimate achievement of solitude.

The passage, in fact, tries to remove Gatsby and his body from the coarseness of realist presence. Unlike Wilson, whose body is crudely available and named as a body, it is as if Gatsby and Nick are together in a metaphysical realm where bodies do not exist, and where language signifies not through mimetic representation but through delicate, yet unqueer, suggestion. And yet, that other mode of communion, where bodies are ever-present and subjectivities are contingent, also lurks in this scene. As much as Nick tries to disappear Gatsby’s body, its closeting marks its presence, as do the turns of phrase that enshrine it. This is, after all, a description of a “laden” mattress, the noun metonymizing a bed, which recalls the scene in McKee’s apartment; although Nick does not name the body, the past participle “laden” suggests the presence of what lies atop the mattress. (Nick’s narrative, too, is laden – weighed down, burdened – by its anxieties concerning male bodies.) Indeed, the language suggests concealment and irregularity: “barely perceptible,” “shadows,” “irregularly,” “down,” “disturb,” “burden.” If there is a secret anxiety that Nick occults by trying to naturalize it, it makes itself felt, furthermore, in the “fresh flow” of water that “urge[s]” its way toward a drain, an image that allegorizes teleological narrative – the linear expenditure of content – but whose urging highlights

the labour involved in telling a “straight” story. The metonymized bed, burdened by a male body, does not follow this flow, but moves “irregularly down” on an “accidental course,” phrases that suggest deviance. The mattress spins slowly because of “[t]he touch of a cluster of leaves,” which traces, “like the leg of transit, a thin red circle in the water.” This depiction of irregular bodies, flowing liquids, beds, and burdens ends with an image of touching and a simile of a leg, but also of bleeding.

Nick’s poesis, in other words, is not singularly directed toward his teleological goal of exposing the failure of ideals. When we consider the images, words, and their connotations closely, they reveal a closeted register of desire that cares not for the utilitarian ends toward which Nick tries to put this description. Rather than a lyricism of metaphysics and romantic disembodiment, Nick operates through the kind of queer sensitivity for which he has castigated the “flabby impressionability” of the “creative temperament” (2). Like Latour in the cave and Irene atop the Drayton Hotel, Nick must recoil from this register that would destabilize his already unstable subjectivity, by returning suspiciously quickly to the language of realism: his description of Wilson’s body. Nick’s constant and troubled vacillations between closure and the closet thereby expose the labour involved in trying to tell a straight story. Whereas we can track Amory’s encounters with this other limit as occasional and remarkable moments in the plot of *This Side of Paradise*, each a moment of dramatic irony undercutting the protagonist’s security in his self-conception, Nick is constituted *as* this perpetual shifting between these two registers, a multiple subjectivity that queers even his moments of stoicism, as they appear as panicked reactions to same-sex intimacy.

Unlike Fitzgerald's use of Amory Blaine, or Cather's of Jean Latour, for that matter, the ending of *Gatsby* does not indulge Nick's attempts to shut down these multiple productions of subjectivity, however ironically. As we have seen, Nick's musing on Gatsby's failure begins in familiar territory, with a lyrical departure on the inevitability of unfulfilled dreams:

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night. (180)

Commenting on Gatsby's lack of awareness of the harshness of reality ("He did not know"), Nick speaks from a position of putative knowledge, acting as critic and moralist, having survived beyond Gatsby to package his story as a lesson against dreaming too grandly in post-war America. This time, however, the two paragraphs that follow, and end the novel, do something different:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther....And one fine morning—
So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (180)

For the first time, Nick allows himself to be romantic about hope, rather than about its failure. His lyrical departure inhabits Gatsby's position, dispensing with the inconvenience of past failures ("but that's no matter"), looking hopefully toward a future that he has just spent an entire novel showing will never come. Nick abandons the last limit here, finding value in hope independent of its object or its practical odds of success. If this constitutes an alternative mode of belief, it also suggests an alternative mode of storytelling: just as "romantic readiness" (2) no longer has to be directed toward a goal to gain Nick's blessing, his story, it would seem, does need to proceed toward a linear conclusion, as it all but abandons the *telos* it has constructed up to this point.

The final paragraph, then, appears to be another attempt to pull back from the other limit that Nick has once more encountered; only this time, he cannot undo or even suspend it. Fitzgerald shows us, through Nick's discovery, that it does not matter what the end goal is, or what lesson we might invoke to abjure queer eruptions of desire. If hope can be enjoyed in and of itself and teleology can be done away with, Nick is beyond the point of being able to reset his desires with appropriate closure, as if he ever could. The novel ends with Nick's multiplicity on full display. Rather than the dramatic irony that permeates *Paradise*, *Gatsby* queers storytelling itself, suggesting that all attempts at teleology and resolution are panicked reactions to encounters with the other limit of subjectivity, which here, takes the form of same-sex desire.

Tender Is the Night

In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick's story is a fantasy in which Gatsby plays the role of the self-assured and self-centred striver possessing a teleological, efficient, and thoroughly masculine sensitivity, a figure for the capacity for authentic hope that has now passed; Nick, on the other hand, plays the lone survivor left to tell the tale of its demise. The irony, of course, is that Nick's idealized admiration for such ostensible norms marks him as in need of a normal corrective, or a "straight man," as it were. This need, which Nick does not do a very good job of masking, suggests that in Fitzgerald's fiction, the putative "straightness" of stories is but a reaction to encounters with subjugated and illicit registers of desire and of feeling, encounters that queer narrative by compromising its ability to present its objects mimetically and resolve through teleological means. Like Cather's Jim Burden and Larsen's Irene Redfield, Nick is a device for exposing not only the fragility of narrative, but the presence of same-sex desire, often closeted through silences, that forms the virtual other limit of the "conventional" love story. Unlike Jim, who never seems to remark on this curious presence, or Irene, who will stop at nothing to expel it, Nick is unable to sustain the fantasy by the novel's end, but instead gives in, however briefly, to this other limit, splintering his subjectivity across multiple and contradictory registers.

How appropriate, then, that Fitzgerald followed up *Gatsby* with *Tender Is the Night*, a novel centred around a psychoanalyst in the business of reconstituting fractured egos. Dick Diver, the novel's protagonist, is Fitzgerald's occasion for contending with the problem of multiple productions of subjectivity that he explores in *Paradise* and *Gatsby*. Armed with an impressive arsenal of psychoanalytic knowledge and experience,

Dick has already “cured” his wife, Nicole, of her condition when the novel begins, a treatment, we later find out, that merely substitutes one mode of bourgeois subjectivity for another. As the novel fractures and multiplies Dick’s ego against his attempts at control, it extends the queer sensitivity that *Gatsby* raises as a means for discerning identities constituted not by discursive identification, but by vague impressions.

Some early reviewers note the change from Fitzgerald’s earlier work to a Depression scene, in which the hope for recuperation from cultural fracture seems to have disappeared. Philip Rahv (writing in the *Daily Worker*, it should be noted) calls the book “a fearful indictment of the moneyed aristocracy” (79), commenting that Fitzgerald’s attitude toward excessive consumption has changed from “enthusiasm” to “exhaustion” (78). Malcolm Cowley, in a review titled simply “Breakdown,” suggests that Fitzgerald’s admiration for the upper classes “has almost completely vanished; the prevailing tone is one of disillusionment mixed with nostalgia” (84), and further, “A whole class has flourished and decayed and suddenly broken into fragments” (84). This shift in tone, moreover, connects to Fitzgerald’s technical experiments. Whereas in *Gatsby* Fitzgerald maximizes the irony of a narrating “I” attempting to achieve psychological and cultural coherence, in *Tender* he tacks the other way, constructing a third-person, yet subjective, narrator to explore the virtual other limit of psychological personhood. In a novel manifestly about psychological breakdown and psychotherapy, that is, Fitzgerald uses a de-psychologized perspective to disrupt subjectivity. In short, *Tender* is preoccupied with the undoing of personhood and asks how to render the disappearance of self in narratological terms.

Despite such formal suspicion of subjective coherence, if this novel depicts the collapse of a class that earlier novels praised or parodied, critics have long seen Dick Diver as the embodiment of this collapse. Richard Lehan, writing in 1966, notes that “*Tender Is the Night* is a novel about the failure of an individual – it is also a novel about the failure of society” (71), and more baldly, “Dick’s decline parallels the decline of the West. He abandoned the old virtues of his father and dissipated his energies, just as western culture had abandoned the old aristocratic virtues for a crass materialism” (73). Similarly, Milton Stern argues that Dick’s story is a microcosm of American “post-war loss of the kinds of identities associated with stable societies, social altruism, and personal responsibility” (99-100). These critics exemplify a tradition so concerned with making Dick stand for a nation’s collapse that it never interrogates why his failure must be a bad thing.³⁶ Others, rightly, notice gender asymmetries in the novel, demonstrating how Fitzgerald associates the collapse of American integrity with the rise of a consumerist culture embodied by female characters, especially Baby Warren, Nicole Diver, and Rosemary Hoyt: women are closely associated with “the cosmopolitan fluidity exemplified by American tourism, film, and shopping,” and are thus most suited to the fallen world represented in the novel (Brand 137); the novel’s central fear is the feminization of culture, “which forces [men] to live out the lives of women and which purchases the sanity of women at men’s expense” (Fetterley 102-3).

³⁶ Some criticism takes a more nuanced view of the novel, but in the end, extends the same argument. Thus, for Callahan, Dick stands not for a specific class, but for a set of “social and psychological sublimations” (188); what fails is the possibility of a hero larger than historical forces (188). For Grenberg, while Fitzgerald uses the novel to critique a linear conception of history, Dick’s ultimate failure to cure Nicole of her psychosis “is nothing less than the tragic failure of American idealism in the twentieth century” (217).

If national, cultural, and psychological fracture is one of the novel's central tropes, as with his earlier novels Fitzgerald uses the war to signify the inalienable source of such fracture. But whereas in *Paradise* and *Gatsby*, as we have seen, war is also the condition for repair, here, it penetrates the very terms of representation, as if to preclude such an escape. Thus, war images and metaphors dominate the narrative: Dick is said to look back upon his parties "as a general might gaze upon a massacre he had ordered to satisfy an impersonal blood lust" (27); Tommy Barban wants desperately to go to war anywhere ("I haven't seen a paper lately but I suppose there's a war – there always is" [30]); Rosemary is "accustomed to having shell fragments of such events [the Maria Wallis shooting] shriek past her head" (85). The narrative constantly reminds us of the war and its effects – witness the various scenes of soldiers and graveyards marking the dead – without offering a dialectical path to resolution similar to Amory's pursuit of self-knowledge, or Nick's comfortable faith in post-war solitude.

That war signifies fracture is established on the novel's first page, which uses an image of physical struggle as the initiating moment of contemporary materialism:

Before eight a man came down to the beach in a blue bathrobe and with much preliminary application to his person of the chilly water, and much grunting and loud breathing, floundered a minute in the sea. When he had gone, beach and bay were quiet for an hour. Merchantmen crawled westward on the horizon; bus boys shouted in the hotel court. (3)

The man, who will turn out to be Campion, approaches the water during a time of innocence toward which the narrator looks nostalgically, a time without the "notable and fashionable people" who have recently invaded the resort, and when "[t]he hotel and its

bright tan prayer rug of a beach were one” (3). Dressed in a blue bathrobe – Dick later has a dream of war in which “navy blue uniforms crossed a dark plaza” (179) – the man engages in animalistic ritual that signifies violence, discomfort, physical exhaustion (“grunting and loud breathing”), before struggling confusedly (floundering) in the water. As an allegory for battle, the scene gives way, after a period of calm, to the arrival of merchants and the noises of post-war comfort.

The onset of materialism upon which this narrative seizes, at least as focalized through Dick Diver, is marked as the onset of decadence, which the narrator equates with femininity, as Brand and Fetterley argue. Indeed, as Dick attempts to rehabilitate Nicole in his roles as both therapist and husband, Nicole, the “scarcely saved waif of disaster” who brings to Dick “the essence of a continent” (136), comes to represent gaudy consumption. The global systems of commerce that support her shopping are legendary:

For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California; chicle factories fumed and link belts grew link by link in factories; men mixed toothpaste in vats and drew mouthwash out of copper hogsheads; girls canned tomatoes quickly in August or worked rudely at the Five-and-Tens on Christmas Eve; half-breed Indians toiled on Brazilian coffee plantations and dreamers were muscled out of patent right in new tractors – these were some of the people who gave a tithe to Nicole, and as the whole system swayed and thundered onward it lent a feverish bloom to such processes of hers as wholesale buying, like the flush of a fireman’s face holding his post before a spreading blaze. (55)

What begins as an almost comical description of Nicole's largesse and the system that underwrites it turns quickly to social criticism, exposing the Dickensian human toil that global systems of production exert upon the less fortunate. In the post-war internationalist order, the narrator seems to say, feminized materialism is responsible for a network of misery that challenges adequate description or representation – we are told only of “some of the people” who are made to suffer – culminating in a simile that portends collapse in the veneer that the system lends to Nicole's purchasing habits.

Richard Godden argues that Nicole's consumerism is the inevitable consequence of her rehabilitation. As Dick puts her fractured self back together, he does not “cure” her, but simply allows her to forget the threat of incest by becoming the “good” father, teaching her to consume as an alternative model of selfhood (*Fictions* 116). In this sense, Dick's role is “to reduce the paternal threat while maintaining the father's good name,” making him “an agent who extends the logic and imperatives of bourgeois privacy” (*Fictions* 114). Godden's point is that Dick is no radical, looking to push modernization as far as it can go, but a conservative nostalgist, who appears to feel trapped in the regime of feminized consumption while looking for a way out.³⁷ Thus, although Dick wins Nicole, she ends up “wanting to own him, wanting him to stand still forever,” as he is “constantly inundated by a trickling of goods and money” (*Tender* 170). He feels he has been “swallowed up like a gigolo, and somehow permitted his arsenal to be locked up in the Warren safety-deposit vaults” (*Tender* 201).

³⁷ Stern suggests that “Dick is not just young American Dick in the Roaring Twenties: he is also Doctor Diver, who was formed by nineteenth-century forebears and who has some very old-fashioned virtues and ideas of morality” (103). Glenday also argues that while Dick is unable to adapt to “modern conditions,” Nicole is “profoundly centred in the modern,” and quite easily “shakes free of old-world values” (153).

Dick therefore looks to an older, pre-war America for clear and conventional gender roles, in which values were stable and not defined by the market's fickle fluctuations. He sees in the veterans who march past him lamenting "a lost magnificence, a past effort, a forgotten sorrow" a "regret for Abe's death, and his own youth of ten years ago" (200). After his father dies, Dick remembers softly that he "had been sure of what he was, with a deep pride of the two proud widows who had raised him to believe that nothing could be superior to 'good instincts,' honor, courtesy, and courage" (204). For Stern, the Divers represent "the legacy of the idea of America, a dream of goodness and transcendent self. Home, America, is a romantically hypothesized history that is all innocent youth and world redeeming service" (100). Dick's utterance, "'Good-by, my father – good-by, all my fathers'" (205), can therefore be read as a lament for this entire constellation of values. The novel is a story of the failure of Dick's line of flight from this modern crisis: he will not be able to recapture a set of values that is already gone.

Not for lack of trying, however. Rosemary comes to stand for an idealized innocence that Dick would like to obtain, a romanticized virginity that signifies a purer version of the world. He tells her early on, "'You're the only girl I've seen for a long time that actually did look like something blooming'" (22); at their first kiss, Dick is "chilled by [its] innocence" (64). The narrator is complicit in this regard, idealizing her on the novel's first page in a description that suggests pristine childhood innocence and vitality: she appears to have "magic in her pink palms and her cheeks lit to a lovely flame, like the thrilling flush of children after their cold baths in the evening" (3), noticeable because of "the strong young pump of her heart" (4). We are assured, moreover, that she is on the cusp of maturity, as if all but ready to be appropriated by the

right man: “Her body hovered delicately on the last edge of childhood – she was almost eighteen, nearly complete, but the dew was still on her” (4). If Rosemary is therefore a device to signify eroticized innocence, young enough to be uncorrupted, old enough not to run the risk of pedophilia, Dick’s eventual realization that she might not be a virgin (“Do you mind if I pull down the curtain” reverberates in his head, signifying the sex scene between Rosemary and Collis Clay that Dick imagines [88]) is the cost that must be borne for holding such an illusion. Unable to cope with this devastating disclosure of cultural corruption, Dick becomes an ardent pursuer of last limits, seeking to reconstitute his fissured ego. If only he could regain his lost youth, if only he could restore an older, simpler, less materialist version of America, Dick seems to believe, the world would be as it should. As a result, he attends parties in hopes of attracting younger women, in whose faces he sees “the same innocent expectation of the possibilities inherent in the situation and the night,” and where he can pretend “that the world was all put together again” (174).

Dick embodies a crisis in masculinity, but also a crisis in representation. *Paradise* and *Gatsby*, as we have seen, end with an impassioned cry by their protagonists recognizing the limits of realism – an expression that, while attempting to produce closure, cannot exhaust the wasteful eruption of closeted desires and the multiplication of subjectivities. *Tender*, however, ends on a rather different note, and expresses a different crisis, as Dick all but fades out of the narrative entirely, living “almost certainly... in one town or another” (315). As the novel undoes the conventions of discursive subjectivity, it uses the trope of sensitivity as a model of queer, post-identitarian connection, and suggests a new model of reading is necessary for Dick to remain visible as he disappears.

Queerness here, notably for Fitzgerald, is not likely to be found in same-sex desire. The closeted spaces of Amory and Tom's room, of Nick's suggestive yet clandestine scene with McKee, are all but absent in *Tender*. In this world, same-sex desire has already been named by the language of psychoanalysis. The most stark example is Francisco, the young man Dick is charged with "curing," and who has "that typically roguish look in his eyes that homosexuals assume in discussing the subject" (245). This is not to suggest that the narrator's voice here is Fitzgerald's or that such homophobia is rendered without irony or critique. Rather, the point is that same-sex desire does not emerge as the virtual other limit of subject-formation. Instead of the shared joy of excess pleasure that would queer the politically and aesthetically representable subject, same-sex desire is already "homosexuality," a descriptor that codes its affects and potentials as a legible diagnosis of deviance. Similarly, the clearly sexual relationship between Luis Dumphy and Royal Campion marks its own failure, rather than elaborating a space of radical excess or intimacy. Aside from references to their sexuality – Dumphy is "effeminate" (8); McKisco apologizes to both after inadvertently using the word "pansy" (21) – the only direct mention of their relationship occurs when Rosemary comes across Campion crying:

'When you're older you'll know what people who love suffer. The agony. It's better to be cold and young than to love. It's happened to me before but never like this – so accidental – just when everything was going well.'

His face was repulsive in the quickening light. Not by a flicker of her personality, a movement of the smallest muscle, did she betray her sudden

disgust with whatever it was. But Campion's sensitivity realized it and he changed the subject rather suddenly. (41)

In this joyless landscape, same-sex desire can only breed heartbreak, a catastrophe that occurs as if on its own, threatening the pleasure of love at its centre (“so accidental – just when everything was going well”). What is so curious about this passage is not Rosemary's homophobic reaction, nor her (and presumably the narrator's) reticence at naming the object of her disgust (“whatever it was”). What surprises is the narrator's insistence on Rosemary's immediate concealing of her homophobia, and Campion's ability nonetheless to detect it, which forces him to closet his desire by changing the subject.

To this end, the passage suggests that while same-sex desire is not an area of available alterity in this novel, at least not in terms of physicality or sensuality, queerness appears as an alternative mode of understanding that functions on a different register from realist perception. Importantly, Campion's “sensitivity” *realizes* Rosemary's disgust, in the sense of “to make real,” as the ambiguous diction suggests. Her grimace is *made real* by a particular kind of notice that can produce a homophobia that remains unnoticed by realist understanding. Campion's sensitivity is a different organ of attunement, manifesting the real as a product of discursive relations not empirically sensed. Extending the queer experiments for which *Gatsby* uses Nick, the novel marshals sensitivity as an alternative mode of understanding that operates simultaneously with Dick's faith in psychoanalytic knowledge and Rosemary's ostensible coldness and youth (“It's better to be cold and young than to love”). Campion's sensitivity “changes the subject rather suddenly”: it transforms subjectivity into a matter of affective productions.

Dick's subjectivity begins a transformation as well, in a key scene that occurs immediately after Dick discovers that Rosemary might not be a virgin: "With every detail imagined [from Collis Clay's suggestive story], with even envy for the pair's community of misfortune in the vestibule, Dick felt a change taking place within him" (88). As Dick hurries to the studio to confront Rosemary, in what he believes is "a turning point in his life – it was out of line with everything that had preceded it" (91), he encounters an American newspaper seller in terms that query the stability of Dick's selfhood:

After three-quarters of an hour of standing around, he became suddenly involved in a human contact. It was just the sort of thing that was likely to happen to him when he was in the mood of not wanting to see any one. So rigidly did he sometimes guard his exposed self-consciousness that frequently he defeated his own purposes; as an actor who underplays a part sets up a craning forward, a stimulated emotional attention in an audience, and seems to create in others an ability to bridge the gap he has left open. Similarly we are seldom sorry for those who need and crave our pity – we reserve this for those who, by other means, make us exercise the abstract function of pity.

So Dick might, himself, have analyzed the incident that ensued. (92)

Dick, we are told, tries to guard his self-consciousness, an act that seeks privacy by containing the inner self. This strategy, however, turns out to work against itself, unwittingly opening him up to a "sudden" involvement in "human contact." We have seen this before, of course, in Nick Carraway's unwitting invitations of confidence from "wild, unknown men" (1), which begin the process of queering his dialectical narrative.

Here, while the relationship between Dick and the newspaper seller does not suggest eros, there is something about this sudden moment of contact that undermines Dick's commitment to indicative knowledge. After all, the narrator turns to a simile borrowed from acting to describe Dick's counter-productive strategy, suggesting that in this moment, Dick's holding back of the outward expression of interiority is a kind of performance.

Who is this man selling newspapers? Dick assumes he knows immediately, placing him "as one of a type of which he had been conscious since early youth – a type that loafed about tobacco stores," garages, barber shops, and lobbies, which suggests a lack of utility (92). But as much as Dick wants to script him as lower-class and unworthy of attention, he will not be ignored, trying "to fit in his footsteps with Dick's," and "fix[ing] him with eyes that were practically menacing" when Dick will barely answer his questions (92). The man, an American who has been living in Paris since fighting in the war, is an ironic counterpoint to Dick:

'What hotel you staying at?'

Dick had begun laughing to himself – the party had the intention of rifling his room that night. His thoughts were read apparently without self-consciousness.

'With a build like yours you oughtn't to be afraid of me, Buddy.

There's a lot of bums around just laying for American tourists, but you needn't be afraid of me.' (93)

Dick's impulse is to understand the man's interest in him as petty criminality, but he is something much more dangerous: he reads Dick's thoughts, a kind of penetration that

exceeds even the narrator's ability earlier in this scene. Moreover, he does so "without self-consciousness," in contrast to Dick's "exposed self-consciousness" (92) at the encounter's beginning. The newspaper seller, in other words, possesses the same mechanism of queer sensitivity as Campion. His selfhood is not on the order of indicative knowing, the passive voice in this sentence ("were read") producing an action without agent. Moreover, he is seeking to get into movies: "They got an American studio over there. And they need guys can speak English. I'm waiting for a break" (93). As we will see, the trope of acting in this novel signifies, at its extreme, personhood as an accumulation of surface gestures without a coherent interiority, embodied most observably by Rosemary. The newspaper seller is not a self fractured by the experience of war, seeking reconstitution, or at least sustenance. Rather, he signals a model of subjectivity not centred in the self, a counterpoint to agency, indicative knowledge, and psychological knowing.

Dick, of course, tries to shake off the newspaper seller "quickly and firmly" (93), but the mode of subjectivity that he represents continues to reverberate, not least in Rosemary Hoyt, whom Dick can only read as innocence corrupted. Fitzgerald writes that she is an empty shell, shaped by her mother, full of "bouncing, breathless and exigent idealism" (13). Rosemary seeks excitement in something putatively real, something outside of cinematic gesture: she contemplates sleeping with the Director Earl Brady, but knows "she would forget him half an hour after she left him – like an actor kissed in a picture" (24). If her idealism lets her believe that Dick represents such a reality for a time, however, the narrative gives no sense that Rosemary is even capable of knowing any such thing. Godden is again instructive on this matter. Nicole displays her wealth

through conspicuous consumption, Godden argues, and is afforded an interior self that her wealth protects from the public gaze (*Fictions* 121). Rosemary, on the other hand, is pure publicity (*Fictions* 120), defined only by the “the gaze of those who envy her” (*Fictions* 121):

Rosemary cannot be self-conscious, since she has no self to be conscious of; she is, however, audience-aware. Under Dick’s tuition Nicole achieved self-possession, she grew ‘hard’, ‘whole’, ‘complete’ and anachronistic. Rosemary’s self is a number of styles which exist to be alienated from her; like fashion, she is created to earn envy so that her style(s) may be purchased by others. (*Fictions* 121)

Godden’s argument is that while Nicole has an ego to be reconstituted, Rosemary is beyond the dialectic of fracture and unity, and is therefore resistant to subjective interpellation.³⁸ Rosemary embodies the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake, surface gesture with no psychologically autonomous centre.³⁹ While Dick understands their first kiss as the culmination of a romance, for instance, Rosemary “call[s] on things she had read, seen, dreamed” to inform her participation as if in a movie scene: “she knew too that it was one of her greatest rôles and she flung herself into it more passionately” (64). To Dick, “the beauty of Nicole had been to the beauty of Rosemary as the beauty of Leonardo’s girl was to that of the girl of an illustrator” (104). While he likely means the difference between well-defined, classical beauty and the whimsical artifice of popular

³⁸ Godden does not consider the extent to which Nicole’s personality is an artificial trace of Dick’s treatment of her as both the subject of a case-study and a participant in a marriage. To this extent, Nicole and Rosemary might not be so different after all.

³⁹ This is similar to arguments put forth by Tiffany Joseph and Faith Pullin. For Joseph, Rosemary makes her gender position “less traumatic” by “recognizing and using the performative” (77). For Pullin, while men in the novel are feminized in Europe, women, and especially Rosemary through her acting, are allowed “free play to act out their chosen personae” (178).

drawing, the description also unwittingly raises the difference between mimesis in representation and a copy with no original.

Seen in this light, Dick's movement from Nicole to Rosemary is significant: as Godden puts it, he "shifts allegiance from the integrating subconscious (the last territory of the private, bourgeois self) to a disintegrative...image" (*Fictions* 120). What has traditionally been read as a decline – "Dick's long dive into disintegration and oblivion" (Stern 101) – turns out to be a taking apart of personhood, something Miller unwittingly acknowledges in his reading without seeing its productive potential: "Dick's story is a story of the losing of a self, the disappearance of an identity" (1964, 93). The death of Dick's father, as Godden points out, is not merely an occasion for lamenting the old order, but also a symbolic burying of its legacy and a severing of his connection to it (*Fictions* 124). If Rosemary is the model for personality as exterior gesture, which makes use of the trope of acting, Dick's relationship with her after having given up his nostalgic illusions – the most exemplary of which is the fantasy of Rosemary as perpetual virgin – is part of this relinquishing of belief in psychological interiority. The scene in which they finally have sex is for this reason rendered without attention to Dick's state of mind, or how it fulfills a desire long held. Instead, we are told that Dick drinks enough "so that his feeling of dissatisfaction left him," that they drive to their hotel "in a sort of exalted quiet" and that Rosemary "wanted to be taken and she was" (213). It is sex without love, if by "love" we mean the climactic communion of two interpellated psychological agents:

Dick's discovery that he was not in love with her, nor she with him, had added to rather than diminished his passion for her. Now that he knew he would not enter further into her life, she became the strange woman for

him. He supposed many men meant no more than that when they said they were in love – not a wild submergence of soul, a dipping of all colors into an obscuring dye, such as his love for Nicole had been. (216-7)

For Dick, this constitutes a new way of relating: sex as bodily pleasure, love as impersonal and without fealty to psychological desire.⁴⁰ For the novel, it takes what would have been a narrative climax to the love story in Book I and turns it into a throwaway moment that fails to participate in the formation of Dick's psychological coherence and idealism for coherent romantic *telos*.

Like Nick Carraway, Dick holds himself apart from emotional involvement but while Nick's decathexis masks a queer register of same-sex desire, *Tender* locates queerness within this very structure. As Dick's vitality declines in the final section, that is, the novel explores the potential for such impersonality as the virtual other limit of subject-formation. When he loses an eye, it is an indication of a diminishing capacity for "vision" or self-knowledge (228). As his face grows pale ("Nicole saw that his usually ruddy face was drained of blood" [271]), he begins to fade not only from himself but from the narrator's grasp of him as a coherent psychological agent, as Godden suggests:

To adapt an Althusserian distinction: [Dick] loses interest in himself as an 'individual' because he recognizes himself as a 'subject', that is as something subjected and produced by and productive of forces that he learns to despise. In response, he quits the crucial sites of 'interpolation' [*sic*], those places at which we are bound over and into those lives which our culture would prefer. In no particular order, and virtually all at once,

⁴⁰ This recalls Nick Carraway's relationship with Jordan Baker. Nick repeatedly insists that he is not in love with Jordan: "I wasn't actually in love, but I felt a sort of tender curiosity" (57).

he deserts the psychiatric armchair, the surrogate drawing-rooms, the nursery, the phallus and even (projecting) the sound-stage. Dick's dive is complete and outdistances the critics. (*Fictions* 130-1)

To be beyond sanctioned identity is to be abjected, to be unrecognizable and inassimilable from the perspective of subject-formation. It therefore makes sense that Dick is rumoured to be “not received anywhere anymore,” a phrase that reverberates in Rosemary's ears insofar as it indicates “the hint of a hostile and organized public opinion” (287). Without a discernible social identity, Dick becomes the element that cannot be incorporated into social structures. As we will see, however, rejection by these structures facilitates his discernibility by queer sensitivity, a non-realist mode of knowing that the novel conjures as a way of rethinking subjectivity.

The final showdown between Dick and Tommy is the narrative's final instantiation of one of these social structures – marriage – and the desire to produce it as novelistic resolution. As the two men argue over Nicole, they are “suddenly interrupted by an insistent American, of sinister aspect,” who turns out to be the same newspaper seller that had confronted Dick years before (309). As the embodiment of the extinction of interiority, the newspaper seller will not allow the duel between competing lovers to take place, cutting off Tommy's “Now no woman would stand such –” with, “Buddies” (309).⁴¹ Even after he leaves, he announces to Dick the imminent arrival of the Tour de France, “Any minute now, Buddy” (309):

First it was a lone cyclist in a red jersey, toiling intent and confident out of

⁴¹ Also consider how newspapers promulgate a kind of reality characterized by events lacking concern for psychological or emotional depth.

the westering sun, passing to the melody of a high chattering cheer. Then three together in a harlequinade of faded color, legs caked yellow with dust and sweat, faces expressionless, eyes heavy and endlessly tired.

Tommy faced Dick, saying: 'I think Nicole wants a divorce – I suppose you'll make no obstacles?'

A troupe of fifty more swarmed after the first bicycle racers, strung out over two hundred yards; a few were smiling and self-conscious, a few obviously exhausted, most of them indifferent and weary. (309-10)

These are not the ash-grey men of *Gatsby*, personifying death-in-life. Rather, the novel gives us an image of the only kind of desubjectification that is possible in the joyless world of *Tender Is the Night*. From the few that still have selves to be conscious of, to those merely exhausted, this passage culminates in the bulk of cyclists "indifferent and weary," worn out to the point of being without psychological interest in the world. These are the cyclists with "expressionless" faces, "endlessly tired," merged together in "a harlequinade of faded color." Without individuality, without psychological depth or coherence, these cyclists embody the emptying of interiority, moving together as pure physicality, in ironic contrast to the quarrel over subjectivity that they disrupt. Dick will not make any obstacles to Tommy in the end, because he is already gone, having moved away from subjectification by and to Nicole, already overcome by "growing indifference" (280), as Nicole observes, already "exhausted and expressionless, alone with the water and the sky" in his ostensibly failed water trick (285). All that is left is for Dick to become a "figure," fading into "a dot and mingl[ing] with the other dots in the summer crowd" (311).

Unlike Nick or Amory, Dick ends up without a self to know, having all but disappeared from the narrative at its close, where the narrator can only say that he is “almost certainly” around New York, “in one town or another” (315). If Dick is supposed to stand for America and the breakdown of its pre-war integrity, the novel’s end exhausts this possibility. Rather than trying to compensate for Dick’s putative failure, in other words, the novel eschews the fortifications of selfhood that in *Paradise* and *Gatsby* resolve by overwriting the queerness that their narratives evoke. The revolution in *Tender* is not its uncompromising critique of psychiatry, as William Blazek argues, nor Dick’s disappearance as a clearing-away of the old political and aesthetic order to make way for an exploration of new literary forms, as Laura Rattray suggests (101). Rather, that the disappearance of psychological interiority and its narrative consequences – psychological motivations, hidden desire – takes the place of the dialectical resolution that we find in Fitzgerald’s earlier novels constitutes a radical departure from the dynamic of queer eruptions and their suppression that *Paradise* and *Gatsby* produce. Instead, *Tender*’s very form forecloses dialectical resolution, co-opting the queer waste of its processes into the narrative’s realist project.

These queer eruptions still occur, but extradiegetically, as Dick’s disappearance is an occasion for the novel to elaborate and deploy the queer sensitivity first raised by *Campion*. As Dick becomes merely a dot mingling with other dots, he eludes the grasp of the narrator’s realist tendencies: that he is “almost certainly” “in one town or another” around New York betrays the narrator’s inability to apprehend Dick as an object of indicative knowledge. Generations of critics have overwhelmingly viewed Dick’s disappearance as a demise, part and parcel of the bleak world that Fitzgerald conjures in

Tender Is the Night. Seen in this light, Dick's being emptied of interiority is less an act of rebellion than a strategy of coping in a world in which to be a subject is to be a member of the consuming elite (when Dick tells Mary North, "You're all so dull," she responds, "But we're all there is!" [313]), and in which to be a rebel is to be the exploitative newspaper seller. For these critics, the only option for Dick and for the novel is to turn away from interpellation, which in this landscape is a rather joyless and exhausting affair.

It is, however, no coincidence that when Nicole hears about Dick's life "[b]y accident," as if he is now constituted by unverifiable rumour, she learns "that he bicycled a lot," recalling the depersonalized and desubjectified cyclists in the Tour de France. As Nicole and the narrator both know Dick only by impressions ("she got the impression that he had settled down with some one to keep house for him" [315]), the novel impels its reader to develop a similar affective sensitivity to perceive Dick not as a faded subject in decline, but as a new model for character. By the end of the novel, Dick is not a coherent character with a psychology to be analyzed and understood. In contrast to his own psychoanalytical training and mode of understanding, Dick is a series of vague impressions, whose facticity is impossible to pin down. Rather than lamenting the emptying of Dick's personality as a subjective failure, as so many critics have done, the novel asks us to learn to read him as depersonalized affect, to ourselves become queer readers of character.

These novels elaborate a story of modernism not as fracture and recuperation, but as the undoing of personhood and the mounting of asubjective desire. Normative identities are produced and can only be recuperated through narrative that disputes any

nostalgic notion of their givenness. While the realist *Bildungsroman* can indulge such radical praxes ironically, the assumption of subjectivity so entrenched in its form, Fitzgerald's turn to less teleological modes, employing not only careful selection of detail, but an ironic first-person narrator, or a narrative that turns its protagonist away from subjective fulfillment, requires that these praxes be less amenable to psychological glossing, because there is less to divert attention away from the propensity of story-telling to alienate the availability of closure and coherence. The negotiation between Amory Blaine's self-actualization, Nick Carraway's ironic viewpoint, and Dick Diver's appearing via his ostensible disappearance, in other words, produces a modernist aesthetic in which the waste of dialectical processes is both unnoticeable empirically but discernible by a new "sensitivity," revealed as the virtual other limit to the writing of fracture and unity, and re-purposed as the very condition for narrative once this dialectic has been exposed and eluded.

Chapter 4: “The Dark Pools on the Other Side of the World”: Woolf, Deleuze, and a
Post-Identitarian Politics

As the first three chapters of this study demonstrate, the novels of Cather, Larsen, and Fitzgerald dislodge or displace the realist endorsement of unambiguous narrative teleology, disclosing the failure of linear character development, satisfying closure of plot (often through the conventional “marriage plot”), and the hermeneutic disclosure of available meaning. These texts, I have tried to show, take as a central thematic and critical concern the unexhausted excess that is the by-product of their ironic representations of realist storytelling and the philosophical underpinnings that support it. Such characters as *My Ántonia*’s Jim Burden, *Passing*’s Irene Redfield, and *The Great Gatsby*’s Nick Carraway try in their own way to control the terms through which knowledge is transmitted and find support for the illusion of self-coherence and self-sufficient subjectivity through recourse to narrative convention, whether it be the boyish displacement of sex into incorporeal romance (Burden), the maintenance of the bourgeois integrity of the middle-class black novel (Redfield), or the detached pose of a secure, masculine narrator (Carraway).

The various ironies that these writers develop to disturb such ploys, moreover, open a breach for exploring the ways in which all texts obscure queer potential and the mechanisms that seek to repress it in order to produce the illusion of coherent meaning. Bringing out this detritus, what Casarino calls the “waste of dialectical processes” (192), threatens the integrity of claims to tidiness, efficiency, unity of meaning, not least because the very act of discerning their immanence is itself a deviant form of reading. We have seen, with recourse to Deleuze, that what gets left behind when characters,

narrators, and implied readers crystallize in all their splendour is a multiplicity of narrative registers that challenge the very functioning of reference, registers that manifest for characters and texts devoted to a realist project of orderly mimesis as chaos. Putting aside the fantasy of realist efficiency, which deems such crises as ironic destabilization, however, these registers form the basis of a politics and an aesthetics of experimentation in which the deviant and queer elements *of* texts and *in* texts might be marshalled to form new and unforeseen assemblages of desire.

If these two movements – the ironizing of narrative authority and the exploration of narrative’s other limit (to use another of Casarino’s terms) – have operated in too linear a fashion in this study up to now, with irony acting as a convenient springboard for the virtual, it is now appropriate to recast that relationship. In short, if each of the previous three chapters has discerned the irony that pushes the novels at hand up against their virtual other limit, disclosing abjected registers and counternarratives, Woolf rewards us for beginning where the previous chapters left off: teetering on the edge of this limit, contemplating narrative crisis and textual experimentation all at once. Woolf’s novels, that is, start with the premise that the hermeneutic contract of realism has already been broken.

This is not to say that *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves* are free of irony or ironic representations of Victorian norms and their ideological trappings: Holmes and Bradshaw, Mr. Ramsay, Bernard come to mind. These characters, however, are rarely in a position of narrative authority (although Bernard comes close), relegated instead to representing outdated norms or to lacking individuality without any special dispensation or mandate. Moreover, Woolf’s representations of such characters are never

monological presentations of types (although Holmes and Bradshaw come close), but meditations on complex character, revelations of the multiplicity that allows Lily Briscoe, for instance, to experience both revulsion and sympathy toward Mr. Ramsay at once.

Also at play is the backdrop of British modernism in and against which Woolf writes her fiction. While Cather, Larsen, and Fitzgerald produce texts that expose the discursive and epistemological assumptions behind narrative conventions of literary realism, they do so not by exploding those conventions but by inhabiting and exhausting them from within (a technique, once again, called “irony”). These novels critique realist texts by exposing their sometimes manic desire to contain and expel the waste that threatens their structural integrity, using and abusing such narrative conventions as demotic language, realistic characters, and some version of the marriage plot.

The set of conventions against which Woolf writes her experimental middle-period novels, however, are decidedly different. While the realist mode continued its dominance through the early part of the modernist period in America, experiments with temporality and narrative voice were already *de rigueur* in Britain and continental Europe (Conrad and Ford, for instance, were early experimenters with narrative unreliability).⁴² By the time Woolf writes *Mrs. Dalloway*, the various techniques of high modernism – psychological realism, impressionism, stream of consciousness narration – are the dominant approaches of modernist literature. We might therefore think of Woolf’s free indirect style – a narrator who jumps unannounced among the perspectives of various characters – as a way of querying the structural limitations of these narratological forms. While psychological realism and impressionistic narration, for instance, are adequate for

⁴² This is not to suggest that similar experiments were not taking place in America in the early part of the twentieth century, but simply that realism continued to be a dominant mode.

attempting to mimic the workings of the human mind and demonstrating the epistemological limits of a singular perspective, for Woolf these approaches are too fixated on individualized psychologies in isolation, to the exclusion of the ways in which different impressionistic subjectivities interact with and constitute one another.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, Woolfian subjectivity is a process of continual construction and change, enabled by encounters with other subjectivities in the social sphere. Subjectivity is not an isolated, personal, and private process, but a very public one, and one which, therefore, requires a new manner of writing to take into account these constitutive social dynamics.⁴³ In addition to building characters by showing us the layers in their private impressionistic minds, Woolf expounds her famous “tunnelling” method in an August, 1923 diary entry as also a means to forge these connections: “I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect” (*A Writer’s Diary* 59). For these caves to connect, there must be some process through which, or register of being on which, discrete impressionistic subjectivities can communicate with one another.⁴⁴

This problem, the problem of what connects individual subjectivities without recourse to some transcendent structure – to which Woolf’s refusal to subsume characters

⁴³ This is reflected in a recent trend in Woolf scholarship that seeks a fuller account of the relationship between the private and public worlds in her fiction. This is partly an attempt to overturn the history of Woolf criticism which, as Melba Cuddy-Keane notes, has read Woolf’s fiction as a retreat from politics into a world of “exquisite sensibilities” (236). For Patrick McGee, Woolf’s technical experiments are an explicit attempt to politicize this space, “an insistence on the sociality of the private,” a move that makes her exemplary of modernism in general (641). Perry Meisel and Helen Carr comment on the strong connection between public and private: how, for instance, “public symbols or language send given spectators into distinct worlds of private thought” in *Mrs. Dalloway* (Meisel 141); or more tersely, “for Woolf the private and public worlds are not separate but in essence one” (Carr 202).

⁴⁴ See also Woolf’s autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past,” in which she writes of a material structure that connects subjects: “that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all

under a monologic narrator or discursive program testifies – is a constant concern in Woolf’s fiction.⁴⁵ So many of her characters, especially in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, grapple with the problem of “life,” of what it really means to know someone else, of how to reconcile individual impressions with the intricacies of social interaction. These instances often take the form of “moments of being,” those moments when one is removed from habit, the humdrum fixations of realism (what Woolf calls “non-being”), and undergoes some private insight that reveals an epistemological or ontological limit.⁴⁶ Think, for example, of Clarissa Dalloway feeling “out, out, far out to sea and alone” as she walks through London, inspiring her to resolve “not [to] say of anyone in the world now that they were this or were that” (8-9), as she renounces the binary logic of disjunction in favour of conjunction;⁴⁷ or of Mrs. Ramsay looking back for one last moment at the tableau of her dinner guests brought together: “it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past” (90).

Importantly, these are not solipsistic moments of psychological interiority where the subject comes to know herself. Rather, there is something decidedly *impersonal* about

human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art” (72).

⁴⁵ This problem is also the concern of phenomenology, whose ideas Edmund Husserl had been exploring before Woolf’s middle period. Phenomenology, rooted in the premise that full knowledge of the world is never possible, is interested in the gap between the subject’s knowledge of the other and the other’s knowledge of himself. As Paul B. Armstrong explains, the early Husserl believed that this gap could be reduced, but never eliminated, “through acts of understanding and sympathy” (32). Later, Husserl came to see this unbridgeable gap as providing the conditions for language and dialogue between subjects, thus guarding against solipsism: because we cannot inhabit the other’s subject position, we can begin to understand the other as a self (137).

⁴⁶ Again, see “A Sketch of the Past,” where she discusses her moments of being: “one’s life is not confined to one’s body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions” (73).

⁴⁷ For Rachel Bowlby, Woolf’s novels are concerned with holding mutually exclusive possibilities simultaneously. She reads the title of *Orlando* as bearing this problem: “or/and (and/or) and/or” (50). In

Woolf's moments of being, where the subject is transported out of selfhood into a realm of pure sensation. As she says in "A Sketch of the Past," "I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture" (67). Rather than an affirmation of selfhood, these moments of being approach the limit beyond which stable and unitary selfhood falls apart.

It is the argument of this chapter that the multiplicity and fragmentation of the Woolfian subject is inseparable from those invisible, inarticulable connections among subjects that bring them into proximity with one another without making them identical. These connections are a revelation of "the panoply of life – that which we all lived in common" ("Sketch" 83), an insight into how the caves that Woolf digs out behind her characters connect. As Mary Ann Gillies has observed, there is something decidedly Bergsonian about Woolf's moments of being, "those instants when the individual is forced outside the everyday world and into another that transcends usual limits" (59). For Bergson, too, reality is a panoply of flux and change, dulled only by our habitual existence and repeated patterns, which lend the world an illusory quality of coherence. Much as Woolf develops the idea of moments of being, Bergson theorizes a mechanism for attuning oneself to this pure flux, which he calls "intuition" (*Metaphysics* 51).⁴⁸ If Woolf's characters have in common the state of having emerged out of this flux into

this reading, *Orlando* does not settle the title character's sex, but activates both male and female at the same time, thereby destabilizing "the determinability of sexual difference" (59).

⁴⁸ Bergson describes the process of intuition as follows: "The mind has to do violence to itself, has to reverse the direction of the operation by which it habitually thinks, has perpetually to revise, or rather to recast, all its categories. But in this way it will attain to fluid concepts, capable of following reality in all its sinuosities and of adopting the very movement of the inward life of things" (*Metaphysics* 51).

arbitrarily discrete identities, they also share occasional confrontations with the violent opposite of habit, where subjectivity no longer coheres.⁴⁹

About Woolf's moments of being, however, there is also something decidedly Deleuzian, because like Woolf, Deleuze is interested in the mobilizing political power of experiments with private subjectivity. As such, Deleuze forms a productive lens through which Woolf's confrontations between the public and the private can be understood. This is not to try to impose Deleuze's philosophy retrospectively on Woolf's fiction and make it speak a language it could not have known; nor is it to depoliticize Woolf by de-emphasizing her commitment to expanding the terms of who counts as a subject in a masculine and Eurocentric cultural context. It is, first of all, to recognize those critics who have used Deleuzian philosophy to illuminate Woolf's texts, giving us some common frames of reference, a Deleuze-Woolf language with a history, and which we can use to speak about *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*. John Hughes, for example, has shown how identities in Woolf hang together in provisional assemblages, haunted by deterritorialized constructions of desire, to show that Woolf's fiction is less interested in elaborating a subject of representation than committed to creating blocks of sensation. Similarly, Beatrice Monaco's *Machinic Modernism* argues that Woolf's project is one of liberating the unconscious "from the Freudian shackles of Oedipus" (19), something that Deleuze and Guattari take up explicitly in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

⁴⁹ It should be noted that Leonard Woolf claimed that Virginia never read Bergson nor his secondary sources (Gillies 107). Still, Bergson's impact on modernism and British culture is undeniable. As Gillies notes, there were over 200 articles on Bergson published in English journals, newspapers, and books between 1909 and 1911 (28).

Moreover, Deleuze is a notable critic of Woolf, in addition to the alternative philosophical canon he constructs (not only Spinoza, Bergson, and Nietzsche, but also Solomon Maimon, Raymond Ruyer, Gabriel Tarde and Gilbert Simondon [Jones and Roffe 6]). As Graham Jones and Jon Roffe suggest, “Deleuze’s thought is one which unfolds internal to an examination of the thought of others” (3). Deleuze’s frequent references to Woolf’s novels, especially *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves*, suggest that his ideas come together not as a preformed system to be imposed on texts that precede it but *through* his readings of Woolf and others, an evolutionary process that makes Woolf an integral part of his philosophy’s development and emergence.

With Deleuze, finally, we find a politicized Woolf not in the bolstering of subjectivity for traditionally marginalized groups but in the recasting of the terms of subjectivity entirely. As Toril Moi argues, the humanist subject is necessarily a male, white, European subject, and we risk reproducing the conditions for the chauvinisms that are the target of Woolf’s critique when we put too much faith in unified self-identity. Rather, as Moi suggests, we need to understand Woolf as a writer and thinker who deconstructs the discourses of gender, race, and national identity (9). And Deleuze provides means to think through a politics and an aesthetics in Woolf that can turn away from the self-centred subject while holding steady ground in the immanent world of discourse.

What would a subject look like that does not presume a coherent or centred selfhood? This is precisely the question that brings Woolf and Deleuze into close proximity with one another. For Deleuze, thinking of selves as autonomous subjects is not a given but merely a bad habit of metaphysical thought, one that starts to appear

natural through repetition. In order to theorize how this ossification of the “I” occurs and how it might be reversed, Deleuze borrows the concept of the virtual from Bergson. Following Bergson, Deleuze suggests that seemingly unified subjects emerge out of the virtual, the flux of duration, the spectrum of infinite potential for a subject to be “actualized” in an infinite number of ways.⁵⁰ This process occurs as a variety of constituent social forces perform their work, including institutional (education, for instance), Oedipal (the family), and linguistic. The subject thus appears as a stable unity, but is haunted by the continued presence of its virtual underside, both the humbling notion that its actualization could have gone any number of other ways, and the process of that emergence which must be forgotten for the subject to appear autonomous and naturalized. The subject, in other words, retains the illusion of fixed selfhood, but underneath it, we are, as James Williams suggests, “mobile individuals, set in motion by unidentifiable intensities” (31). As we have seen, Deleuze merges this ontology of emergence with a politics of experimentation, in which the pre-individual singularities that elude the process of actualization become the basis for forging transversal connections between subjects.⁵¹ The resultant assemblages hang together not through common discursive identities (gender, race, sexuality, for instance, which are sanctioned by the regime that produces subjects), but through shared desires or shared capacities: think, for instance, of the provisional being-in-common that occurs between Amory Blaine and Tom D’Invilliers based on the enjoyment of excess consumption or the non-

⁵⁰ For Deleuze, the subject must be seen *as* the process of its emergence or its “individuation”: “the I and the self... must be replaced, but in and by individuation, in the direction of individuating factors which consume them and which constitute the fluid world of Dionysus.... Beyond the self and the I we find not the impersonal but the individual and its factors, individuation and its fields, individuality and its pre-individual singularities” (*Difference and Repetition* 258).

⁵¹ See a more detailed discussion of this process in the Introduction.

identitarian blackness toward which Larsen gestures in the affects of Clare Kendry's body.

The ontology of emergence and the politics of experimentation that seek to displace the unitary self as the centre of subjectivity should resonate with readers of Woolf. Instead of the realist goal of the development of a durable and politically acceptable subject, Woolf's novels present characters constantly faced with the pain of inhabiting socially sanctioned identities and haunted by virtual affects that threaten to undo them. Clarissa Dalloway's seemingly climactic musings about death at her party suggest an encounter with the violent obliteration of the self, one that she regards as an almost salutary attempt to communicate beyond the inevitable fact of discursive selfhood, a perspective not without its ironies, it should be pointed out (202). Lily Briscoe's troubling over how to connect disparate elements in her painting suggests a search for a new model of social assemblage, one that brings together without homogenizing. Rhoda's visions in *The Waves* of "dark pools on the other side of the world" (103) conjure a register of being beyond dialectical subjectivity, where sexual pleasure exists outside of the regime of subject production. At the same time, Woolf's experimental techniques in these novels – the free indirect discourse of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, the multivalent perspectives and natural interludes of *The Waves* – shift focus away from character and toward the aesthetic function of literary figures. As the novels propose a model of subjectivity in which characters connect based not on their identifications as subjects but as temporary and contingent formations based on shared desire, they also propose a similar relationship between reader and text. Ultimately, Woolf's novels solicit readers to hold multiple propositions at once rather than to resolve

them dialectically, an epistemic capacity Woolf associates with womanhood and which brings together the private sphere of domesticity with the public sphere of politics and discourse. As Stephen Barber argues, her texts are both a critique of power and an experimental art that practices politics and subjectivity in new ways, presenting possibilities for living “the non-fascist life” (204).

Mrs. Dalloway

Woolf’s novels contemplate the process by which institutional forces (gender, time, metaphysics, for example) dominate and exploit bodies and minds, separating them into individual subjectivities, bodies, consciousnesses. Her writing attempts to free subjects from these workings by contemplating them as unactualized and unspent potential. These institutions can only grasp such potential as chaos and madness: hence, Septimus Smith, who is rendered “mad” by institutions that force him to withdraw from human interaction entirely, once the “madness” of imperialism has been revealed to him.

Mrs. Dalloway is a novel about connections. These include the appropriate social connections that Septimus can no longer access and which his doctors propose as a cure, similar to the connections that Clarissa tries to engineer at the party for which she spends her day preparing, the connections formed when bourgeois subjects meet and greet each other in the post-Victorian drawing room. Beyond this world, however, Woolf’s novel gives us another kind of connection entirely, those forbidden connections whose ontology and circuitry are not immediately available and observable to the Drs. Holmes and Bradshaw and the world they represent. These are the forbidden connections between Clarissa and Sally Seton in the past at Bourton, connections that appear as chaotic and perverse, which must be either relegated to obscurity by social convention or normalized

and brought into the realm of analysis by regimes of knowledge and surveillance. As the radical outside to institutional subjectivity, in other words, they must be subjectified.

Much of the history of Woolfian criticism is invested in doing the very work that Woolf's texts critique. In particular, the persistent humanist readings of these forbidden connections make them legible through recourse to some deeper essence or authentic structure of feeling from which characters have been alienated. Hermione Lee, for example, idealizes the connection between Clarissa and Septimus as "intimate and vital," making up "the novel's most remarkable achievement" (29), while also locating an authenticity in Clarissa's attempts to free the "soul" from ideological possession (24). For Maria DiBattista, similarly, the novel is about reaching "the privacy of the soul, the sanctuary of the sovereign 'I'" (38), embodied in the "inviolable individuality" that Clarissa's silent neighbour represents (55). This is not to say that feeling has no place in criticism of Woolf, but we need to avoid romanticizing a personal conception of feeling that locates meaning in the privacy of the self-sufficient subject. Such criticism upholds and buttresses the very same logic on which institutional subjectification depends. To the contrary, in Woolf's novels characters are not realist models of people and psyches but occasions for discerning the limits of charactericity and the inadequacy of psychology.

The key to understanding the relationship between these two registers of connections is Clarissa herself, who operates as a kind of portal between the virtual and the actual. To use Deleuzian terms, *Mrs. Dalloway* is the story of a subject looking back upon her process of actualization,⁵² lamenting the loss of a pre-subjective self (which is

⁵² Alex Zwerdling notes that "Woolf was interested in the process through which an independent, responsive, emotionally supple young man or woman is gradually transformed into a conventional member of his or her class" (159). For Zwerdling, however, this subjectification comes at the cost of renouncing the "buried life of feeling in every human being" (164).

to say, her unmarried self), contemplating the various institutional forces that have colonized her desires and vitiating such forbidden connections. As we will see, however, Clarissa is not the best diagnostic agent of her own situation, preferring as she does to locate her queer moment with Sally as a moment of authenticity in and as the past, rather than a virtual moment in the present, produced as an affect by her repeated encounters with the inadequacy of her subject position. While she is devoted to a psychological and biographical model of linear temporality, the novel compels us to read these moments as figurally simultaneous. At the same time, Clarissa looks to death as the structural equivalent to her kiss with Sally: the ultimate limit to subjectivity deferred into the future, authentic in its finality and its dispensation of narrative closure. What the novel compels us to see, and which Clarissa does not, is that queer relations and death are both located in the present as the internal limit to subjectivity that Clarissa cannot acknowledge. As she approaches this limit only to turn away from it, however, the novel's narrative technique shifts in the final pages, exposing reading habits that are complicit with Clarissa's logic of deferral and domestication, complicating the realist expectation for characters as coherent subjects to be understood, rather than as assemblages of impersonal affect. In so doing, the novel's final scene makes Clarissa an occasion for implied readers to discern virtual connections.

It would be easy to read along with Clarissa and see Bourton as an idealized place in the past, accessible only through memory. The language, syntax, and rhythm of the novel's third paragraph evoke a freedom that seems unavailable to Clarissa in her life as Mrs. Dalloway:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when,

with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave. (3)

The exclamation marks, the long sentences with successive clauses that mimic excitement, the image of bursting into open air, all suggest a pastoral freedom that is also a memory of pre-war innocence. As Kate Haffey argues, however, this memory exists side-by-side with the present (143). For Haffey, Clarissa's memories of Bourton and the kiss with Sally not only interrupt the "proper" story of female development but disrupt the temporal flow of the "proper" narrative present by plunging us into the past.⁵³ Indeed, it is significant to note that in this passage, Clarissa can hear the squeak of the hinges "now," that the memory is tied up with the "doors that would be taken off their hinges" by Rumpelmayer's men in preparation for the party (3). The two temporalities, that is, are less a distinct past and present than two registers hinged to each other and existing simultaneously. If there is a causal relationship between them, it is not that the past conditions the present but that Clarissa's present experience prompts forays into the past, not as memories to be recaptured through verisimilitude, but as creative bursts, queer in both their form and their content.

According to this logic, Woolf's tunnelling method can be seen as a machine for the production of virtual affects, as one moment in the present becomes the jumping-off point for an exploration of what it is like to be something other than oneself: for Clarissa, an unmarried woman practicing same-sex desire; for the narrative, a text of winding, non-

⁵³ Elizabeth Abel makes the inverse argument, that the marriage plot obscures the plot of lesbian desire, which remains open as an alluring possibility of what might have been (81).

linear prose. To this end, the text's virtuality makes itself felt in moments of non-compliance with Clarissa's embodied subjectivity as Mrs. Dalloway. Deleuze himself thinks of Clarissa's ecstatic experience of "life; London; this moment of June" (4) on her walk as a cultivation of such affects, particularly in the passage,

She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or that. She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on...[S]he always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 8-9)

For Deleuze, Clarissa's slicing constitutes a "haecceity," a pure becoming, an assemblage of desire without subjective characteristics, similar to Woolf's moments of being.⁵⁴ Even as Clarissa perambulates as the wife of Richard Dalloway, in other words, that subjective layer disappears in the moments when she is absorbed into the pure sensations around her: "Forms and subjects are not of that world...Taking a walk is a haecceity; never again will Mrs. Dalloway say to herself, 'I am this, I am that, he is this, he is that'" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 263); or, as Daniel Smith explains, "she has passed into the town like 'a knife through everything,' to the point where she herself has become imperceptible; she is no longer a person, but a becoming" (xxxiv).

Deleuze's reading is useful because it opens up the fabric of the narrative technique as a continual production of virtual potentials, deriving any teleological

⁵⁴ In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari explain the haecceity as follows: "There is a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing, or substance. We reserve the name *haecceity* for it. A season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing, even though this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject. They are haecceities in the sense that they consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected" (261).

narrative movement in the present actual from its multiplying forays into the virtual past and can be extended to consider the ways in which Woolf encourages her readers to undergo a similar detachment from intellectual sequential experience. It is not a reading, however, without its ironies: Clarissa's wanderings are also oriented toward her role as society woman and social engineer, charged with the task of bringing people together in her bourgeois drawing room. Clarissa's sense of being "far out to sea and alone" speaks to a desire to become something other than "Mrs. Dalloway," but only from a secure position of selfhood, without being able to imagine what it is to be truly alone, a condition that perhaps only Septimus can exhibit. Such indulgences are fantasies of having both privacy and publicity at once, of being able to denounce the regime of subjectifying power while benefiting from its bounty. It is to imagine that the structural limit of the bustling London life that she loves "being a part of...with an absurd and faithful passion" (6) is solitude, feeling "blessed and purified" as might "a nun who has left the world" (31).

From her deep longings to participate in public rituals that constitute subjectivity, Clarissa imagines fleeing to a separate domain of privacy and memory, never examining to what extent such refuge is itself a product of subjectifying discourse. She wants to assert her independence and overcome class barriers by buying the flowers for her party herself, but this gesture is one ironically in the service of her role as bourgeois society woman, wife of Richard Dalloway. Similarly, the long taxonomy of flowers in the flower shop uses the same overflowing syntax as the initial description of Bourton to evoke sensuality:

as if it were the evening and girls in muslin frocks came out to pick sweet

peas and roses after the superb summer's day, with its almost blue-black sky, its delphiniums, its carnations, its arum lilies was over; and it was the moment between six and seven when every flower – roses, carnations, irises, lilac – glows; white, violet, red, deep orange; every flower seems to burn by itself, softly, purely in the misty beds, and how she loved the grey white moths spinning in and out, over the cherry pie, over the evening primroses! (14)

There is something erotic about the way Clarissa's desire is overwhelmed by her senses, producing the image of flowers burning by themselves, as if inflamed by internal passions.⁵⁵ This image yields to a kind of climax of desire, which is halted pre-emptively by the sound of a car backfiring on the street:

And as she began to go with Miss Pym from jar to jar, choosing, nonsense, nonsense, she said to herself, more and more gently, as if this beauty, this scent, this colour, and Miss Pym liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up when – oh! a pistol shot in the street outside. (14)

Here, queer desire and death are brought together in a moment of sublime same-sex eros and its sudden interruption by what sounds like a gunshot. Clarissa's assertion of her own agency – wanting to buy the flowers herself – appears to lead her to an approximation of her idealized moment with Sally. The “pistol shot,” however, is as if to say that this pure

⁵⁵ This is similar to a later passage involving flowers, which, as Patricia Margne Cramer points out, signifies Clarissa's same-sex desire (187). As Clarissa ponders her intense feelings for Sally Seton, “Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus” (35), which for Cramer is “the symbolic equivalence for female genitalia – the match and crocus for clitoris and labia” (187).

experience is not available on its own, that exploring forbidden connections requires facing the limits of subjectivity, which are always located within a history not only of one's own making.⁵⁶

The limit case of Clarissa's fantasies of privacy are available to us, of course, in Septimus. These fantasies, the novel makes clear, are also national fantasies that imagine the self-sustenance of subjectivity as an integral part of British wartime identity, particularly when it comes to imperial soldiers. Septimus accrues "manliness" in the military as a necessary part of moving up in the ranks (94), and when his superior officer, Evans, dies, he

congratulate[s] himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive. He was right there. The last shells missed him. He watched them explode with indifference. (95)

Septimus returns from the war as a parody of masculine convention, free of such pesky feelings as sympathy and sadness.⁵⁷ His engagement to Rezia is merely an expression of

⁵⁶ To this extent, Clarissa is more similar to Peter Walsh than she would like to admit, who also seeks privacy as an antidote to the public constitution of subjectivity. On the one hand, Peter is the paragon of colonialism and proper public engagement, in awe of the "splendid achievement" of London, the apex of "civilisation" in its efficient functioning (60): "Like the pulse of a perfect heart, life struck straight through the streets. There was no fumbling – no hesitation. Sweeping and swerving, accurately, punctually, noiselessly, there, precisely at the right instant, the motor-car stopped at the door" (59-60). Peter is supremely unaware of the ironies of "civilisation," and it is this romanticized view of a London that allows him to see the war-damaged Septimus Smith, and his horribly lonely immigrant wife, Rezia, as simply a couple embroiled in a domestic spat: "And that is being young, Peter Walsh thought as he passed them. To be having an awful scene – the poor girl looked absolutely desperate – in the middle of the morning" (77). On the other hand, when Peter falls asleep in the park, he dreams of being a "solitary traveller" (62), away from civilization, blown "to nothingness" (63). Like Clarissa, Peter can play at the annihilation of the subject because his fealty to the actual will ensure that it stays safely intact.

⁵⁷ That this emptying of feeling occurs in the context of his queer relationship with Evans, who is "undemonstrative in the company of women" and feels "affection" for Septimus (94) – "They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other" (94) – only further broadens

this masculinity beyond masculinity: “he became engaged one evening when the panic was on him – that he could not feel” (95).

To this extent, Septimus forms an ironic double to Clarissa, but as her structural inverse. If Clarissa is a bourgeois subject exercising privilege to indulge safely in searching for an outside to her subject position, Septimus exhibits the dangerous fragmentation Clarissa tries to bury. It is for this reason that Dr. Holmes has told Rezia to make him “take an interest in things outside himself” (23), to engage publicly in the process of subject-constitution. He is the limit case not only of masculinity, but of desubjectification, exposing the horror of Clarissa’s fantasy of privacy taken to its logical extreme. Rather than a salutary isolation from the social interactions Clarissa is compelled to pursue, Septimus is more like the walking dead, so cut off from the rest of the world – “Away from people – they must get away from people, he said (jumping up)” (27) – that he can only fantasize about “the birth of a new religion” (24) based on the imagined society of living trees and leaves that he perceives all around him. For Septimus, that is, the only possible escape from his condition of extreme privacy, outside of death, is transcendence, the impending arrival of “the Lord who had come to renew society,” who will put “from him with a wave of his hand that eternal suffering, that eternal loneliness” (27).

Woolf’s use of Septimus thus lays bare the starkness of the privacy of the soul about which Clarissa fantasizes. This is significant because Clarissa’s party, the gathering for the express purpose of forging connections between subjects in the actual, becomes more and more obscure in purpose as Clarissa arrives closer and closer to being faced

the novel’s critique to include the ways in which gender discourse restricts alternative assemblages of desire.

with Septimus' death. To defend against the notion that she simply likes "to have famous people about her," she finds renewed vigour in the ephemeral concept of "life": "What she liked was simply life. 'That's what I do it for,' she said, speaking aloud, to life" (133). "Simply life," it turns out, is Clarissa's shorthand for the connections between subjects that only a party like hers can engender:

But to go deeper, beneath what people said (and these judgements, how superficial, how fragmentary they are!) in her own mind now, what did it mean to her, this thing she called life? Oh, it was very queer. Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it.⁵⁸ (133-4)

Unlike a Deleuzian assemblage based on non-identitarian affects, the connections of "simply life" preserve individual subjectivities.

"Simply life," of course, is interrupted by the stark fact of death, the news of which disturbs Clarissa: "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought" (201). As Clarissa proceeds into the next room alone, "[t]he party's splendour [falls] to the floor, so strange it was to come in alone in her finery" (201), as if there is something uncanny and revealing about being dressed to impress when there are no others around to see. It lays bare the process by which social interaction produces subjects, and it makes her think through Septimus's death in stark terms:

⁵⁸ Zwerdling notes that the neighbourhoods that Clarissa mentions in this example are "upper-middle-class preserves, the residential areas where the members of the Dalloway set are likely to live" (151), showing that Clarissa's sense of universal humanity is already demarcated by class.

He had killed himself – but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party! (201-2)

It is no coincidence that Clarissa feels her dress engulfed in flames at the same time as her body, as if the incursion of death is not only an obliteration of life but of “simply life,” that bourgeois condition on which her party’s social interactions are founded. And yet, Clarissa’s recourse to imagine the intense bodily experience of death is also a reckoning with a register of experience that she has hitherto conceived of as separate from her own. Death as the precariousness of the human subject enters Clarissa’s life baldly.

Indeed, the question that the bodily shock leaves her with is, “why had he done it?” Why, Clarissa asks, would anyone renounce his life? Her attempt to think through this question yields no answer at first: “She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away” (202). Soon, however, Clarissa decides that Septimus’s suicide is commensurate with the problems she faces:

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre

which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (202)

Having had the putative falsity of her party revealed to her, Clarissa decides that Septimus's suicide preserves some authenticity in life by flouting the "chatter" which obscures it and is thus an attempt to overcome the impossible solitude of being a subject. For Clarissa, that is, "simply life" does not yield the kinds of intersubjective connections she longs for. Looking only in the terrain of the actual for these connections, in Septimus she observes their dialectical obverse: the obliteration of the subject, which, she claims, is itself a way of connecting, because it rejects the conventions of actuality outright.

Clarissa's musing on Septimus's suicide, in this regard, is a way to domesticate death. Immediately after, she sees her old neighbour in the house opposite:

She parted the curtains; she looked. Oh, but how surprising! – in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her! She was going to bed....She was going to bed, in the room opposite. It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window. Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed alone. (203-4)

In one sense, the image of the old lady brings together the dual antagonisms of death and virtuality. She is the unknowable prospect for an alternative mode of being, that which moves beyond discursive construction of identity.⁵⁹ In "going to bed," she also figures

⁵⁹ The first time Clarissa sees the old lady, she understands her as individual autonomy, outside of the subjectifying regime of discourse, free to be whatever she wants: "Let her climb upstairs if she wanted to; let her stop; then let her, as Clarissa had often seen her, gain her bedroom, part her curtains, and

death in the moments after Clarissa has had to face Septimus's suicide, but death only in such a way that it compensates for the incursion of the latter into the party. Whereas the suicide is unfathomable to Clarissa, the image of the old lady "quite quietly, going to bed alone" settles the disturbance, domesticates it by providing an image of death that yields condolence and peace. Clarissa can be fascinated with the contrast between the old woman going to bed alone and the "laughing and shouting" from the drawing room, because it compensates for the putative inauthenticity of bourgeois social interaction to which she has just been awakened. It is thus that Clarissa can feel "somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself" (204), as if they have been through identical ordeals. To Clarissa, she and Septimus have both faced the limits of subjectivity, have both been awakened to the forces that produce subjects. If Septimus' response to this horrific revelation, however, is to obliterate the product of those forces, Clarissa retreats from such a dialectically negating move: "But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room" (204).

The kinds of epistemic capture that we see in Holmes and Bradshaw is present where we might not expect to find it. Clarissa's treatment of Septimus suggests an affinity with the Edwardian writers whom Woolf criticizes in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown": "They have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there" ("Character in Fiction" 49). Like these writers, Clarissa attempts to capture Septimus as a

disappear again into the background. Somehow one respected that – that old woman looking out of the window, quite unconscious that she was being watched" (139). To this extent, she forms a fantasy for Clarissa that this mode of private selfhood beyond the inexorable limits of subjectivity is "out there" in the house opposite, and available insofar as it can be seen and conceptualized.

Many critics are complicit in this fantasy. Lee argues that the old lady signifies Clarissa's independence and her respect for the "privacy of the soul" (24). Similarly, for DiBattista, she symbolizes "an inviolable individuality" (55).

steady object of knowledge to be held apart from her own experience but without trying to inhabit his perspective. Similarly, Peter tries to contain Clarissa at the novel's end through his perception and description of her:

What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? he thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?

It is Clarissa, he said.

For there she was. (213)

Without access to Clarissa's mind in the novel's final few pages, we see her only from Peter's perspective. The last line, "For there she was," reproduces Clarissa's reading of the old lady, as Peter uses Clarissa for an experience of particular affects (terror and ecstasy). In the novel's final line, Peter keeps Clarissa in the past tense – "For there she *was*" (emphasis added) – generalizing her individuality by tying her to what she used to be; she is, finally, only Clarissa-for-Peter.

In foregrounding these various phenomenological limits, the novel queries this kind of capture and containment. The novel's title, after all, suggests that "Mrs. Dalloway" is a character available for the reader as an object of knowledge. The surprising affinities between Clarissa and Peter, however, suggest that *Mrs. Dalloway* is invested not in character, but in the reading practices that treat characters as stable and psychologically sound subjects. By diagramming this problem, the text opens a virtual limit that exceeds the problem's logic. In being absented by Peter's past-tense regard of her, Clarissa becomes a sign for the untenability of depth psychology as a model of presence. Clarissa is the target of multiple contentions about her manifestations: her own, which the novel deactivates by making her available only through Peter; Peter's, which

attempts to remove her agency. She is also a dual object for the implied reader: through the novel's free indirect discourse, Clarissa is available as Peter sees her, but at the same time, she disappears into a series of affects: terror, ecstasy, excitement. This latter effect suggests that by the novel's end, she is not a "person" at all, but merely sensation, even if that assemblage of sensation will get coded as "Clarissa" by the subjectivity that surrounds it. As a result, Woolf challenges the text's reader not to regard Clarissa as a coherent psychology to be analyzed and understood.

These multiple versions of Clarissa remain active by the novel's end, even though they are adversarial. Moreover, if Clarissa can be both present and absent, contained as a model of the uncontained, the novel teaches us to read not through an empiricist "either/or" but through an anti-empiricist "and/yes": to hold two contradictory positions at once, to refuse to decide between two irreconcilable options. That the novel's virtual limit appears as an aspect of the reader's subjectivity demonstrates that freeing minds from subjectifying discourses does not need to proceed through character alone. Minds in Woolf are not simply isolated experiences of coherent psychology but larger constellations produced by and existing in social interaction. By pulling back at the end and revealing Clarissa as a sign of non-revelation, *Mrs. Dalloway* teaches us to move beyond character. Clarissa's non-appearance is much like Lily Briscoe's painting at the end of *To the Lighthouse*, which we see only as simultaneous concealment and revelation. Instead of plumbing the main character for psychological depth, the novel's technique in this final section shows us that the forbidden connections that Woolf's text seeks to illuminate is the simultaneous presentation of two irreconcilable stories.

To the Lighthouse

To the Lighthouse engages the same problem as *Mrs. Dalloway*: how to represent characters with an interdependency of consciousness and how to do this beyond psychological characterization. Clarissa's discomfort with the doubleness of narrative finds its corollary in the novel's first section in Mrs. Ramsay, who grapples with the "madness" of people who refuse to marry and the inexorable flux of time. Like Clarissa's attempt at bringing people together at her party, Mrs. Ramsay is a social engineer who wants to stabilize flux because she can only understand it as chaos. So immersed is she in the present actual that she is not even afforded memories of a time before she was "Mrs. Ramsay" (nor does she have a first name). If Clarissa is a subject looking back upon her process of emergence and seeking its outside, Mrs. Ramsay is an occasion for discerning how to order the unresolvable nature of flux by smoothing it out into an experience. To the extent that Mrs. Ramsay privileges affect over reason while remaining committed to epistemic stability, she is also a figure for a particular kind of narrative which the novel characterizes as naïve.

Beyond the binarism of surface and depth, the novel positions Lily Briscoe, who engages the potential of virtual connections. Instead of retreating from flux or trying to stop its movement, Lily seeks an artistic principle to relate multiple perspectives without making them identical, a way to produce difference in itself. To set free the mind from the institutional forces that would dominate it, Woolf writes the story of an artist who herself communes with unspent potentials, producing non-realist art through a process of intensive becoming. The challenge she issues to her implied readers is how *not* to be like Holmes and Bradshaw, how not to read characters for psychological depth, as

hermeneutical cases to be analyzed, as problems to be solved. Instead, she challenges her readers to consider the rhizomatic possibilities of reading when they leave themselves open to holding conflicting perspectives at the same time. Rather than narrative as a device for a character or an intellect to come to know itself, *To the Lighthouse* posits characters and readers as multitudes of intensity bursting forth with unsettled potential, endowed with the capacity to enter into pre-subjective assemblages with others by abandoning the self to the flux of becoming.

Part of this immense challenge is learning to read a character such as Mrs. Ramsay for all of her multiplicity. Gayatri Spivak argues that the project of *To the Lighthouse* is to find adequate language with which to articulate Mrs. Ramsay and capture her essence (30), to turn her into an object rather than a subject (33), only to see that project undone by the openness of language (40). If this is true, that project is also undermined by the experimental textual form that renders Mrs. Ramsay. The temptation might be overwhelming to read Mrs. Ramsay as a faithful embodiment of Victorian ideals, gender fixity, and realist storytelling, given her desire for her daughters to get married and to conform to conventional gender roles.⁶⁰ Her propensity for propagating the kinds of social connections that govern Clarissa's party, moreover, are apparent in her desire to relieve the lighthouse keeper and his son of solitude ("For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time...and to have no letters or newspapers, and to see nobody[?]" [8]), and are of a piece with her aspirations of being "an investigator elucidating the social problem" (11). The novel's first section, however, which sets up Mrs. Ramsay in these terms, is also a story of competing objects in which she is but one

⁶⁰ She uses the term "infidel ideas" to describe the possibility of her daughters seeking "for themselves a life different from her; in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of some man or other" (9).

participant, a narrative whose free indirect style should temper the impulse to read her as a retrograde counterpoint to the New Woman. It is more useful to read Mrs. Ramsay as patently displaying her characteristicity, putting the Victorian “Old Woman” on stage to be queried and questioned. As much as she exudes convention, for instance, Mrs. Ramsay is also the “spray of life” that Mr. Ramsay squelches with his infantile demands for sympathy, an image that connotes Bergsonian vitalism even as it positions her as a life-giving force to be used up by men (33). Like Clarissa, Mrs. Ramsay is *both* the old and the new. To this extent, the novel engages us early on in the problem of how to relate multiple and contradictory perspectives without settling their dynamism, a problem extended by Lily’s experiments.

A recent reading by Beatrice Monaco heeds this challenge, identifying Mrs. Ramsay’s moments of being as instances of Deleuzian becoming, where she puts “her ‘molar’ self aside, because it is a peripheral aspect of being...and is therefore secondary to this sphere in which individual subjectifications do not exist” (42). Monaco goes on to argue, importantly, that Mrs. Ramsay’s “free exploration” is limited by her subject positions as wife and mother and that the novel requires a second figure in Lily Briscoe, whose roles are indeterminate, to realize the “micropolitical activity” that Mrs. Ramsay begins (42). As with Clarissa’s moments of being, Mrs. Ramsay’s are dual. In perhaps the most well-known example, she retreats to “a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others,” where “this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures” (52-3). As a moment of presumed privacy, it affords her a contingent escape from social structure and gender positioning. And yet, this loss of self is oriented toward the gaining of stability:

Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke. (53)

This is not, in other words, a descent into the flux of potential out of which selves emerge but into some putatively deeper mode of individuality free of the subjectifying influences of “life.” To Mrs. Ramsay, it affords stability of selfhood, because she is temporarily abjured from “the fret, the hurry, the stir” of social interaction and all its attendant repositionings of the self. Her sudden invocation of God – “It will end, It will end, she said. It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord” (53) – speaks to a desire for transcendence, not because she is particularly religious, but because she has no epistemic tools for turning toward anything *but* such stability.⁶¹ Like Clarissa on the London street, Mrs. Ramsay feels outside of herself in these moments – “But what have I done with my life? thought Mrs. Ramsay...She had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything” (68) – made suddenly aware of the falsity of social interaction and its subjectifying mechanisms. Her moments of being seek to arrest flux by finding permanence and stability in the actual: “there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change” (85).⁶²

⁶¹ Mrs. Ramsay immediately recognizes the inadequacy of invoking God, but thinks of herself as having been “trapped into saying something she did not mean” (53). Indeed, she is trapped by the logic of the argument that she chooses to pursue: solitary moment of being, to triumphant individualism, to epistemic stability, to transcendence.

⁶² For Perry Meisel, it should be noted, Mrs. Ramsay’s moments of being allow her to sink so deeply into herself that she is left without a self, “a function of privacy so profound as finally to have no ego at all by which to name it” (147).

To put this another way, Mrs. Ramsay believes it possible to tunnel deep enough beneath flux and change to overcome it. In this regard, she looks to stability as an affect lying in wait beneath the rigours of the quotidian, a sublime changelessness separate from the violence of history to which she can escape. While not stultifying as Mr. Ramsay's masculinist desire for epistemic certainty, nor Peter Walsh's to reify Clarissa as an object for his own pleasure, neither is this belief in line with the kind of protean queerness toward which the novel points. Rather, Mrs. Ramsay's desire – to experience the liveliness of the moment through self-contemplation – typifies a way of knowing that the novel finds inadequate: to resolve the unresolvable doubleness of the moment, to understand an affective experience in indicative terms, to make Bergsonian flux yield a satisfying unitary experience.

Lily is uniquely positioned beyond Mrs. Ramsay's binarism of surface and depth. Rather than seeking to resolve the distance between two incompatible narratives, Lily seeks to represent it. Her exploration of this distance is both aesthetic and political, as her painting also queries the masculinist logic of either/or. Again, Bowlby's reading of sex and gender in *Orlando* provides a useful paradigm for holding competing perspectives at once, a position Bowlby associates with feminism:

Is this extraordinary 'biography' a fantasy of the effacement, the whimsical ruling out, of a sexual differentiation which must, in reality, mark the forms of human subjectivity? And/or, is it a manifesto for a new world in which the difference of the sexes is no longer the principal determinant of the lines along which human subjects make their way? It might be that the very possibility of putting the question in the form of the

‘and/or,’ without demanding a definite, single answer, is already
 ‘feminine,’ in the sense of preceding or challenging the confidence of an
 unequivocal judgement. (50)

The feminist model of knowing that Bowlby proposes to elude the masculinist logic of empiricism is not a dialectical synthesis. Rather, it is to remain open to the possibility of choosing both at the same time. To represent both sides without privileging either is to see this distance not as a problem to be solved but as fertile terrain for elaborating virtual connections.

Like so many of Woolf’s characters, Lily suffers from a feeling of solitude, especially at the beginning of the novel’s final section: “she felt cut off from other people, able only to go on watching, asking wondering. The house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her. She had no attachment here, she felt, no relations with it” (121-2). Unlike Mrs. Ramsay’s predicament, such solitude does not lead to a quest for self-sufficient individualism or a longing for epistemic stability. More importantly, Lily’s feeling of detachment does not include her reminiscence of the painting and her struggles with it: “There was the wall; the hedge; the tree. The question was of some relation between those masses. She had borne it in her mind all these years” (123). The painting serves as a metaphor for Lily’s predicament: she is also a mass with an unknown relation to things that surround her. Crucially, the fact that Lily’s situation can be rendered metaphorically undermines her claims to utter detachment: she is connected, at least to her art, through a representational system. By locating Lily as attached to something larger than the self, the novel suggests that unlike Mrs. Ramsay, she will look beyond psychological stability for a solution to the dynamic nature of time.

Extradiegetically, moreover, the novel points to such a solution in the passage's free indirect discourse. Whether it is Lily characterizing her detachment or an external narrator is suggestively obscure, opening a space between psychology and the figuration of that psychology. Instead of a coherent text delivering the certainty of unified psychology, the novel gives us a fragmented and multiple character delivered by a fragmented and multiple narration.

The free indirect discourse is a key reflection of Lily's artistic technique, made apparent as she tries to begin her painting:

Where to begin? – that was the question; at what point to make the first mark? One line placed on the canvas committed her to innumerable risks, to frequent and irrevocable decisions. All that in idea seemed simple became in practice immediately complex; as the waves shape themselves symmetrically from the cliff top, but to the swimmer among them are divided by steep gulfs, and foaming crests. Still the risk must be run; the mark made. (130)

The dilemma that Lily identifies here is more than the division between theory and practice. The difficulty, Lily suggests, is that the waves are thinkable both omnisciently (“from the cliff top”) and impressionistically (“to the swimmer among them”). The challenge in art is to think these two perspectives simultaneously and to represent this duality in non-indicative terms.

While the novel's free indirect style strives to meet this challenge narratologically, the beginnings of such a non-indicative model of artistic representation for Lily are to be found in the wave-like process through which she paints:

With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke. The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark. A second time she did it – a third time. And so pausing and so flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related. (130)

This scene is not of a putatively objective artist actively shaping an inert canvas, all the while pretending not to be implicated discursively in its design, a model we might call “hylomorphism.”⁶³ To the contrary, Lily’s “dancing rhythmical movement” is a way of interacting with her canvas. Lily’s movements and brush strokes are “related” to one another as they are caught up together in the same rhythm. Instead of a subject-centred artist giving form to a passive canvas, Lily and her canvas participate in a common rhythm, not as pre-formed and unchangeable subject and object, but as subjects in process.

Indeed, in these moments of artistic creation, Lily seems to retreat from the self-centred subjectivity by which others are accustomed to recognize her. She is “drawn out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people” (131), but not toward some more authentic privacy that might fortify selfhood. Rather, Lily’s process of painting is a process of depersonalization:

Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost

⁶³ Deleuze and Guattari define “Hylomorphism” as to the imposition of transcendent form on passive or inert matter (*A Thousand Plateaus* 407-9). As Protevi explains, hylomorphism also resonates with fascism: the leader comes from on high to rescue the chaos of the people by his imposition of order, the soul rules the body from on high, the will whips the body into shape, and so on” (*Political Physics* 9).

consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr Carmichael was there or not, her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues. (132).

When Lily is in this state of artistic creation, she forgets the demands of subjectivity put on her by habit. It is a movement toward privacy, but one that begins to erase rather than bolster the primacy of individual consciousness.

Lily's pursuit of a principle of difference through becoming is not a dialectical quest for essence, as Meisel sees it.⁶⁴ Rather than the symbolic depth that attracts Mrs. Ramsay, Lily's attempt to "get hold of something that evaded her" (158) is a quest for unspent potential: "Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything" (158). Witness the affinities of Lily's pursuit here with how Deleuze and Guattari define the task of art:

By means of the material, the aim of art is to wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations. (*Philosophy*, 167)

For Deleuze and Guattari, art must extract the pure sensation of the artwork, divorced from the subjectivity of its creator or its perceiver. It must produce affects, which are not

⁶⁴ See Meisel, page 146: "The nature of Lily's desire for Mrs. Ramsay's love in life in part 1 and for her memory, sanctified by art, after her death in part 3 is the same kind of modernist desire Woolf satirizes in philosophy and psychoanalysis. For Lily in part 1, it is nothing less than a question of discovering the 'secret' of Mrs. Ramsay's being."

subjective emotions but “zones of indiscernibility” between “things, beasts, persons,” those points “that immediately precede their natural differentiation” (*Philosophy* 173).⁶⁵

We might say that Lily aims to isolate Mrs. Ramsay’s affects and to enter into a zone of indiscernibility with them through a process of becoming. Indeed, there is a world of difference between trying to recapture an actualized Mrs. Ramsay in the past, and giving herself over to Mrs. Ramsay as a series of asubjective characteristics or percepts:

[O]ne got nothing from soliciting urgently. One got only a glare in the eye from looking at the line of the wall, or from thinking – she wore a grey hat. She was astonishingly beautiful. Let it come, she thought, if it will come. (158)

Mrs. Ramsay is less a coherent person in Lily’s memory here than a feeling without subjective embodiment. When Lily thinks she sees someone sitting in the house, it is due only to the windows being “whitened by some light stuff behind it,” which turns out to be the wind-stirred curtain (164-5). Her cries of “Mrs. Ramsay!” quickly become “part of ordinary experience,” on a plane “with the chair, with the table,” an encounter that spurs the production of her painting: “she had something she must share, yet could hardly leave her easel, so full her mind was of what she was thinking” (165).

When Lily completes her painting, she is in the midst of another encounter: “Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was – her picture” (170). The “something over there” is vague: “there” has no apparent

⁶⁵ It is in this regard that Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of affect is distinct from T. S. Eliot’s depersonalization. While Eliot, too, seeks to isolate pure feeling independent of the individual artist and perceiver, Deleuze and Guattari’s affect is geared toward uncovering the work’s capacity to form virtual

referent, merely an elsewhere used only to describe Lily's actions (she moves "as if" recalled by this elsewhere). The "as if," furthermore, provides only an approximation of what Lily's movement looks like. It obscures her as a textual object but to this extent, it also reveals her insofar as Woolf's novel does not represent her indicatively: Lily is *only* this simultaneous concealment and revelation.

In this regard, Lily is a metonym for her own painting:

With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (170)

The intense burst of energy tires Lily out but not before she seems to find a principle for relating unbalanced elements. Like Lily herself to the narrator, this principle is nothing but its own simultaneous concealment and revelation. Lily leaves the implied reader behind in this moment, but also brings her with her, insofar as the text teaches that such a principle cannot be revealed mimetically. If Lily discovers a series of virtual connections, they are connections that resonate with Woolf's free indirect style, because it, too, seeks to connect competing perspectives without rendering them identical.

The "something over there" also refers to the lighthouse, as it is the location most recently mentioned. Indeed, Lily's painting occurs in the context of Mr. Ramsay's voyage to the lighthouse with Cam and James, a seemingly dialectical pursuit of an object that would epitomize Mr. Ramsay's teleological mind and motives. But there is more to what happens in the boat, and not just because James has a revelation of multiplicity at the same time as Lily ("No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing

assemblages. Eliot's view of art as "an escape from personality" (1097) is rooted in the presumed objectivity of its creator and the critic's disinterested pursuit of clear judgment.

was simply one thing. The other was the Lighthouse too” [152]). Their arrival at the lighthouse also produces a parallel moment to Lily’s painting:

[Mr. Ramsay] rose and stood in the bow of the boat, very straight and tall, for all the world, James thought, as if he were saying, ‘There is no God,’ and Cam thought, as if he were leaping into space, and they both rose to follow him as he sprang, lightly like a young man, holding his parcel, on to the rock. (169)

In this moment, Mr. Ramsay is as two-sided and contradictory as the masses on Lily’s canvas, appearing as the rational pondering of loneliness to James, as the exuberant hope for the future to Cam (“leaping into space”), both of which are presented simultaneously and on equal planes. Like James’ own contradictory view of the lighthouse,⁶⁶ Mr. Ramsay is both of these at the same time, made up of divergent perspectives that can co-exist because Woolf conjures a reader who must hold both views at once. When he leaps “like a young man” onto the rock, it is another instantiation of Lily’s painting that we do not see: Mr. Ramsay moves onto stable ground, as if reconstituting himself for some future, while the two perspectives of him, in James and Cam, are on the verge of following him there, but the scene ends without that happening.

Mr. Ramsay, like Lily’s painting and Lily herself, is not to be monologically settled, but left in dynamic tension. Cam and James’ description of their father through analogy (“as if”) raises the same phenomenological limit as we see in Lily’s painting and

⁶⁶ James’ vision of multiplicity comes as he remembers the idealized lighthouse from his childhood next to the empirically visible one: “The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening. Now –

“James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry” (152). Importantly, James realizes that both are the lighthouse.

in Lily herself: Mr. Ramsay is only a series of impressionistic approximations, revealed completely to the implied reader *as* incompleteness. If the various versions of Mr. Ramsay are connected, it is through their non-identity: the novel's shifting perspectives simultaneously activate Mr. Ramsay as loneliness and Mr. Ramsay as hope. Indeed, Woolf's technique in *To the Lighthouse* is always a means toward creating these connections: a free indirect narrator who does not synthesize various perspectives under an all-encompassing subjectivity, but a shifting one, who stylizes a multiplicity of voices as a line in the centre of the novel, as it were. If the shift from "The Window" to "The Lighthouse," moreover, is a shift from Mrs. Ramsay's self-exploration and search for stability to Lily's self-dismantling and representation of unsettled dynamism, it is also a shift, at least metonymically, from psychological realism to free indirect discourse.⁶⁷ This raises the question of what connects *these* competing perspectives; if "The Window" and "The Lighthouse" are ten years apart, what connects them is time, or more specifically, "Time Passes."⁶⁸

The novel's middle section constitutes a zone of indiscernibility between "The Window" and "The Lighthouse." "Time Passes" engineers the emptying of idealism through a force that goes by various names: "time," "death," "war." This force arises as if out of nature with the arrival of "a downpouring of immense darkness" (103), a "flood" (103), and "wind and destruction" (105) that stand in for the impersonality and indifference of the world to human subjectivity. This section of the novel renounces the development of subjects as its *modus operandi*, relegating characters and their deaths to the insignificance of bracketed asides, as if to remark on how miniscule they are in

⁶⁷ Intradiegetically, that is: both sections, of course, are narrated in free indirect style.

⁶⁸ Gillian Beer makes this argument, comparing "Time Passes" to the line in Lily's painting (78).

comparison to this force. Like death to Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*, here time and its exigencies form a limit to human consciousness, making the war and other attendant deadly forces⁶⁹ the political unconscious of “The Window” and “The Lighthouse.” The latter two are invested in elaborating the multiplicity of the decentred human subject through free indirect discourse and Woolf’s tunnelling method; “Time Passes” shows what these two sections leave out and therefore what also connects them: the dangerous political consequences of claims to unified subjectivity, what can result when nationalist and gender discourses produce subjects. The impersonal force of nature that is conjured here – “Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began? With equal complacency she saw his misery, condoned his meanness, and acquiesced in his torture” (110) – is the modernist moment that Woolf identifies: when “nature” ceases to signify an outside to human activity and is instead supplanted by it as the highest life-giving and life-administering force.

In terms of Woolf’s novel, “Time Passes” thus suggests that even the fragmented impressionism of free indirect discourse has its limitations as a political model for conjuring forbidden connections between decentred subjects. As much as the technique of *To the Lighthouse* looks for a way to bring the concept of privacy from psychological solitude to intersubjective and public engagement,⁷⁰ “Time Passes” suggests another technique that Woolf will explore more fully in *The Waves*: not a detached narrator as an ever-shifting vantage point between subjects, but natural analogies that create zones of

⁶⁹ The proximity Prue Ramsay’s death in childbirth, for instance, to Andrew’s death in the war demonstrates a commitment to showing that there were and are horrors for both sexes (108-9).

⁷⁰ See Cuddy-Keane on this point, especially page 242.

indiscernibility where subjects – both the novel’s characters and its implied reader – cease to be themselves.

The Waves

The Waves takes the decentring of subjectivity as a narrative given, reforming the stream of consciousness of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* to a purer distillation of affect and percept;⁷¹ in so doing, it exposes subjects as contingent formations held together through their parallel textual positions and their shared lack of narrative progress. Like Woolf’s other characters, the six voices in *The Waves* express dread at having undergone actualization, the painful process that begins in their infancy and works them into gendered subjects. At the same time, there is a blankness to these characters, as they are not endowed with the features of individual subjectivity. As the novel moves further away from character as its central unit of meaning, the poetic interludes extend the technique of “Time Passes,” in this case using figures about figuration to interrogate the seemingly perspectiveless flux that lies behind character. By ironizing the availability of this flux, the novel diagrams the challenge of seeing objectively, all the while evoking a new relationship between reader and text as the virtual potential between the private and the public.

Criticism on *The Waves* notes from early on the novel’s attempt to do away with characters as distinct psychological consciousnesses. Early reviewers suggested that the novel’s six voices were not characters *per se*, but either abstractions free of psychological

⁷¹ Hermione Lee suggests that *The Waves* is Woolf’s only true stream-of-consciousness novel, “in which the minds of the characters flow on, as from the inside, with no authorial interpolations” (102).

reality,⁷² or aspects of the author herself.⁷³ (This was perhaps aided by Woolf, who said in an interview, “The six characters were supposed to be one” [qtd. in Goldman, 22]). Later critics extended and complicated this idea by reading the novel as an attempt to reform selfhood. Frank McConnell, for instance, sees the novel’s natural interludes as “deliberate and highly effective attempts to present a phenomenal world without the intervention of human consciousness” (qtd. in Goldman, 82), while Meisel suggests that its fragmented structure depicts the self as something “not yet mapped and pinioned to a spot on the landscape” (qtd. in Goldman, 99). Garrett Stewart, intriguingly, reads the rhythms of the novel’s prose as an expressive projection of the unconscious as it tries, “often vainly, to posit, and position, a subject behind all its verbal *jection*” (425), a “dispersal of self” felt most acutely by Rhoda (426). Finally, in an influential essay, Jane Marcus shows how Bernard’s claims to authorship and his idolizing of Percival construct him as an allegory for white, male, British colonialism. Through ironic allusions to Romantic poetry, Marcus argues, the novel “undermines humanistic faith in the individual coherent subject while exposing the role writing plays in shoring up national subjectivity,” thus mocking “the Western valorization of individual selfhood” (145).

As we have seen, monological readings of Woolf’s characters are rarely sustained by scrutiny. Clarissa admits she could have loved even the odious Miss Kilman in a different world (13).⁷⁴ An important study by Patrick McGee takes up Marcus’s post-colonial reading of *The Waves*, suggesting that while the novel’s characters are presented

⁷² A review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* states, “after all is said and done, her people remain poetic reflections” (“Unsigned review” 283).

⁷³ See, for instance, a review in the *New Statesman and Nation*: “They each have a name, each a private and independent existence; but in one important respect they are all Virginia Woolf” (Bullett 269).

⁷⁴ Critics have pointed out Kilman’s overt lesbian desires as the reason for Clarissa’s hatred of her, as the latter seeks to contain her own lesbian sexuality. On this point, see Barrett, pages 159-61.

as interpellated subjects – recall, for instance, Susan’s domestic desires to be “like my mother, silent in a blue apron locking up the cupboards” (80) – they are not endowed with the realist conventions of character, such as surnames, physical descriptions, or other individualized characteristics that would lend to them the illusion of personhood. Indeed, as Lee points out, even the characters’ style of voice is consistently monotone and humourless, regardless of mood or situation, whether “young or old, happy or sad, excited or despondent” (104), distinguishable only by content (106). The result is a particular and peculiar non-charactericity, at least by conventional realist standards. This disjunction, then, between the characters’ interpellated desires and their relative sameness makes them, according to McGee, simultaneously present and absent as characters. They represent the ambivalence of the process through which subjects emerge as coherently centred around a unified notion of selfhood (643). Bernard especially exposes this non-identity in the context of the European imperial subject against which post-colonial critics such as Marcus suggest Woolf writes. He is “constructed in contradiction,” performing this ambivalence through his inability to merge with the other characters, but from whom he also “cannot stand apart” (637).⁷⁵ While Marcus reads Bernard as a straight parody of authorial power, McGee suggests that to do so is “to grant authorship an authority that Woolf’s novel calls into question,” showing instead how the complexity of Woolf’s characters undermines its very principles (640).

This complexity plays out in the expectations of character that the novel both raises and confounds. Woolf tempts her implied reader into thinking of the characters as discrete and psychologically coherent, while at the same time challenging such notions of

⁷⁵ See also Tamlyn Monson, who uses Kristeva’s notion of the subject-in-process to suggest that Bernard presents the desire to move past identity but also the impossibility of this task.

identity. Like waves, the characters in the novel appear to have individual autonomy, but are defined only by their position together, and blend into one another in such a way that the novel presents a community without identity, a way for the novel to connect these characters outside of their identification as subjects. Jinny, for example, seems an interpellated subject of heteronormative desire, wanting nothing more than to dress herself up for the gaze of men: “‘I glance, I peep, I powder. All is exact, prepared. My hair is swept in one curve. My lips are precisely red....Our bodies communicate. This is my calling. This is my world’” (82). And yet, there is something highly improper about Jinny’s bodily existence, her unabashed expressions of sexuality and unrestrained enjoyment: “‘He makes towards me. I flutter. I ripple. I stream like a plant in the river, flowing this way flowing that way but rooted so that he may come to me’” (83). The images of flowing and disorientation convey the transgressive nature of Jinny’s desire, as does the careful and yet boundless attention to the physical joining of Jinny’s body with a nameless man’s as they dance: “‘In and out, we are swept now into this large figure; it holds us together; we cannot step outside its sinuous, its hesitating, its abrupt, its perfectly encircling walls. Our bodies, his hard, mine flowing, are pressed together within its body’” (83).

Louis, similarly, exudes conventionality in his fealty to carefully ordered institutions (“‘Now we march, two by two,’ said Louis, ‘orderly, processional, into chapel. I like the dimness that falls as we enter the sacred building. I like the orderly progress’” [25]), and in his resentful jealousy of the attention Percival commands: “‘Look now, how everybody follows Percival....His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander’” (28). Louis’s obsession with the militaristic precision that Percival

embodies speaks both to a desire for order and a dialectical attempt to overcome his status as an unwelcome and unaccepted Australian immigrant. It is thus that he fantasizes about being attached to the soil through a massive length of roots:

‘I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre. All tremors shake me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs. Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing. I am a boy in grey flannels with a belt fastened by a brass snake up here. Down there my eyes are the lidless eyes of a stone figure in a desert by the Nile. I see women passing with red pitchers to the river; I see camels swaying and men in turbans. I hear tramplings, tremblings, stirrings round me.

‘Up here Bernard, Neville, Jinny and Susan (but not Rhoda) skim the flower-beds with their nets....“Louis! Louis! Louis!” they shout....But let me be unseen. I am green as a yew tree in the shade of the hedge. My hair is made of leaves. I am rooted to the middle of the earth. My body is a stalk. I press the stalk.’ (7-8)

The contradictory desires on display here suggest that Louis is as multiple and fragmented as Rhoda will turn out to be. On the one hand, Louis’s fantasy of growing roots is a fantasy of anchoring himself solidly in a life that has been characterized by the consequences of displacement. In his elaborate distinction between “up here” and “down there,” moreover, Louis imagines a place of solitude safely away from the demands and judgments of others. However, “down there” evokes not a private sanctuary of self-

fulfillment, but a hybrid subjectivity of the organic and the artificial. Louis is rooted in the ground, but only by becoming a tree with leaves for eyes, an image that quickly transforms into the stone figure. The statue, a masculine image of a leader and a seer, is Louis's imperialist fantasy of Orientalized otherness, but also a protean subjectivity of shifting vantages.

As the novel frustrates realist notions of character, it challenges its implied reader to resist treating character as Peter Walsh treats womanhood: something to pursue and conquer. *The Waves* issues this challenge through its own figure of imperialist desire – Percival, the only one of the seven friends without his own voice, who commands attention even as a child: “Look now, how everyone follows Percival. He is heavy,” says Louis (28); who, for Neville, stabilizes shifting identities upon his entrance into a room: “The reign of chaos is over. He has imposed order” (100). Quite literally, he is a soldier, deployed to India and, to that extent, standing in for a practice of pursuit and capture that Woolf associates with imperialism. And since nations can conspire in their acquisitiveness with modes of reading that do the same, so can national traditions of literature, especially when the figure for all three is named after the knight in quest of the Grail.⁷⁶

Irony is one way through which *The Waves* approaches and undermines this English literary tradition. While Parsifal's quest ends in victory, Percival's ends in waste. Similar to Peter Walsh, whose suggestive habit of playing with his pocketknife only foregrounds his metaphorical impotence, Percival's masculine quest comes to a

⁷⁶ The legend of Percival was popularized by Wolfram Von Eschenbach's thirteenth-century Arthurian romance, *Parzival*. The epic, and the various retellings of the story, detail Parzival's quest for the Grail in order to become a knight of the Round Table. Parzival's journey is both physical and psychical; as Poag notes, the knight not only succeeds in his quest, but learns by the end “the puzzle of human kinship” (255).

premature end through the ignominious event of his horse tripping (124).⁷⁷ The incident suggests that for this novel, the national literary tradition is worn out, stumbling, and perhaps close to death, as is a mode of dialectical pursuit with which Woolf associates it.

A second way that the novel attempts to subvert this masculinist literary tradition is by revealing its own queer contradictions. Neville's sexual attraction to Percival, and in particular, to the most austere subject-producing elements of Percival's operations, elaborates an alternative relationship to power, one based not on compliance or resistance, but on the sheer abandon to the enjoyment of submission. What Neville loves most of all about Percival is his authoritarian imperialism and his overly masculine conventionality. As a child, he is thrilled by the idea of being subdued by the nationalist authority for which Percival stands, represented by his stolid demeanour in church:

‘His blue and oddly inexpressive eyes are fixed with pagan indifference upon the pillar opposite. He would make an admirable churchwarden. He should have a birch and beat little boys for their misdemeanours....But look – he flicks his hand to the back of his neck. For such gestures one falls hopelessly in love for a lifetime.’ (27)

The paradox of Neville's desire is that he is in love not only with a register of authority that would subdue alternative forms of desire (is, in fact, in love *with* being subdued in such a way), but with Percival's utter indifference to his desire and outright heterosexuality: “‘He will forget me. He will leave my letters lying about among guns and dogs unanswered. I shall send him poems and he will perhaps reply with a picture post card. But it is for that that I love him’” (47). If Louis tries to capture the limit that

⁷⁷ An earlier draft of *The Waves* has Percival's horse tripping over a molehill (*The Waves*, 257, n. 189).

Percival embodies by trying to imitate his subject-making power with fantasies of Egypt, Neville finds thrill in submitting to it, much like Nick Carraway's attraction to the thrall of subjectification at the end of *The Great Gatsby*. Neville's regard of Percival multiplies him, making his unwavering straightness into a totem of queerness. That this model of British literature is susceptible to deformation suggests that for Woolf, hermeneutically naïve realism, too, contains and conceals its own self-abnegating energy. In demonstrating this queer effect, the novel exposes the potential fluidity of all phallogocentrism when submitted to deviant forms of reading.

In this regard, the novel in part teaches readers to read beyond character. For Woolf, the dangers of reifying unified subjectivity are tied up with the dangers of imperialism, which also tries to assert the masculine primacy of the British "I" over its colonized others. McGee's reading makes the important, if obvious, point that *The Waves* is not a novel of self-development. The novel's interest is not for Bernard, Louis, Neville, Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda to actualize themselves as subjects through narrative progress. Never are we given the sense that closure would lie in these characters crystallizing into some sort of community or that they should be paired off in marriage or sanctified through self-discovery. Indeed, any progress we *can* ascribe to this narrative would seem to be mitigated by the novel's poetic interludes, whose breaking waves and unceasing movement from morning to night suggest the world's indifference to human affairs, much like "Time Passes." The interludes contain various images of falling, breaking, darkness, and death to remind us of the non-human limit to the human world of personal concerns: the waves falling "*with muffled thuds, like logs falling, on the shore*" that recurs throughout the interludes (21); the drops forming "*on the bloated sides of swollen*

things” (59); the “*flocks of shadow*” that obscure the light (90); the “*waves of darkness*” that cover the world (198). Although Bernard imagines himself taking on a personified Death at the end of the novel ““unvanquished and unyielding”” (248), the contrasting terseness and sobriety of the final, short interlude – “*The waves broke on the shore*” (248) – suggests that the world depicted in the interludes has no concern for such human affairs as death.

As the ostensible space of the non-human between the chapters proper, the interludes diagram the problem of negotiating a move away from free indirect discourse. Seemingly told without a narrating consciousness, these sections attempt to do away with the subjective perspective involved in impressionism without claiming an objective reality. Like the descriptions of Lily’s painting and of Mr. Ramsay, the interludes use similes to move through this problem, this time almost to excess: “*the dark bar on the horizon became clear as if the sediment in an old wine-bottle had sunk...the sky cleared as if the white sediment there had sunk, or as if the arm of a woman...had raised a lamp*” (3). The abundance of similes depicts a world available only for the I, yet seemingly not located in the consciousness of one character. The negotiation of this phenomenological limit recalls Husserl’s notion of the transcendental ego, which constructs the world for the individual, yet is distinct from what Dermot Moran calls “the psychological domain of the empirical self” (148). For Husserl, perceiving the world in this way requires a phenomenological epoché (bracketing, or reduction), whereby the perceiving subject “transcends” the world of things by declaiming objective knowledge, but without slipping into the idealism of individual psychological experience.⁷⁸ Instead, the transcendental ego

⁷⁸ For further explanation of the epoché, including the evolution of the idea throughout Husserl’s career, see Moran, pages 144-8.

can be said to construct the world for me *as* a world of meanings, revealing potentialities of objects that can only be confirmed or denied by further experience.⁷⁹

Just as the transcendental ego does not reveal an essence behind objects, it is important to resist reading the interludes in *The Waves* as direct access to Bergsonian flux that subtends the human or the frozen moment for which Mrs. Ramsay searches in vain. Recall that “Time Passes” does not directly represent time; it is an interlude about charactericity, demonstrating that there is no “nature” outside of textuality. Here, too, the interludes appear to offer the pure emotional intensity of affects freed from consciousness. The ostensible perspectivelessness on display, however, is an illusion.

It is appropriately paradoxical that *The Waves* begins with an interlude, which, by definition, should come “in between”; what comes in between the subjective narrations of the chapters also precedes them, as the novel’s opening dramatizes:

The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually. (3)

The scene sets up the binary between light and darkness, which circumscribes the passage of time and the movement toward death that the interludes thematize. As the sun

⁷⁹ Husserl, in *Cartesian Meditations*: “By phenomenological epoché I reduce my natural human Ego and my psychic life – the realm of my *psychological self-experience* – to my transcendental-phenomenological Ego, the realm of *transcendental-phenomenological self-experience*. The Objective world, the world that exists for me, that always has and always will exist for me, the only world that ever can exist for me – this world, with all its Objects, I said, derives its whole sense and its existential status, which it has for me, from me myself, *from me as the transcendental Ego*, the Ego which comes to the fore only with transcendental-phenomenological epoché” (26).

illuminates, however, it becomes clear that darkness is a function of light: the “dark line” only becomes visible as the sky whitens and is therefore the absence of light on the horizon. Already, the novel suggests that the opposites that darkness and light embody – life and death, surface and depth – are not opposites at all but different expressions of the same relationship. Outside the emerging distinction between light and darkness, however, there is something that precedes the binary, marked by the word “except”: a crease in the sea. This exception, which functions to do what the absence of light cannot (that is, distinguish the sea from the sky), has no tangibility on its own: it is texture or the movement of the water.

The opening of the novel is a figuration of figuration: the sun stands in for the text’s author, gradually illuminating a field of representation and endowing it with meaning.⁸⁰ If this is a story about the author’s power to create signification, however, the interlude shows us that the author does not work on a blank text. While the scene masquerades as objective description, there is a narrating perspective, first and foremost in the opening sentence: “*The sun had not yet risen,*” which suggests that there is subject position from which the sun can be said to rise (as the sun does not actually rise). Throughout, the interlude’s language implies an unspecified observer: the air “*seemed to become fibrous*” (seemed to whom?); the sea “*slowly became transparent*” (transparent to whom?); a “*broad flame became visible*” (visible to whom?) (4). While the poesis of this section, and of all the interludes, appears to be beyond the human, it is phenomenologically always for a point of view. The interludes, that is, ironize the

⁸⁰ Dickinson argues that the novel uses the sun imagery to demonstrate the effects of patriarchal and imperialist power on feminine spaces (27). Through various textual experiments, Dickinson suggests, the interludes attempt “to extinguish imperialism’s domestic gaze and reclaim language that has been in the

availability of Bergsonian flux, unmasking the difficulty in objective observation.

Intradiegetically, if the sun stands for the author, the crease in the waves is what precedes the relationship between author and text: textuality itself, or the inevitable distance between signifier and signified. The will to represent this crease might be called “Lily Briscoe,” diagramming this separation as a necessary feature of art.

Figures of figuration multiply as the novel moves forward. As the sun rises higher in the second interlude, it appears to endow the scene with meaning:

The light touched something green in the window corner and made it a lump of emerald, a cave of pure green like stoneless fruit. It sharpened the edges of chairs and tables and stitched white table-cloths with fine gold wires. As the light increased a bud here and there split asunder and shook out flowers, green veined and quivering, as if the effort of opening had set the rocking, and pealing a faint carillon as they beat their frail clappers against their white walls. (21)

As a figure for the author, the sun illuminates the domestic and natural spaces, making the “something green” and the “edges of chairs” perceptible, and coaxing buds to open. At the same time, the descriptions of these objects are rendered impressionistically. As usual, the similes in the passage (“like stoneless fruit,” “as if the effort”) suggest that they are only phenomenologically available for an observer, undermining any other standard of realism in the sun’s illumination. Far from lamenting the impotence of the author, this passage represents the distance between realism and impressionism, suggesting that the

service of empire” (29). In so doing, the novel uses the interludes’ shadow imagery “as a place of possibility for a new female subjectivity to emerge” (38).

simultaneous activation of these two modes is both the form and the content of the interludes.

The death that gets dramatized over the course of the novel's interludes – the slow setting of the sun – draws out the death of stable meaning, underpinning the narrative action of the chapters. Its figures are many. They include “*the ribs of an eaten-out boat,*” which the sun-flecked waves gild (58): a broken vessel, a metaphor of metaphor, rendered temporarily vibrant again by a masterful author function. The novel does not lament the bursting of the vessel, but sees it as an opportunity for creation. In the same paragraph, the splashing mackerel leave detritus of twigs and cork on the water, “*as if some light shallop had foundered and burst its sides and the sailor had swum to land...and left his frail cargo to be washed ashore*” (58). The interlude borrows the figure of the worn-out vessel from the register of the indicative to dramatize the fish's activity. What results is a hybrid form of representation, where an image of the death of hermeneutic stability is reappropriated through a simile to illustrate the vividness – and therefore, the life – endemic to this highly impressionistic scene.

Like Lily Briscoe, whose art seeks to exploit the unbridgeable distance between Bergsonian flux and Mrs. Ramsay's longing for it, the interludes suggest that the slow setting of the sun is not a failure but an opportunity for artistic production. When the sun does finally sink, what is left is darkness that acts “as if” it is a force rather than an absence: “*As if there were waves of darkness in the air, darkness moved on, covering houses, hills, trees, as waves of water wash round the sides of some sunken ship*” (198). The extended passage that follows describes darkness's path as it submerges the landscape, behaving as waves would to extinguish the perceptible world. Darkness,

according to the description, is not a graspable thing in its own right but must be figured as a force comparable to the force of the waves. These similes suggest that this is not a moment of obliteration for the novel, where all that had been hoped for is lost. Rather, if darkness is like waves, rolling through the landscape to cover what was once perceptible, then it is not darkness at all; we are left not with the nothingness of a true absence, but with a performative series of similes that evokes what remains, and what was always there: the waves themselves, which precede the binary of light and dark, life and death.

If the sun's gradual setting recalls Mrs. Ramsay's death in slow motion, the novel's final line – the short italicized paragraph, “*The waves broke on the shore*” (248) – suggests “The Lighthouse.” By this logic, Bernard's protracted final soliloquy alludes to Mr. Ramsay's longing for the comfort against his inevitable death that Mrs. Ramsay seemed to provide,⁸¹ a despair that also strategizes how to preserve the “I”:

‘For one day as I leant over a gate that led into a field, the rhythm stopped; the rhymes and the hummings, the nonsense and the poetry....

‘This self now as I leant over the gate looking down over fields rolling in waves of colour beneath me made no answer. He threw up no opposition. He attempted no phrase....

‘...A man without a self, I said. A heavy body leaning on a gate. A dead man....I, carrying a notebook, making phrases, had recorded mere changes; a shadow, I had been sedulous to take note of shadows. How can

⁸¹ Gabrielle McIntyre and Jane Goldman both note Bernard's aspirations toward textual sovereignty. For McIntyre, Bernard's final soliloquy “quite literally ‘takes over’ the narration...to displace the community of speaking voices that has constituted the text thus far” (31), locked in a battle to suppress heteroglossia (33). For Goldman, Bernard's repeated use of “I” in the final section “declares itself the Absolute Subject of literary tradition,” a declaration that is also undermined by his “labyrinthine sentence structure,” which indicates his own insecurities (66).

I proceed now, I said, without a self, weightless and visionless, through a world weightless, without illusion?’ (236-8)

Bernard’s story of approaching a threshold and observing what lies beyond it culminates with his claiming a loss of self, which he equates with death. As he diagrams his own crisis of narrative powerlessness (“he attempted no phrase”), however, he does so through his narratorial agency (“A man without a self, *I said*”). This duality suggests that although Bernard is not a naïve stand-in for unfettered and unwavering dialectical pursuit, he embodies a devotion to individual selfhood whose loss would mean the obliteration of vision.

Bernard, however, is not Woolf. Her novel teaches its implied reader to think subjectivity beyond individual psychology. While *The Waves* ends with the seeming assertion of the limited scope of human agency, this is not equal to the death of the subject that Bernard fears and laments. In “*The waves broke on the shore,*” there is still a narrating perspective and an implied reader, subjectivities crucial to this novel’s meaning, as well as a narrating present distinct from its content (the interludes are in the past tense). The final line suggests that although character has been evacuated, subjectivity is still here in the relationship between narrator and reader that the text continues to elaborate. Imagistically, the waves are an appropriate correlative to this dynamic: waves, too, are not things in themselves, but a relationship that expresses the difference between high points in the water’s flow.

What is it that joins “writer” (the various figurations of the author) and reader? What connection do Woolf’s texts – and most self-consciously, *The Waves* – inaugurate and explore? If Woolfian subjectivity is a public process, rather than a private interiority,

the novel's ending, which strips away character to reveal the novel's other, extradiegetic subjectivities, suggests that what is at stake between the private and the public is reading itself, an act whose performance necessitates a curious mixture of public and private.

What is reading, in other words, if it is not mimesis or the pursuit of exhaustive knowing?

Several critics have noted this dynamic in Woolf's novels. Molly Hite suggests that Woolf withholds cues from her reader, obscuring the "understanding between author and reader" as to whether given passages imply "mockery, censure, sympathy, condescension, or some other evaluative mode" (256). Such a strategy creates "tonal labyrinths" (254) that force the reader into a perpetual state of ambivalence, a productively ethical shuttling between "conflicting points of views and sympathies" (268). For Sandra Kemp, Woolf's fiction enables "a different gendered relation of writer to reader," where text elicits reader as woman, meaning that she is "part of the shared consciousness of the book" (104). For both critics, to read Woolf is to share in the production of new subjectivities; for our purposes, to read Woolf is also to participate in an experiment of transmission and transmissibility.⁸²

⁸² Part of what makes a consideration of reading so germane to Woolf is her frequent expressions of love for this act. Both volumes of *The Common Reader*, for instance, contain essays whose careful and almost systematic examination of authors, in language critical and laudatory, indicates both a deep concern and a joy for reading. She writes of Addison, "Two hundred years have passed; the plate is worn smooth; the pattern almost rubbed out; but the metal is pure silver" (105); of George Eliot, "she gathers in her large grasp a great bunch of the main elements of human nature and groups them loosely together with a tolerant and wholesome understanding which, as one finds upon re-reading, has not only kept her figures fresh and free, but has given them an unexpected hold upon our laughter and tears" (167). Even Defoe, whose realism she accuses of being "dull" and leaving out "a large part of human nature" (92), she finds to have achieved "a truth of insight which is far rarer and more enduring than the truth of fact which he professed to make his aim" (93). The final essay in the two-part collection, "How Should One Read a Book?", proceeds from the question of how to "get the deepest and widest pleasure from what we read" (258). Her 1932 essay "The Love of Reading" concludes that the "true" and "inscrutable" reason we read books is that "we get pleasure from reading. It is complex and difficult pleasure....But that pleasure is enough" (274).

Unsurprisingly, Woolf's own conception of reading is paradoxical. In "How Should One Read a Book?", she characterizes it as a solitary activity – "The other side of the mind is now exposed – the dark side that comes uppermost in solitude, not the light side that shows in company" (252) – yet one that is also communal, in at least two ways. First of all, she makes clear that equally important and equally difficult as "open[ing] the mind wide to the fast flocking of innumerable impressions" (259) is passing critical judgment upon books once the multitude of impressions has settled. This aspect of reading's pleasure participates in a larger network by becoming part of the critical "atmosphere which writers breathe as they work" ("How Should One Read," 261). As Cuddy-Keane argues, Woolf's goal was to bring "private immersion in language into the sphere of public discourse," making publication and critical discussion "the sites where private and public meet" (242).

Secondly, Woolf's novels pull readers into the public sphere by training them to see the world in new ways. By grappling with Woolf's experimental fiction, readers learn to "engage the complexity, richness and fluidity of the mind as it modulates and weaves between conscious and non-conscious thought" (Cuddy-Keane 243). In turn, these novels challenge readers, as we have seen, to hold contradictory propositions at once, and to be attuned to what Woolf calls the "incessant shower of innumerable atoms" ("Modern Fiction," 150) that her fiction impressionistically records. Reading is done in solitude, but its ability to transform subjectivities and thus alter public engagement makes it a political act, as Woolf suggests at the end of another essay, "The Love of Reading":

Reading has changed the world and continues to change it. When the day

of judgment comes therefore and all secrets are laid bare, we shall not be surprised to learn that the reason why we have grown from apes to men, and from our caves and dropped our bows and arrows and sat round the fire and talked and given to the poor and helped the sick – the reason why we have made shelter and society out of the wastes of the desert and the tangle of the jungle is simply this – we have loved reading. (274)

Although hyperbolic in its veneration of reading's history-altering power, the final four words get at the paradoxically communal nature of this seemingly private act. Recalling Lily Briscoe's similarly paradoxical statement, "I have had my vision" (170), the past participle of these final words, forecast speculatively and facetiously to the end of time, suggests that intersubjectivity is both the result of reading, but is also contained within it through a continuous and communal expression of love: *we* have loved reading. There is a subjectivity in reading, but it is a contingent one that exceeds the boundaries of individual consciousness.

For *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, this is especially true for women. There is Clarissa the new reader, who decides she will "not say of any one in the world now that they were this or that" (8); Lily, whose multiple readings of others leads her to reflect, "One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with" (161); Rhoda, who recognizes the historical discursive limitations that her gender places on her as a reader: "I am fixed here to listen. An immense pressure is on me. I cannot move without dislodging the weight of centuries'" (85). More appropriately, there is the texts' production of their readers as female. For Bowlby, as we have seen, active reading that involves "unmasking the pretensions of masculine neutrality and playing up the possibilities of endless

dissimulation of identity,” which Orlando’s gender vacillations allegorize, is necessarily a feminine strategy (60).

Importantly, this solicitation does not call for fixed female subjects, nor do these texts care if their readers are anatomically men or women. As Moi reminds us, the unified self so often held up as an agent of change is almost always a “phallic self”: male, white, and European (8). Rather, Woolf’s “deeply sceptical attitude to the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity” (Moi 10) recognizes the “falsifying nature” of stable gender identities (Moi 13). Thus, as Kemp suggests, Woolf’s narrators’ refusal of “mastery over the world of things” elicits readers of either sex as women by asking them to consider an ideological question: “what or whose interest determines the apprehension of the experience?” (104). Woolf’s revolution is in recognizing that the category of “woman” can be used as a tool for subjugation when it conforms to the logic of interpellative identification, caught up in the regime that produces subjectivities. To free women from this logic, Woolf recasts this category as a shared capacity for necessary epistemic uncertainty, the reading of which connects the experience of the text to the world of public and political discourse.⁸³

This distinction recalls the gendered relationship between the domestic and political spheres that Woolf elaborates in her 1938 anti-war polemic, *Three Guineas*; she connects the tyranny emerging in pre-war Germany to the tyranny of the household in Britain, which keeps women economically dependent on men. Woolf exposes that “the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities

⁸³ To this end, Woolf rejects stable gender categories in a famous line in *A Room of One’s Own*, “it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex” (136). However, she goes on to suggest that gender, at least in literary production, should be thought of as a fluid and enabling capacity: “It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (136).

of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other” (364). Moreover, because women have been left out of the public professional world for so long, they are uniquely positioned to overturn this hierarchical order, not through participating in its own logic of oppression, but by locating and exploiting its hidden internal limit: “we, remaining outside, will experiment not with public means in public but with private means in private. Those experiments will not be merely critical but creative” (321).

What would these creative experiments be, performed in the private sphere but engaged in the public, other than Woolf’s own fiction? Woolf’s experiments solicit readers individually, but, as we have seen, pull them into the public world of discourse by encouraging them to read and think “as women,” while challenging the very legibility of this position. This act becomes a political force when it rejects the humanist assumptions behind unified identity, and transforms instead into the internal limit of tyranny and fascism. If womanhood for Woolf is a capacity shared amongst individuals that is also the explosive and unspent potential lurking at the centre of the heretofore masculine world of politics, then so too is womanly reading. The ability to hold multiple propositions at once, which *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves* invite, is not an identity, but a capacity, which is also an act of community building because it connects readers through their potential to become women readers.

Conclusion: The Double-Bind of Identity and Queer Modernism

There is a paradox that emerges whenever a critic considers a variety of texts or authors together under a common theoretical rubric: in attempting to show how these texts or authors are comparable in their approaches, their styles, their themes, their theorizing, it is inevitable that the critic will elide crucial differences between them. This paradox reverberates throughout the preceding chapters. The texts of Cather, Larsen, Fitzgerald, and Woolf, I hope I have demonstrated, are ineluctably similar, insofar as they all ironize the processes through which narratives produce realist subjectivities. In so doing, they elicit a mode of queer desire that forms the immanent other limit to such narratives: the potential for subjectivities that exceed the bounds of discursive identifications, subjectivities founded on shared excesses and shared capacities. Moreover, the thematizations of these subjectivities allegorize a resistance to the passivity of a realist readership. These texts, that is, solicit modes of queer reading that entail, variously, a love for impurity, the joy of unreadability, the simultaneity of contradictory propositions.

At the same time, these texts are ineluctably different. To suggest that Cather's narratives of the Nebraskan prairie and Larsen's narratives of Harlem are doing the same thing is to remove each from their local and historical specificity. Is it fair, or even ethical, to suggest that Larsen's exploration of the social ascendance of blacks in Harlem is the same as Cather's of the hardships of Eastern European immigrant farmers? I think not, and that has never been my intention. What is it, then, that these text have in common? Or, more appropriately, what mode of commonality do they share? How can these texts be said to be both the same and different?

The answer, of course, is right under our noses: the Deleuzian model of shared subjectivity that I have suggested is at work in the novels at hand. The mode of being-in-common that Deleuze's ontology makes possible is perhaps most usefully articulated in this context by Giorgio Agamben as the ability for individuals to "co-belong without a representable condition of belonging" (87). While Agamben is writing specifically about subjects under political regimes, the idea of co-belonging negotiates the particular problem here, and is given a Deleuzian inflection when Agamben states that "[w]e can communicate with others only through what in us – as much as in others – has remained potential" (10). The question then becomes, what virtual potentials do these texts share to make them co-belong?

I will leave this question aside for the moment to consider a related problem. This study has concerned itself with the unrepresentable: not the impossible or unknowable, but modes of being and writing that resist being represented politically – that is, having a sanctioned identity – and aesthetically – being made mimetically available. All along, I have assumed complicity between representation and relations of power, put on display not least in Irene Redfield and her mania for making such queerness readable. This assumption is not unfair, given the all-encompassing effects that political representation seems to yield, as Tim Dean explains in relation to sexual minorities:

The process of differentiation that allowed homosexuality to emerge as a quasi-permanent difference from heterosexuality – and thus ultimately to challenge the latter's normative universality – remains contaminated by the regulatory intentions that inspired differentiation in the first place. (29)

For Dean, representing oneself through an oppositional identity is still to be oriented by normativity; self-representation is always pre-determined by power.

Still, it is easy to forget the necessary function that identity politics have played in decentring normalizing discourse. Dean is again instructive on this count:

The danger is that demonstrating the historical contingency of identity categories and thereby evacuating their contents will cancel the hard-won recognition of differences and reinstate a universal norm, with disastrous political consequences for those whose identities are defined by their distance from the norm. (28)

It is easy to wish away identity and representation when there is nothing at stake; it is another matter entirely when a group's historical acquisition of rights follows from asserting the agency of that group's identitarian category forcefully and loudly. Larsen is aware of this fact – hence her novels' ambivalence toward, rather than rejection of, the black middle class – and so is Woolf, who makes clear the necessity for improving material circumstances for women – the need to have a room of one's own – before gender categories could ever be erased.

There is thus a double bind to this model of identitarian representation: it facilitates resistance to the norm, while co-opting its revolutionary energy. It is the means by which the minoritarian can advance, but also the mechanism by which power can expand its dominion. In this regard, it behaves like a last limit, holding out the promise of political change and offering tangible rewards as proof of its bounty, but simultaneously entrenching its own centrality as the bestower of such rewards. As quickly as the politics of identity decentres the norm, the norm sets up a new centre a little further down the

road. Still, representation happens, and it is worth asking whether it can yield something other than this serial retrenchment, a question posed recently by R. Radhakrishnan: “Is it possible to rescue representation, existentially, ethically, and in the name of the lived moment, from the false pieties and the vicious doxology of an unregenerate politics?” (663).

My provisional answer to this question will be a qualified *yes*, which will lead back to the issue of the relationship between texts. Representation can, and should, be rescued, but not without first querying its very terms. The problem with Radhakrishnan’s question is that it assumes that representation is out there in the world. If Casarino’s reading of Deleuze teaches us anything, it is that we must consider representation as an effect, rather than as *a priori*:

to the extent to which representation does take place, it needs to be understood and studied as the by-product of a forever incomplete and forever renewed process of exploitation of the unrepresentable. (xxxiv)

The virtual is not representation’s unconscious, harbouring repressions that surface as distorted symptoms. Rather, the virtual is the unactualized potential out of which all forms of representation emerge, the complicated historical-genetic process of becoming which subsists in, say, an idea, but must be momentarily forgotten, as Brian Massumi writes, for “a statement or thought to appear in all its apparent simplicity and clarity” (46). The virtual is the humbling notion that its emergence could have gone any number of other ways, thereby undermining the illusion of autonomy and self-creation; it is thus, for Deleuze and Guattari, “that which cannot be thought and yet must be thought” (60). The virtual cannot be said to “surface,” because it is the undisclosed underside to any

actuality, its potential for self-difference. Coming face to face with this potential can elicit both “horror and ecstasy” (Casarino xx), but recoiling from it in this way is *generative of further representation*. All representation, all ideologies, all identities, in other words, are reactions against the other limit. The radical upshot of this notion is that all representation, all ideologies, all identities are queer, or, at least, that they contain queer potential in every moment.

To return now to the question at hand: what virtual potentials do the novels of Cather, Larsen, Fitzgerald, and Woolf share to make them co-belong? What is their commonality that constitutes, in Dean’s words, “a sameness irreducible to identity” (31)? Given the numerous disruptions to linearity that the preceding chapters reveal, we can say that these texts share a desire to queer narrative – that is, to expose and explore what Eve Sedgwick calls “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning,” which for Sedgwick occur “when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (8), and to which I will add, when the constituent elements of narrative *telos* and characterological and readerly subjectivity that presume heteronormativity aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to achieve coherence. As we have seen, it is not as if realism is immune from this desire. Especially in late realist texts, there is a decided ambivalence regarding the novel form’s adequacy for accommodating the unseemliness of social change. Still, what is apparent in the eleven novels considered here is not only a profound distrust of narrative and narratological linearity, but a desire to take on the queering of this linearity as a central feature.

It seems curious that all of these novels are canonical texts of modernism and that, moreover, some of them are still generally celebrated for their putative indulgence of last limits (recall that it is Marilee Lindemann and very few others who would call *O Pioneers!* a queer text). This curiosity, however, is precisely the point. I will suggest that modernism, despite its diverse and ever-shifting boundaries, might be marked by texts' shared desire to push open the ironic gap further than their realist predecessors as a precondition for queering narratives and subjectivities, and for displacing the function of the reader. That this desire is observable in both *This Side of Paradise* and *The Waves* – the latter of which is now as canonical as the first but considered more radical in its technique and its politics – suggests that this grouping of texts exemplifies a feature of modernism that is as “mainstream” as it is avant-garde.

As a counterpoint to these canonical texts, I would like briefly to consider a text that has not received the critical attention it deserves, yet whose milieu will help us consider the politics of this definition of modernism. Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1937), a novel whose prose T. S. Eliot, its editor, wrote, “demands something of the reader that the ordinary novel-reader is not prepared to give” (xii), wears this desire on its sleeve in both its form and its subject matter. Much has been made, for instance, of the novel's excess of language, particularly in the monologues of Doctor Matthew O'Connor, which can sound like absurdist parables without discernible direction or meaning.⁸⁴ Alan Singer has argued that the instability of metaphor in *Nightwood* – a jarring disharmony between tenor and vehicle (71) – forces us to understand the interruption of meaning-making as the novel's organizing principle (78). To take just one example, to try to follow the logic

⁸⁴ See, for example, AnnKatrin Jonsson, who argues that this narrational excess “disrupts and destabilizes what could have been or become a logic of the text” (152).

of O'Connor's excursus on sorrow can be bewildering:

I, as a medical man, know in what pocket a man keeps his heart and soul, and in what jostle of the liver, kidneys and genitalia these pockets are pilfered. There is no pure sorrow. Why? It is bedfellow to lungs, lights, bones, guts and gall! (22)

The metonymic equivalence between feeling and "heart and soul" here is quickly transgressed with a sly shift to the anatomical register, which turns "heart" from metaphor to non-metaphorical body part. And yet, "heart" also remains as metaphor, because the passage maintains its symbolic value as a repository of sorrow. It becomes a marker of doubleness itself, perhaps a queer form of representation that does not lead to a satisfying or singular meaning.

On the level of content, *Nightwood* features characters who can only be called queer, and not only because of the stark depictions of same-sex relationships and transgendered or transvestite characters. Importantly, the intense relationship between Nora Flood and Robin Vote is not pathologized in the novel, despite the intense emotional suffering that occurs within it. Unlike, say, Fitzgerald's *Campion* and *Dumphry*, already positioned by the subjectifying power of psychoanalysis as "homosexuals," the novel never establishes a norm of sexual behaviour against which same-sex desire would appear as deviant; as Brian Glavey argues, "*Nightwood* takes same-sex love as a given" (758). On another level, however, charactericity itself is queer in *Nightwood*. As in *The Waves*, Barnes' characters oscillate between fleeting impressions and occasional glimpses of realist selfhood. Robin Vote, for instance, has a first and last name, but seems at times more a curious object than a representative of a

person. Felix's, and the reader's, first introduction to her yields this description:

Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface. About her head there was an effulgence as of phosphorus glowing about the circumference of a body of water – as if her life lay through her in ungainly luminous deteriorations – the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds – meet of child and desperado. (34-5)

For Glavey, Robin's queerness lies in her refusal of motherhood (758), and with it, of the heteronormative plot that this subject position enables. What we witness in the passage above, however, is something else: Robin as the border between human and non-human. She is as if always about to become something other than human, be it plant, or animal, as in the novel's final scene, in which Robin crawls on her knees and barks like a dog (170). Again, Robin's liminality is not abject within the world of the novel, because all the characters are marked by their own otherness: Felix's Jewishness, but also his insinuation into the theatrical world of the circus; Nora's American salon, home to "poets, radicals, beggars, artists, and people in love" (50); O'Connor's cross-dressing. Rather than denoting deviance *per se*, these characters queer the possibility of characterological unity itself.

What most distinguishes *Nightwood* from the other novels considered here, however, is in the implications of this queerness that it invokes. Published in 1937, Barnes' novel arrives in the context of European fascism and considers the slippages between the loss of identity and submission to authority, especially in its first chapter,

“Bow Down.” As Jane Marcus notes, the novel seems almost to anticipate the Holocaust, as the characters who populate it were all types marked for the camps: “Jews, homosexuals, lesbians, transvestites, gypsies, blacks, and circus performers” (158). Felix Volkbein, himself the son of a Jew trying to escape his racial history, clings to his contrived nobility while seeking to acquiesce to the aristocracy of ““Old Europe”” (9). In this regard, Felix is less like Clare Kendry, who passes to game a system of exploitation based on skin colour, and more like Jay Gatsby, who invents a new identity to cover up his own unmoneyed, and possibly his ethnic, lineage. In Felix’s excessive supplication, the novel lampoons the desperate desire to submit to this tradition by pointing out the absurdities involved therein: “In restaurants he bowed slightly to anyone who looked as if he might be ‘someone,’ making the bend so imperceptible that the surprised person might think he was merely adjusting his stomach” (9).

If Felix is like Gatsby, the stakes are much higher for his deference to tradition. Without answering it, *Nightwood* raises a crucial question for this study: what can the queering of identity mean once it is placed in the context of the Holocaust? The novel is at once a stark reminder of the need for stable identity, at the same time as it lampoons all attempts to construct one. Felix’s attempts to turn Robin into a wife and mother, which are doomed to fail, has a more sinister aspect than Gatsby’s pursuit of Daisy, both because Robin embodies transgression, and Felix longs for sympathy with a fascist tradition. That Robin so easily escapes Felix’s desires for her, as well as Nora’s and Jenny Petherbridge’s, both of whom try to domesticate her, suggests a freedom in this refusal that is either naïve or prescient (Robin spends much of her time in America after she leaves).

Nightwood, in other words, reminds us of the political implications of modernism's fantasizing a beyond of subjectivity. It is all too easy to imagine these texts celebrating the casting off of identity as a quasi-Deleuzian antidote to the subject. Consider, for instance, Sherrard-Johnson's reading of Larsen, which celebrates the texts' putative wished-for possibility of an existence that transcends race, hinted at, according to the critic, in *Quicksand*'s Audrey Denney and her "free self-expression" (860). Such a solution, it should be obvious by now, ignores the novels' ambivalence toward the separation from black cultural and political roots, which is perhaps the cost of black economic ascension.

A return to these canonical modernist texts today provides twenty-first century readers and critics with a sharp reminder that post-identitarian fantasies are also the domain of fascism (the phrase "avant-garde," after all, comes from a military tradition). Larsen's texts, especially *Passing*, feature middle-class black characters in Chicago and New York; the political subtext to these geographical and economic locales is the Great Migration that took place in the decade before, caused in large part by racial brutalities. *Passing* might appear to idealize Clare's wish to be free of racial embodiment, but the setting's historical background reminds us that an organized political program to eliminate blackness reverberates as the ironic undercurrent to this fantasy. In a similar way, Cather's ironizing of the fantasy of disappearance finds a dark companion in the genocide of Native Americans, explicitly brought to the surface in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, but also present in *My Ántonia*. In the latter, Jim's mention of the "great circle where the Indians used to ride," which he sees only as "a good omen for the winter" (83), exposes the obliviousness of Jim's naïve desire "to be dissolved into

something complete and great” (60); this setting has already hosted a sinister version of his fantasy on a massive scale.⁸⁵ While Woolf’s anti-imperialism is implicit in Peter Walsh and Bernard, it is in *Three Guineas*, as we have seen, that Woolf connects imperialism abroad with systemic misogyny at home, suggesting that the fight for political agency requires preserving the category of “woman” but simultaneously reforming that category as a shared capacity rather than a fixed identity. In Fitzgerald, whose protagonists are often the privileged indulging in excess, we find warnings against the unfettered trade in identities. Nick Carraway’s love for a man obsessed with changing the past appears as naïve romance, but this romanticization of a seemingly magical figure also allegorizes the slavish attraction to a glamorous leader, much like Felix Volkbein’s anti-Semitic servility to aristocracy. Perhaps Gatsby’s doppelganger is not Nick but Tom Buchanan, whose crass racial prejudices make him decidedly unromanticizable to Nick, but whose ugly control over Daisy is merely the less glamorous version of Gatsby’s romantic pursuit of her. It is Gatsby who, in essence, tries to be “whiter” than Tom in trying to escape his presumably ethnic name and origin, thereby disclosing his non-whiteness; as Bourgeois and Clendenning argue, Gatsby evokes Jewishness in both the name “Gatz” and in his outsider status (111-12). The allure that he offers, that which renders him “Great,” is ominous when considered as a precursor to the allure of fascism in Europe.

For these texts, the queering of narrative is an experiment whose goal is not to access some unrepresentable beyond, but to explore the actualization of subject positions that can be co-opted to serve repressive political powers. Rather than destroying

⁸⁵ Nebraska became a territory in 1854 after its white population grew due to the discovery of gold in California in 1848 (Brown 8). Until 1890, when the frontier was declared closed, and beyond, tribes in Nebraska (and all over the United States), including the Cheyenne, the Omaha, the Pawnee, and the Sioux

identities, queering exposes their becoming and rewrites their limits. The novels of Cather, Larsen, Fitzgerald, and Woolf never call for the obliteration of the old, leaving a void that something like fascism might arrive to fill. Rather, they reconfigure how we might think of the new: as a repatterning of the old, soliciting not preformed ideology from the outside to reshape it, but the hidden potential already there to reactualize differently.

were subject to forced relocation, broken treaties, and massacres by American soldiers. For a detailed accounting of the tribes of Nebraska, see Webber, pages 17-32.

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