

ACCIDENTS IN READING: A PSYCHOANALYTIC INQUIRY INTO THE  
READER'S EMOTIONAL LIFE

ALECIA LABOVE

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## **Abstract**

In this dissertation, I examine the emotional landscape of literacy and its breakdowns to suggest that difficulties in reading have something to teach us about literacy and education. Engaging psychoanalytic theories of development, language, and literacy I situate reading as a psychosocial practice that at once leans on the reader's emotional life and can be felt to undo the reader from the inside out. To do so, I investigate fictional representations of readers who find themselves exorbitantly affected in the act of reading. Attending to the ways in which reading difficulties telegraph back to the infant's earliest conflicts as depicted by child psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, I analyze accidents in reading that represent three different emotional situations: greed, trauma, and reparation. My engagement with these accidents in reading contributes to conversations about the significance of the unconscious in personality development, educational life, and our dependence on others in the social world. With this study I do not seek to "fix" reading difficulties but rather, to better recognize reading as an existential "fix" that can renew our stories of self and of what it means to inhabit a world with others.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Reading is an educational endeavor, one that promises the chance for learning to readers and to the social world. In a lecture delivered for the Reading Agency, Gaiman (2013) recognizes this promise of learning that reading holds when he argues that “everything changes when we read. Aiming to defend libraries as sites that support world-changing day-dreaming, he insists that through reading we come to see that “the world doesn’t have to be like this...things can be different” (Gaiman, 2013). For Gaiman, reading is a practice that calls us into feeling empathy for others, a call that provokes us to imagine new and possible worlds. Reflecting on her own readerly biography, Winterson (2011) holds a similar position as a long-standing proponent of reading’s promise and the “chances” that books offer to imagine the self and world otherwise. In an essay for *The Guardian*, she offers homage to public libraries as integral social institutions that first took books out of the private homes of the wealthy and put them “into the hands of the world” (Winterson 2012) where marginalized groups could newly access ideas and stories that they were previously denied. With this history in mind, Winterson (2012) asks: “as our government tells us that this wrecked economy can’t afford to pay a living wage to the poorest people in society, what can we offer them?” Her answer: libraries. Winterson (2012) insists that the library democratizes access to knowledge and ought to serve as “the centre of a web of cultural services” available to all citizens. For both Gaiman and Winterson, reading matters for how we think of our world and also for the kind of world we can think.

In novel reading, there is power and potential for affecting the thoughts and ideas of people. Conflicts over the banning of books in education, exhibit a worry about this potential, in particular for how certain books can put “controversial” or dangerous ideas into the minds of young people, a worry that expresses the chances and changes to thinking that reading can enact. For instance, responding to calls for censorship of his novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) Alexie has spoken up in defence of controversial YA fiction and the promise it holds. Specifically, Alexie (2011) pointedly argues that for too many young people “protection”, in the form of literary censorship, comes too late as they have already experienced the violence and injustices of our world. Alexie (2011) writes for these injured young people, hoping to give them “weapons—in the form of words and ideas”

that can help them survive the world they find themselves in. Aligned with Alexie's positioning of the novel as a potential "weapon" for psychical survival, Cisneros (2015) also describes books as medicine, and libraries as medicine cabinets, especially for children who have "lived experiences beyond their years" (p. 310). For these readers, Cisneros sees reading as a practice that has the power to heal what hurts within.

With these literary advocates, literary educational and cultural studies scholars have long taken up reading's cause, arguing for the transformative effect of reading on psychical, social, and political worlds (Barthes, 1975; Britzman, 2000, 2009; Coleman, 2009; Freire, 2008; Gallop, 2011; Georgis, 2014; Gilbert, 2004; Grumet, 2006; Jacobus, 1999; Lewkowich, 2011; Mishra Tarc, 2011a, 2011b, 2015, Robertson, 2000, 2001). For example, Georgis (2006) offers a striking defence of the power of stories in the wake of political conflict and enduring social violence. She suggests that story can be thought as a "resource...for political imagination and for political recovery...[that can] link us to unthought spaces, to spaces that thought refuses". Georgis, like others, articulates the promise of reading as providing a bridge to ideas as yet unthought, but nonetheless felt. Similarly, in her consideration of the mass appeal of Rowling's *Harry Potter* novel series, Robertson (2001) locates reading as a practice through which young readers can think and work through some of the fundamental conflicts that make up inner life. She suggests in her essay that Rowling's novels not only address, but might also satiate inner, unspoken hungers: "good stories satisfy a craving" she says, and *Harry Potter* just hits the spot for many of its readers (Robertson, 2001, p. 209).

In each of these defences we see reading conceived as a promising endeavor made so by the futures imagined to follow. The linguistic origin of promise emerges from a sense of putting forth or sending forward – indeed, readings' promise points toward futures for both individual readers and the worlds they inhabit: futures with promise, a practice with potential. For psychoanalytic scholars such as Britzman (1998a), reading's favourable future resides in the promise of both touching and being touched by an other – a relation first experienced in babyhood without words, where one is charged with having to make sense of feelings and make attachments to others in order to survive. Reading, as a problem of making and re-making a self from relations with others, is driven by "the desire to attach –to touch and to be touched" (Britzman, 1998a), an interminable developmental labour. As

such, this touchy situation of readings' promise brings the reader into various relations with textual others – just as we might “touch” someone for a loan or get “in touch” with an acquaintance, so too do these kinds of touching encounters occur in reading. This is reading's promise and yet, it is a promise that does not know its own future as the affects and effects of touch cannot be known in advance. Akin to the uncertainty of a blind date, readers cannot know in advance how they will be touched by a text and the sense they may (or may not) make from their encounter with someone else. Despite best intentions, reading is more like a blank cheque than a detailed promissory note. With this in mind, it is reasonable to approach with skepticism idealized positive outcomes for while reading is indeed promising it is also a “risky business [where] selves...are interfered with” by the touch of an other (Britzman, 1998b, p. 61).

My dissertation is situated in this risky business of reading, where readers are lodged in the messiness of human relations and communications that don't always go as planned. That is, in reading lies the promise but also the danger of being affected by the others we meet in literature. I aim to lend support, and give additional texture, to Coleman's (2009, p. 51) argument that the effects of, perhaps our most promising, novel encounters are accidental, unpredictable and not fully knowable. My research employs a psychoanalytic interest in how the promise of touch between self, other, and the text highlights reading as an unconscious labour. I see the reading relation as one where there is always “something unknown and unspoken, like a story that exists off the page, written nowhere else but in the mind and the life of the reader” (Lewkowich, 2011, p. 91).

While reading promises touch, our experiences of reading a story cannot be known beforehand: one might be tenderly touched by another's story, but one might also touch on “difficult knowledge” (Britzman, 1998a) or touch off a bomb. It is in these later cases where reading can go pear-shaped. In these moments, Coleman (2009) notes that a reader can feel as if they are “*being read by* [a] book” (p. 60) in unanticipated and affectively upsetting ways. Similarly, Winterson (Quoted in Ellis 2006) describes well this reversal when she reminds that “you can pick up a book but a book can [also] throw you across the room” (p. 1–2). In these moments, the promise of reading feels more like a threat of violence, a cruel guarantee, or a sudden betrayal of an unspoken contract.

These “ugly” moments where one has touched off a literary bomb, been read by a book, or feels thrown across the room by a story cannot be divorced from the promise of reading itself. Scholarly work in the field of education, specifically psychoanalytic approaches to literacy attempt to grapple with these exorbitant scenes of reading’s promise gone sideways. In particular, I first encountered a scholarly representation of reading gone awry in Felman’s (1992) essay “Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching”. As I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, I have identified three qualities that make up Felman’s conceptualization of an “accident” in reading: it’s sudden and unexpected onset; breakdowns in meaning where words no longer mean as they used to, and; over-the-top affective experiences for readers. In this dissertation, I build from Felman’s case study the conceptual scaffolding that makes up an accident in reading and look to an archive of scholarly and literary works that also represent scenes where reading goes astray and cannot be rescued or tamed by cognitive or comprehensive measures. Throughout this archive we meet readers who in their experience of reading a novel find themselves in psychical distress (Britzman, 1998b, 2009, Mishra Tarc, 2011a, 2011b). Intrigued by this theoretical and anecdotal archive, my dissertation engages and looks to contribute to representations of readings’ accidents as the shadowy underside of its promise (Levinas, 1989). Beginning from a curiosity about the unpredictable and unknown qualities of readings’ promise of touch, I investigate accidents in reading that reside at the boundary lines of sensible, cognitive meaning-making. While not all accidents are meaningful, meaning can be made from accidents (Phillips, 1994, p. 11). This dissertation endeavours to do just so by engaging accidents as opportunities for learning and chances to re-think readings’ promise.

I inquire into the significance and emotional landscape of reading by turning to novels that represent fictional “accidents” in reading. For research objects, I look to three Canadian fictional works that each represent a reader who experiences an accident in her encounter with the words of an other: Munro’s (2005) *Lives of Girls and Women*, Kogawa’s (2006) *Obasan* and, Atwood’s (1986) *A Handmaid’s Tale*. In my engagement with each of these aesthetic works I consider how, in reading, practice does not make perfect and ask: What are the affective qualities and effects of this accident? What might be made psychically, pedagogically, or socially from such accidents? And, what can reading’s accidents tell us about the affected nature of this promising practice and its place in education?



## Theoretical framework

Accidents in reading happen in spite of reading's promise and a reader's best intentions. In fact, accidents in reading can confound assurances that reading can be, as Grumet (1988) laments, a positivist endeavor where "meaning is hidden in the folds of the topic sentence or the story structure" (p. 133). That is, reading cannot be "ordered" by procedures of literacy. There is no guarantee that can promise containment of the capricious effects of touch and the embodied nature of reading practice: no intellectual prowess or dogged intentionality can temper the unpredictable effects of reading and ferry one safely through the trouble with books (Grumet, 1988).

In Lewkowich's (2011) account, "the orderly, staid, and obedient character of commodified and standardized learning" is superseded by "the erratic and elusive possibilities of textual engagement" (p. 85). Similarly, the theoretical perspective I employ in this dissertation centres reading as an unconscious practice and sets aside reading "systems" or procedures. I categorize such cognitivist approaches as examples of *symptoms* that disclose something about the messiness and unpredictability of the practice of reading. That is, as Bass (Quoted in Britzman 2003) suggests: "Wherever one finds systematicity, one can, from a psychoanalytic point of view, ask the question of what unbearable piece of reality is being defended against by means of the system" (p. 99). Scholars working with psychoanalytic perspectives suggest that the difficulty defended against by way of reading systems is the possibility that something other than information transmission and decoding occurs behind-the-scenes of reading (Britzman, 2009; Dutro, 2008; Felman, 1992; Gilbert, 2004; Mishra Tarc, 2011a, 2011b). Drawing on this insight, my study locates reading in between an other and the reader's unconscious which "knows no time, no negation, and tolerates contradiction" (Britzman, 2006, p. 48). To theorize this psychical meeting as the practice of reading, I turn to Klein's (1986c, 1986a) clinical study of the young infant's inner world and her resultant theory of object relations. Specifically, Klein's heady portrait of the workings of the infant's internal world provide a scaffolding for theorizing reading as an affected and affecting practice—as a relation that does not obey the reader's will. Her storying of the infant's vulnerability and complete dependence upon her mother is where I locate the beginning of primitive meaning-making processes that will later form the groundwork for one's more sophisticated reading of printed words on a page.

## **The psychic event of reading**

The infant's dependence is central to Klein's thinking about inner life, and to my sense of the psychical stakes of reading. Felt first and most acutely in infancy, "our dependence on others is manifestly a condition of our life in all its aspects" (Riviere, 1964, p. 7). However, this is a condition that causes grief for with dependence comes "the possibility of privation" (Riviere, 1964, p. 8) – of not getting what you want when you want it. Having felt only prenatal unity with the mother, the young infant's first experiences of privation – the inevitable deprivations and frustrations that accompany happy experiences – pose a confusing and terrifying crisis.

It is in this primal scene of pathetic neediness and vulnerability where the capacity for reading first emerges as a means for "making sense of the objects and environment upon which...survival depends" (Mishra Tarc, 2011a, p59). In Klein's (1986f) developmental narrative, literacy begins here before words in this first relation between mother and baby where the problem of reading is truly felt to be a problem of survival. Facing the ordinary, severe anxiety that accompanies babyhood, Klein (1986f) suggests that the infant's rudimentary attempts at symbolic equation ("this stands in for that") are the breeding grounds for future readings of words on the page and her relation to the outside world generally (p. 97–98). These primitive psychical readings are neither elective nor serene. Rather, the infant rallies two fledgling psychical processes to try and make sense of their situation: Projection and Introjection. Working in tandem, these unconscious movements of sending out (projection) and taking in (introjection) one's sense of oneself form the groundwork for the baby's very first readings: uncertain meanings made in the space between self and other and, between reality and phantasy give the baby its first impressions of lived reality (Klein, 1986f). While introjection and projection are in some sense amelioratory developments, Klein theorizes their emergence and animation in the paranoid schizoid position – an emotional situation where taking in and sending out both bring danger and rouse anxiety. In these rudimentary readings, the infant's labours are driven not by learned literacy skills but by the force of overwhelming affect and a desperate need to interpret or make sense from feelings.

Klein's theorization of infantile reading not only locates literacy in a time before words, but also insists that these first readings foreground future early object relations and

readings. With the mother's spoken and unspoken love, care and support, the infant manages to make it through this trying time. Physical dependency slowly lessens and some degree of sense can be made by the baby from what was initially a barrage of confusing and persecutory sensations. The later labour of reading printed words on the page occurs by the dim and enigmatic lights of transference to this archive of early object relations (Klein, 1975b, 1986f, 1986c). Leaning on one's primal object relations, revised versions of these old conflicts animate present readings such that the past and present are entangled with each other in the scene of reading.

The concept of transference, paired with Klein's theorization of the emotional situation of the maternal relation scaffold my exploration of accidents in reading. Specifically, Klein's object relations theory, and the constructs I glean from the work of others who study the emotional landscape of reading, inform my thinking about the accident in reading as a limit case which exemplifies "the ways we read regardless of what is presented, the way we read with desire and anxiety" (Britzman, 2009, p. 47), as well as the unpredictable effects of such a practice. Most significantly, psychoanalytic constructs such as transference invite an imagining of the place of affect in reading: how reading here and now is always tied to conflicts and affects from earlier primal reading. Framed by a psychoanalytic lens, accidents in reading exceed conscious expectation and in doing so expose the murkier psychological processes that set the conditions of possibility for sense-making and its collapse. In particular, Klein's (1964, 1986c, 1986g) narrative of the young infant's painful and dramatic attempts to make sense without intelligible communication bid one to consider how the affective force of an accident in reading uncannily parallels the frustrations and psychological disturbances encountered by virtue of coming into a world populated by others. In this way, accidents, as "obstacles", reveal desires that can offer insight into the self and relations to others for, as Phillips (1993) suggests:

...the only way to discover your projects is to notice...what you reckon are obstacles...[for] when we unpack the obstacles in analysis – when we think of them as the way rather than as something in the way – we find them, like Pandora's box, full of the unusual and the forbidden...(p. 82–83).

My research engages these strange arrivals to theorize the psychological accident as a bounded site where one's practice of reading collides with unforeseen psychological material to expose unconscious desire and conflicts. With an ear to the unconscious, I aim to explore the

accident in reading as a form of “discarded content...[or] a “curious affair” (Britzman, 2011, p. 2) that represents something of reading’s promise and its breaking points. I aim not to safeguard the hazard of accidents in reading but to approach the accident as an object to be thought about – an object that that is not other to reading but endemic to its promise. In the forthcoming substantive chapters, I analyze three fictional accidents in reading where meaning breaks down. In each literary portrait, the reader engages with textual “news” of some sort: tabloid news, historical news, and clandestine news, that rouse in each reader something of their own unfinished psychical history: Do I have enough? Who am I? Will I survive? Each reader’s accident is both occasioned by and read through one of these questions: their reading bringing news that infantile worries persist beyond the vulnerability of babyhood itself.

In each case the accident in question is particular to the emotional situation of the fictional reader. However, my engagement with them in this dissertation carries significance beyond literary analyses of the novels themselves insofar as my reading of these accidents moves to center emotional and autobiographical life as central to reading. This dissertation argues that the news forged in accidents in reading is news of the oldest sort: that we first read as a means to learn more about ourselves, others, and the world. In place of “fixing” reading to make its practice more predictable, stable, or simple, I locate reading *as* an emotional fix of sorts, a space where we can make anew old existential conflicts.

The significance of this study lies in my contribution to representing how reading, as an affected practice, matters for thinking about the volatility and vulnerability of learning to live with others and with ourselves. That is, just as book-reading may break down at the hands of enigmatic and non-rational causes, our “reading” of others in the social world is similarly vulnerable to collapse with overwhelming existential consequences. It is, however, these breakdowns that provide occasion for thinking and making significance from our living with others and their stories (Britzman, 2000; Todd, 2003, 2016). For, as Britzman (2000) notes, questions of ethicality ought not begin from “what is successful, ideal, or familiar...but rather with what becomes inaugurated when we notice the breakdown of meaning and the illusiveness of signification” (p. 29). In focusing in on moments of breakdown in reading, my study reaffirms that reading difficulties have

something to teach us. In particular, that “accidents” help us better understand the guts that drive reading, and also make this practice (and its practitioners) vulnerable to upset.

Framing the status of reading in this way matters to how we think about the presence of novels in a curriculum –how reading can touch off existential conflicts that students may not be able to immediately name, but nonetheless feel: deep-seated questions about one’s safety, identity, and relations to others. Accidents in reading can open opportunity in education then to broach sideways questions of finding anew, renewing, and reconciling what lies within us and between ourselves and others. This necessitates a sensitivity and respect for reading as a risky business with high stakes that extend beyond curricular benchmarks. That is, when we are reading a novel we are also re-reading our stories of self, and the stories we have of others on whom we depend. In Felman’s classroom, mayhem erupts from her students’ experiences of an accident in reading and, in turn, Felman assumes responsibility for supporting them to make meaning of their affected experience. Attuned to the existential stakes of her students’ accident, Felman responds in kind with a rudimentary meaning-making structure (in the form of a written assignment) through which they might begin to make sense from feelings. Moved by Felman’s pedagogical gesture here, this dissertation aims to make a contribution to how we think about the place of novels in education, by arguing that emotional upset in reading warrants our curiosity and investigation – that accidents in reading need not be remedied but rather, are evocative objects that can be read, and that can help us re-read our stories of self and the others that make up our world.

## **Structure and chapter breakdown**

The following chapter opens with an account of my own accident in reading Felman’s (1992) essay “Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching”. This work introduced me to the concept of the accident in reading around which my study turns. My own deeply affected reading of this work also drew me to engage psychoanalytic theories of reading. In particular, in this chapter I answer the question “What is this thing called reading?” by engaging Klein’s theory of object relations. Developing before one even has words, I describe how the baby’s wobbly attempts to make sense of their own feelings and need of others grounds the later capacity to read printed words. I move then from a

discussion of the psychical foundations of reading, to Felman's representation of an accident that undoes her student readers' and highlights the potential existential significance of reading. I summarize Felman's narrative of her class's accident in reading and suggest that there are three dimensions to any accident: its unexpected onset, the collapse of sensible meanings and, the reader's experience of affective upheaval. I explain each of these qualities in turn, drawing on others' anecdotes about strange reading experiences to flesh out each feature. The final section of this chapter, builds on my theoretical understanding of reading and its accidents to outline the methodological parameters of my study. Here I describe my methodological decision to position the accident as an object of inquiry, and explain why I turned to three popular Canadian novels that each represent a fictional accident in reading. I present my understanding of the novel as an aesthetic object and as an object of interpretive research. Lastly, I give an account of the reading practice that I bring to the three selected cases. As I follow an accident represented in each novel, I note how I will attempt to write an afterword that dissects the psychical mechanisms and stakes of reading's breakdown, pinpointing the moment, or word, where meaning breaks down and affect runs roughshod. Moving from a discussion of the work of identifying and describing accidents in reading, I conclude this chapter by explaining how Gallop's anecdotal theorizing offers a model for how I make something from these literary accidents in reading.

In Chapter Three I turn my attention to a greedy accident in reading as represented in Munro's (2005) *Lives of Girls and Women*. As the quality of being greedy often manifests in one's relation to food and eating, I begin this chapter with a consideration of the uncanny ties between reading and eating: both being emotionally affecting practices that are propelled by hunger and introjection and later require internal digestion. In particular, I situate reading as a practice grounded in the helpless baby's felt need for others, and how reading words can likewise be thought of as one way of reaching out to the world upon which one depends. From Klein's sense for the infant's need, and her need to take in objects, I theorize reading as a problem of appetite and engage scholarship which triangulates reading and eating with the psychical risks of appetite and its satisfaction. Mired in one's unconscious relation to their first object, the practice of reading is vulnerable to the same excesses and obstacles to oral incorporation. In particular, adjacent to the difficulties of envy and jealousy, I offer a conceptualization of greed as an

introjective defence run haywire. I use this theoretical scaffolding to then analyze a greedy accident in reading that happens to the fictional adolescent Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women* (2005). I suggest that Del's greedy accident in reading can be best understood in relation to her first attempts at grappling with emergent psychical demands of adolescence. That is, as Del is returned to old questions and worries from infancy, her voracious appetite for tabloid newspapers is driven by a hope that something in these stories might help hold her self together during this tumultuous developmental time. If stories, like food, can satisfy a hunger (Robertson, 2001, p. 209), my analysis of Del's accident in reading aims to explicate the insatiable psychical need that drives Del's voracious appetite to the point of excess and accident. This chapter engages the concept of greed as a fix to a problem, rather than as a problem to be fixed. With this in mind, I close the chapter with two stories of greedy reading that occur in education. These anecdotes from Coleman and Tarc demonstrate what sense might be made from student readers' greed. In particular, how readers' capacious appetite might be thought of as kind of smoke signal indicating unconscious conflicts or anxiety over felt losses.

In Chapter Four I explore a different kind of accident in reading as represented in Kogawa's (2006) novel *Obasan*. Neighbouring Felman's interest in trauma and historical violence, *Obasan* broke ground in fictionally representing the psychical dimensions of Japanese internment during World War II, seven years before the Canadian government's Redress Settlement Agreement. The accident I read in *Obasan* is of a different order than the scene in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Specifically, while Del Jordan cannot stop reading, Naomi Nakane's reading is initially inhibited as she refuses to read for fear of what she can feel but not yet narrate of her own growing up as a Japanese-Canadian during her family's internment and relocation. Weaving through Naomi's dreams, memories, and conversations with family members, Kogawa's narrative slides between phantasy and reality, between then and now, and all that has been both forgotten and remembered. It is in this affectively teeming space where Naomi happens upon a newspaper clipping that shatters her defences and causes her rational sense-making to fall apart. In an instant, all that Naomi cannot bear comes rushing back through a flood of affect. Eviscerated by an other's storying of *her* lived experience, frantic, disjointed "memories in feelings" (Klein, 1986b, p. 228) spill forth from Naomi and a scattered story overtakes her. Gutted by another's words, Naomi retaliates: her weapons are stammered words that she trips over,

scrambles through, and repeats. Something breaks in Naomi and likewise, something breaks in Kogawa's narrative. In this chapter I analyze Naomi's accident in reading as an encounter which reopens "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). Reading returns to Naomi childhood trauma that has never been assimilated but nonetheless resides within. In my conclusion I move from these particularities to suggest that reading cannot be educated, and that the questions Naomi meets in her accident in reading are the fundamental questions for better understanding the relationship between reading and the reader's emotional life.

Chapter Five shifts to consider, what I call, a hopeful accident in reading as represented in Atwood's (1986) *The Handmaid's Tale*. In Atwood's fictional world of Gilead, women are forbidden to read and any transgression of this edict is harshly punished. And yet, despite personal risk and the state's almost total censorship of printed words, Atwood's protagonist Offred happens upon a line of text that has been secretly etched into the wall of her bedroom closet. Mistakenly falling in deep projective identification with the unknown author of this text, Offred finds herself moved to compose her own testimonial tale. She could not have imagined that she would stumble upon unreadable words that would enable her to re-read her own possibilities for living. I offer an anatomy of Offred's literary encounter that attends to the three qualities of an accident in reading: it's surprise, affective dynamics, and how Offred's sensible meaning-making habits are sent into a tailspin. In my consideration of how this accident interferes with sensible meaning-making, I suggest that Offred's "wild" reading of this graffiti inspires a re-reading of her own story of living. In particular, her transference in reading makes possible what Sedgwick (2003) describes as "reparative reading" of her own circumstances. That is, her accident in reading alters Offred's interpretive orientation and ushers in a new found capacity to tell a "better story" (Georgis, 2014) that might help her better survive difficult circumstances. Though Offred's accident occurs in an imagined time and place, I close this chapter by suggesting that while reading might not change our material circumstances, it can nonetheless have significant psychical consequences for readers. In particular, through my analysis of Offred's accident in reading I suggest that reading is a sly emotional resource for living through difficult political times, a practice that has the potential to offer, as Solnit (2006) describes hope in the dark.



This dissertation begins where reading goes awry, when readers and the promise of reading are broken open by affect. My exploration of the selected accidents in reading is located at the furthest edge of cognitive sense-making, to call into question what the practice of reading fundamentally is such that it might be so easily shattered, so precarious. In so doing, I engage the work of pursuing an accident –a labour, which Felman (1992, p. 24) reminds, is one of enigmatic means and ends. As such, I begin this study not in hopes of offering a salve for the pain of accidents, or as a remedy to their recurrence. Rather, in response to the accident’s call for witness, I (re)turn to reading as the means by which we first come to make sense, and the labour by which the self and world is made and remade.

## Chapter 2. On Method: Theorizing and Analyzing the Accident in Reading

In the early months of my doctoral program, I read Felman's (1992) essay "Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching" contained in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. An assigned reading for one of my doctoral seminars and, having left the reading till the last minute, I first read Felman's essay on an hour-long subway ride to campus. In this work, Felman tells of a graduate seminar course designed and taught at Yale in the fall of 1984 titled: "Literature and Testimony: Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History" (1992, p. 6). About thirty students, from a variety of disciplines, registered in Felman's course to read a breadth of literary, psychoanalytic and historical testimonial accounts as a means of exploring the overlapping historical, clinical and, pedagogical relationships between trauma, testimony and, education. Framing this course were questions about what it meant to live, teach, write and, read in the wake of the Holocaust – in the wake of a crisis of truth that ushered testimony to the forefront of cultural narratives (Felman, 1992, p. 6). The curriculum for this course included a variety of objects that represented Holocaust testimony or theories of witness and learning: Camus' *The Plague*, a selection from Freud's *the Interpretation of Dreams*, Stéphane Mallarmé's lectures on the "Crisis of Verse" and, two videotaped testimonies from the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale<sup>1</sup>. As Felman (1992) tells it, things seemed to be going well when, all of the sudden the class "broke out into a crisis" (p.47): there was a swell of affect among her students, along with deafening silences and incessant talking as words became both too much and too little for them to bear. Looking back, Felman (1992) describes how, without notice or premonition, an accident "happened in...happened to...[and] passed through the class" (p. 50). Adjacent to the emotional and social situation of, say, a car collision or chance misstep off an icy curb, she tells of how her students and their reading were sent wayward, off the beaten path and into a thicket of treacherous psychic and social territory. From her own encounters, and news from nearby others,

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<sup>1</sup> While I note here the assigned reading for Felman's course, I don't substantively engage in particular with the contents of these works in particular. That is, what interests me here is not so much the content of Felman's course, but of what she makes from her students' surprising relation to the course readings

Felman (1992) comes to learn just how rattled her students were by their reading in her class:

They were set apart and set themselves apart...They were obsessed. They felt apart, and yet not quite together. They sought out each other and yet felt they could not reach each other...They felt alone, suddenly deprived of their bonding to the world and to one another...I realized the class was entirely at a loss, disoriented and uprooted (p. 48).

An accident in reading interrupts Felman's class while abruptly and frighteningly changing reading into something nearly unrecognizable. While Felman could curate her reading list, her class experienced a wholly unanticipated encounter with the words of others as they read.

So too, in my reading of Felman's essay. Something happened in my reading on the subway and I suddenly could not get enough: it's sentences felt like live jumper-cables as my mind darted from ideas on the page to the ideas in my mind and back again. I was wound up by this story of a class falling apart and captivated by these students who found themselves so undone by their reading. Stopped in my tracks, I sat at the subway platform and raced to the essay's conclusion, though unsure of what was driving me there, or what I was driving towards. Immediately and intensely affected by Felman's story, I could not put my experience into words, though in the coming months (and frankly, years) I have chewed the ears off of a number of friends trying to come to grips with this essay that has kept me in its grip.

About a year after first reading Felman's essay, I stumbled upon an anecdote that eerily paralleled my own experience:

I was in the early years of a doctoral programme...[when] I used to remark, with a slight shrug and a forced lightness to my tone, that it took me a year to 'recover' from reading *Testimony*...took me a year to figure out how to begin to put myself back together...I have slowly...come to acknowledge that I was lying. To myself at least...Not unlike the other students of whom Felman writes, I too was 'at a loss, disoriented and uprooted'.

That was almost fifteen years ago.

But, the sense of loss, disorientation and unsettlement that this incident indexes for me have neither disappeared nor been forgotten (Rosenberg, 2010, p. 245–246).

Although I had previously worked closely with Rosenberg, we had not spoken of her experience reading *Testimony*, the book within which Felman's essay is contained. Having died a few months before I would read Felman's essay, communion over our similar reading experiences occurred between the lines of Rosenberg's anecdote and my own flailing attempts to make sense of an essay that would not let me go. It was as if Rosenberg was telling my story –my identification with her emotional situation upsetting as much as it also proved comforting to think I wasn't the only one undone by Felman's words. Rosenberg's anecdote stopped me in my tracks: I too, was "at a loss, disoriented and uprooted". I too have not yet recovered. I have not, as the OED defines "recovered": "return[ed] to a normal state of health, mind, or strength", or regained possession of myself following this reading.

A quick search on Google Scholar shows that Felman's essay has been cited no less than 790 times: scholars at work and working with her essay. I see in this archive an additional sense of the word "recovery" at work as people borrow and extract – *recover*, pieces of Felman's essay for their own use and reuse, the idiosyncrasies of Felman's narrative employed to engage disparate questions and preoccupations (Britzman & Pitt, 2004; Caruth, 1996). Felman's essay gives us something, in fact many things, to recover and think about –her narration of, and theorizing about, an accident in reading is a germ that's now fermented into a conversation that continues over 30 years after its occurrence in her class.

One of the most compelling things I've recovered from Felman's essay is her description of an accident in reading as an event where a psychical limit is crossed as readers experience some form of existential conflict. The Oxford English Dictionary describes an accident as "an unfortunate incident that happens unexpectedly and unintentionally, typically resulting in damage or injury". This definition reminds that an accident is intelligible only in relation to expectations of what is supposed to come and intentions toward that future. The accident is an accident precisely because it breaks with an imagined future with, to borrow Phillips' (1998) phrasing, "a deeply ingrained sense of order already there to be affronted" (p. 121). In Felman's conceptualization, her class' accident in reading stages a crisis for her students, one that upends their known and felt knowledges of

testimony, literacy, survival, and themselves. These student readers got more than they bargained for, and nearly more than they felt they could handle.

The accident in reading is a kind of crisis that holds the power to “tear...away façades and obliterate...prejudices” (Arendt, 2009, p. 171) laying bare the essence of a particular issue. The crisis, Arendt (2009) suggests, emerges when sound human reason and common sense fail such that some shared truth is destroyed. Radically destabilizing well-worn pathways for understanding, a crisis marks a qualitative change in projects of inquiry and one’s interpretive practice. In particular, there is a caving-in of previously solid ground; established habits of thought are upset and likewise cause upset. Amidst this loss and destruction however, Arendt (2009) insists that a crisis can also productively “force...us back to the questions themselves” (p. 171) – the point of collapse pointing, in fact, toward some integral but previously inaccessible knowledge. Indeed, in my first encounter with Felman’s (1992) essay, I found myself in the throes of a crisis regarding the status of reading: What is it about reading, that readers could be so undone, so helplessly “at a loss, disoriented and uprooted” (p. 48) by an other’s story? As I recover from my reading of Felman, and recover bits and pieces of her narrative for my own use, I am forced back, as Arendt describes, to a more general question I’d thought long since settled when I was in grade school: What is this thing called reading, anyways?

I begin this chapter by engaging this very question. To theorize reading as a practice that is vulnerable to upset and also capable of upsetting readers, I look to the work of Klein. In particular, Klein’s theorization of the abiding conflicts of early infancy help locate reading as a labour grounded not in cognition, but in the readers’ unconscious history, phantasies, conflicts and anxiety. I note the work of others who have built from Klein’s work psychoanalytic theories that acknowledge reading as an emotional situation from which we sometimes have to recover, but through which we can also recover parts of ourselves that are otherwise inaccessible. I then return to more comprehensively answer the question: What is an accident in reading? I summarize Felman’s case study and identify three qualities that constitute an accident in reading: it’s sudden onset, breakdowns in meaning, and the reader’s emotional upset. I triangulate these three dimensions of an accident in reading with the work of other scholars who have similarly grappled with readings gone awry as a means of fleshing out (with an eye to operationalizing) the contours of an accident

in reading. The second half of this chapter moves to discuss the methodological considerations of my research: I explain my understanding of the accident as an object of inquiry, and my decision to work with fictional representations of accidents in reading. I discuss my selection of these fictional works and how each contains an accident in reading that is a kind of limit case for thinking about affect in reading. My analytic reading of these accidents in reading turns on my identification of the central conflict through which the accident arrives, and my articulation of the unconscious machinations that the fictional reader grapples with.

## **What is reading?**

Reading her work for the first time, Klein's (1986f) interpretations of her patients' offhand utterances and made-up games seem wild and somewhat outrageous: she interprets toys as brothers, trains as fathers and, somehow "Tea daddy" might mean "eat daddy" (p. 104). With a box of small, simplistic toys designated for each patient, Klein (1986g) notes that her consulting room would sometimes become a "battlefield" (p. 41) as children expressed with and on these objects their unconscious anxieties and phantasies of all stripes. The presence of, and patient's engagement with, these toys owes to Klein's (1986g) innovation in opening up the principle of free association beyond spoken words (, p. 37). Klein thought that "if language is not available, something else must replace it" (Mitchell, 1986, p. 18). Working with patients for whom words were few, Klein (1986g) thus theorized that the child's behavior, imaginary games, and nonsense babbling might be a means of "expressing what the adult expresses primarily by words" (p. 37). For instance, in her clinical writing about a patient named Erna, Klein (1960a) is incredibly attentive to her physical behaviours:

she used to break her toys or cut them up, knock down the little chairs, fling the cushions about, stamp her feet on the sofa, upset water, smudge paper, dirty the toys or the washing basin, break out into abuse, and so on (p. 89).

Though Erna does not have words to share, Klein suggests that she is nonetheless communicating something of her aggression through play: the objects that Erna breaks, cuts, tears and otherwise destroys are purposed to convey the dramatics of her inner world. Without immediate concern for hindering or modifying Erna's behaviour, Klein could

speculate, and try to re-describe, what her patients were relaying about their inner world through made-up games or gestures full of aggression, persecutory anxiety, guilt and occasionally attempts to repair damage done. In no rush to educate the child in etiquette, Klein's clinical case studies instead offer a "vivid and shocking [portrait of] the raging infant" (Britzman, 2009, p. 12) who's life hinges on a relation to her mother. Klein's theorization of this earliest time is upsetting not least of all because her work attempts to represent what thinking might feel like and the manner in which early thinking proceeds for the infant (Britzman, 2009, p. 12). In her reading of Klein, Sedgwick (2007) suggests that engagement with her work approximates the very mind blowing processes of infantile mental function that Klein sought to describe. Sedgwick (2007) elucidates:

Engaging closely with Klein often feels like getting stoned, in the sense that the unchecked proliferation of the reader's sense of recognition, endlessly recursive and relentlessly architectonic, quickly turns into a kind of fractal ineffability, resistant to the linear formulations of ordinary exposition...with Klein, the additional, unmediated charge of all that thematized bad affect—anxiety in particular—can be genuinely disabling to cognitive function. At least I've often found it so (p. 629–630).

If Klein's interpretations seem at once too wild to be true but also too familiar to be dismissed, then it is here where we meet the unconscious world of object relations –the affective mechanisms by which one builds up an inner world and the means by which one develops "styles of loving and hating" (Britzman, 2009, p. 82–83) the world. Indeed, it is to Klein's (1986f) storying of the baby's first object relations that I turn to in order to discern the nature of reading –the baby's relation to its first object, the mother, instantiating a later capacity for symbol formation and the substitution of words for things.

To locate the origins of reading in the time of infancy is to think of reading as a problem of making relations and making sense before one has any recourse to words. In Klein's (1986f, 1986c, 1986a) description of the pre-oedipal time of infancy, the first readings made by the baby are readings of the relation between self and other where the other in question is someone upon whom the baby's physical survival depends. This dependency is nearly absolute as the human baby is far more vulnerable and reliant on others to sustain her existence than, say, a foal is to a mare. Writing of Klein's contribution to psychoanalytic theories of development, Mitchell (1986) succinctly describes this dependency when she notes that "the human baby is born prematurely. Its instincts are

weak – it seems to have only a slight instinctual notion of how to avoid danger or to get satisfaction for its own needs from the outside” (p. 15–16). Mitchell implies here that all babies are born premature in the sense that they must face the problem that they are essentially immobile, know nothing of those upon which they depend, and lack words with which to communicate their vital needs. Although felt first and most acutely in infancy, dependency on others remains “manifestly a condition of our life in all its aspects...[and] this means that some degree of sharing, some degree of waiting, of giving up something for others, is necessary in life” (Riviere, 1964, p. 7–8). The new baby however, does not yet know this. What’s worse is that the baby also does not yet have the mental function with which to tolerate, any degree of privation – there is no replacement for prenatal unity (Klein, 1986b, p. 212). The “unavoidable grievances” (Klein, 1986b, p. 212) that accompany happy experiences of being fed or otherwise gratified thus pose a confusing and terrifying crisis because, in Riviere’s (1964) words, this is this moment where:

...the baby becomes aware of his dependence; he discovers that he cannot supply all his own wants –and he cries and screams. He becomes aggressive. He automatically explodes with hate and aggressive craving...the baby’s world is out of control; a strike and an earthquake have happened in his world (p. 8–9).

The experience of even the smallest deprivation is, at first, devastating for the infant as her world spins out of control by the infantile problem of desire and its frustrations. Unable to discern the internal world from the external one, the baby initially feels even the slightest privation as a question of life or death:

when he is cold, hungry or lonely there is no milk, no well-being or pleasure in the world – the valuable things in life have vanished. And when he is tortured by desire or anger, with uncontrollable, suffocating screaming, and painful, burning evacuations, the whole of his world is one of suffering; it is scalded, torn and racked too...it is our first experience of something like death... (Riviere, 1964, p. 9).

Klein suggests that grappling with her dire need of the gratifying and frustrating first object the baby is over-stimulated by her internal suffering: the mother who feeds is also the one who, in other moments, fails to deliver the promise of sustenance. We are born into this situation of helpless dependence on an other and consequently born into, what Klein (1986e) calls, the “Paranoid-Schizoid” position. Sedgwick (2007) notes five “violent” qualities that constitute this position and its perceptual effects: there is a ruthless “all or



nothing” logic, objects are split and “seen as exclusively, magically good or bad”, one feels either utterly powerless or omnipotent, there is a greed to take in good things and lastly, unpleasant or painful things within the self are attributed to others (p. 633). Resting on binary distinctions, these perceptual and psychical arrangements seem somewhat facile: absolute, polarizing divisions that lack nuance. And yet, Segal reminds that it is precisely the early ability to split, which should be considered a positive achievement for:

...it is splitting which allows the ego to emerge out of chaos and to order its experiences...however excessive and extreme it may be to begin with, [splitting] nevertheless orders the universe of the child’s emotional and sensory impressions and is a precondition of later integration (1988, p. 35).

The breast is the first object subject to this splitting such that the baby can, in one moment, love the good breast that feeds, and in the next moment hate the bad breast that denies. Under severe distress and anxiety, the baby plummets hastily into distinctions of her experience of this object based on her feelings toward it.

Rallying the psychical processes of projection and introjection, there is a movement of loving and hateful impulses exchanged between the baby and the first object. Tortured by an internal world that is felt to be all of suffering, the ability to project feelings of love and hate outside the self is a watershed moment for the infant as it is “the first and the most fundamental of our insurances or safety—measures against feelings of pain” (Riviere, 1964, p. 11). While loving feelings are sent out and constitute a gratifying breast, projection also offers relief by way of relegating painful feelings onto the bad breast and outside the self. In Riviere’s helpful formulation, in projecting bad feelings we can “disown and repudiate them as emanating from ourselves...we blame them *on* to someone else” (1964, p. 11). Working to redistribute dangerous forces within the self, projection localizes and concentrates danger outside thus establishing in phantasy a more secure and benevolent inner world (Riviere, 1964, p. 13). Long before one might utter the thin consolation of: “it’s not you, it’s me”, intense projective defences desperately insist “it’s not me, it’s you”. By extension, this relocation of badness heightens the threat of the bad breast, legitimizing is as a justified target of aggressive attack (Riviere, 1964, p. 13).

Coupled with this unconscious work of sending dangerous parts of the self elsewhere, impetuous introjections help move good things into the self as a way of augmenting

psychical resources and one's sense of security in the face of dangers internal and external. As the early ego is fragile and lacks cohesion, introjection is a way for the baby in crisis to collect and integrate bits of benign objects that reassure one of their goodness and enhance feelings of well-being (Klein, 1986e, p. 179; Riviere, 1964, p. 26). Essentially, early introjections figure as a way to patch up or solidify a self that is prone to disintegration by way of borrowing from others. Regarding introjection, Klein specifies in particular the importance of incorporating the "good breast" –frequent experiences of undisturbed enjoyment in being fed allowing the baby to build up a sense for the breast's goodness and its introjection creating the groundwork for later experiences of happiness in relation to other objects (Klein, 1986b, p. 215).

Working in tandem, these unconscious movements of sending out (projection) and taking in (introjection) allow the baby to construct and renovate their inner world. In these simple "readings", the infant's labours are driven not by formalized literacy skills but by the force of overwhelming affect and a desperate need to make sense from feelings. That is, before phonetics, rhyming games or vocabulary words learned in school, fledgling introjective and projective readings establish the baby's internal object relations: the bits sent out and taken inside help the baby to build up "internal representation[s] of figures and relationships which are emotionally significant" for the infant and will foreground their future readings of the outside world (Waddell, 1998, p. 13).

While these first readings are in some sense amelioratory –helping the infant to order a chaos of sensations, the sadism inherent to the Paranoid–Schizoid position has a recoil effect in that persecutory anxiety can be amped up to a tipping point (Klein, 1986f, p. 96). That is, by all means necessary and available, the infant's aim is to selfishly possess everything the good breast has to offer and to simultaneously obliterate the bad breast made, in part, from her own violent projections. However, having projected her destructive impulses onto the bad breast, the infant instantly fears reprisal – the "paranoia" of the Paranoid–Schizoid position naming the infant's fear that what she has done to the bad breast will, in turn, be enacted upon her in revenge. Both projection and introjection bring danger, for in projecting his hatred, the baby:

...bites and tears up the breast, devours it, annihilates it; and he feels that the breast will attack him in the same way...in his mind [he] attacks the

breast with poisonous urine and explosive faeces, and therefore expects it to be poisonous and explosive towards him (Klein, 1975c, p. 63).

In a similar logic, as introjection of the good breast rests on a greedy impulse, there is fear that what has been taken in can turn to “devour him in the same greedy way as he desires to devour it” (Klein, 1975c, p. 64). The object previously under attack mounts its own attack against the self and fear of this retaliation ignites anxiety that then pushes the infant to move to new equations – which is the work of finding and appropriating new objects that can stand in for old ones deemed dangerous. New objects are equated as symbols of older dangerous objects, then when the new object itself becomes a threat a further equation is made. From here on out, the baby is “impelled constantly to make other and new equations, which form the basis of his interest in the new objects and of symbolism” (Klein, 1986f, p. 97). If all goes well, there is enough anxiety to push one into taking interest in new objects that can replace old ones, and building up a repository of symbols that can be used to stand in for the thing itself.

This is a crucial movement in that up till now, the infant has inhabited a reality which was wholly phantastical “surrounded with objects of anxiety...[where] excrement, organs, objects, things animate and inanimate [were] equivalent to one another” (Klein, 1986f, p. 98). Through symbolism however, a true relation to reality can be made from the infant’s “unreal reality” as she brings her internal world into dialogue with real objects in the external world (Klein, 1986f, p. 98). It is this intrasubjective dialogue that introduces that infant’s fledgling capacity to think in the Depressive Position where one enacts “the capacity to find newer and newer ideas that can be unmoored from the frightening qualities of concrete symbolization” (Britzman, 2003, p. 130). The capacity for symbolism, which is fashioned from one’s first paranoid schizoid readings, is the foundation of all phantasy and sublimation (Klein, 1986f, p. 97). As Britzman summarizes:

Klein raises meaning, or knowledge of reality and phantasy, as the first terrible problem and so she attributes something original and frustrating to the infant: a lively desperate, paranoid, and an urgent struggle to symbolize, to understand, and to relate (2006, p. 84).

With the mother’s love and support, the infant manages to make it through this trying time. In the very beginning, the mother is the baby’s first object and her necessity awakens the baby’s need to read. Her love and responsivity supports the infant to risk making meaning

and drawing emotional lines between her self, sensations, and external objects. In relationship to another then, the back and forth of the baby's psychical readings establish the labour of making sense as beginning from a kind of intra and intersubjective, and primarily unconscious, communication that is *felt* more than consciously comprehended. Between the social world of others and the baby's fledgling mental labour meaning is made. Born in need of others, the baby is not, and could not, go at this alone; her internal world and shaky readings are built up from the world of others outside her.

The significance of this intrasubjective, internal struggle cannot be underestimated insofar as the baby's first readings of her mother ground a future capacity, and interest, in reading others and eventually the written word. In her consideration of the place of maternity in reading, Grumet redescribes this relation in her insistence that reading begins as a "romantic" process between at least two and remains so throughout life as it "invites us to mingle our thoughts, visions, and hopes with someone else's" (2006, p. 207). The capacity to use symbols and make relations between objects allows the baby to encounter external reality and gets going the mechanisms of identification upon which a self can begin to be built. She suggests that the baby at first "just [does] not seem to know what is important" and looks to loving others who can point out "the world worth seeing" (Grumet 2006, p. 217). There is not a one-to-one correspondence between the mother's pointing and the baby's seeing, but one nonetheless comes to learn what matters in the larger world through this loving relationship. It is within this reliable relationship that the baby can come to venture their own readings of the world; and why Grumet (2006) claims that "...this world is handed down to us from the people we love" (p. 217). Her conceptualization of "bodyreading" similarly brings reading home as a "most human activity (1988, p. 131) that "is contingent, tangled up with the world from which texts and readers come" (Grumet 1988, p. 130). As a passage between one consciousness and another, between the public world and one's private world, reading is at once a comforting and risky journey as readers give of themselves in reading what they may not so willingly surrender to the world (Grumet 1988, p. 134)

In particular, the labour of reading printed words on the page is driven by what readers unconsciously give over to a text. This is called the transference, which Britzman (2000) describes as "the capacity to bring new editions of old conflicts into present relationships"

(p. 41). In reading, one brings unresolved conflicts and desires to the text they are reading. This cannot be helped and is, in fact, what enlivens the desire to read even as the transference can be felt to haunt one's conscious intentions in reading. The necessity of the transference in reading means that even as one is reading in real-time, the transference catches the "'then and there' of an infantile past [with] the 'here and now' of the present" (Britzman, 1998a, p. 33–34). That is, interpretive habits and affects from one's long ago "first readings" guide and resurface in later literacies –conflicts from each stage of psychical growth being never fully "resolved" but "reworked, over and over again, at different times and on different planes" (Waddell, 1998, p. 71). The infant's first readings and later transferences to this experience make clear that we cannot help but be touched in reading by others of our past –reading stories between the lines of our own history of having to make sense of the outside world and make a self.

Brought to the scene of reading, psychoanalytic representations of inner life and psychoanalytic concepts such as the transference center unconscious mechanisms over conscious comprehensions skills. The invitation that psychoanalytic theories of reading offer is this: hot-wired to the pains and pleasures of infancy by way of the transference, the vicissitudes of affective life supersede learned literacy skills and best intentions. Vulnerable to our psychical history which is known only through its symptoms, reading cannot help but be driven by unconscious object relations in all their curious logics and dramatics. Even for sophisticated adult readers, encounters with the words of an author are not dissimilar to our first exchanges with a mother in that they lean on the primal conflicts of self/other, inside/outside and, love/hate. For instance, unable to dialogue with the author to confirm what was meant by a particular phrase or turn of events in a novel, the reader must feel their way through confusion and not knowing what is being communicated: sending love and wishes onto the text, attacking the text for fear that it will harm them in some way, accepting inside what is found to be beautiful but also fearing that something dangerous has also inadvertently been taken in.

Taken in by Klein's representation of the baby's emotional life, and the ways in which the transference makes reading possible, I imagine the reader as Phillips (1998) imagines the dreaming self who cannot be schooled because she chooses her teachers and the curriculum she wants. The reader I imagine is one engaged in an "unforced labour" (Phillips, 1998, p.

70–71) which proceeds by way of psychological mechanisms learned before words. As with the infant, the reader of words is put upon to engage with an other completely in her mind. As with the infant there is no way that the reader can correspond with an actual person but for inside her mind where she holds an imaginary conversation with an other through their words on the page.

## **What is an accident in reading?**

While reading itself cannot be schooled, we must nonetheless grapple with the place of reading in school. As an affected and affecting labour, reading in school can give us grief when the transference marshals reading to unexpected places. Felman's (1992) essay "Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching" represents just such a scene where an accident in reading signals the workings of the unconscious transference in reading. In this section, I offer a summary of the accident that occurred in Felman's classroom and suggest that there are three qualities that compose such an event. In the second half of this chapter I move to describe my methodological use of this concept, but for now I aim to describe how, to borrow Grumet's (2006) language, Felman's class began with a teacher pointing out a "world worth seeing" (p. 217) in her course materials, but ended with student readers desperately pointing fingers and trying to pin down the cause of their readerly distress.

As I mentioned earlier, Felman had composed a reading list for students attending her class—the curriculum pointing out concepts and interventions offered by others. However, while Felman could plan her reading list, she could not anticipate how the learning of her students would be implied in the very conflicts under theoretical consideration. As many have noted, the teacher's inability to know or anticipate her students' engagement with curriculum is an example of the "belated time" of learning how, as Britzman (1998a) notes, "accidents, chance, and frustration may well be the effects and not the derailing of any deliberate action on the part of the adult" in education (p. 26). In Felman's case, all seems to be progressing as expected—students are reading, writing, and speaking of the course materials, when all of the sudden the class unexpectedly breaks down. In particular, all seems fine until the class views a video-taped life testimony. Something in the testimony bothers the students. It seems as if a line has been crossed, a limit reached that causes the class to break out into

crisis. In the moments following the video screening, Felman (1992) recalls that her students remained “inarticulate and speechless”, appearing “subdued” and “ke[eping] their silence even as they left” (p. 47). It is only outside the class, that students began to be able to express their distress. Away from the teacher, the students are helplessly obsessed with testimony to the point that they are unable engage any other topic in other classes (Felman 1992, p. 48). Among the students there was an “endless and relentless talking in the days and weeks to come” (Felman 1992, p. 48): friends and roommates became “coerced listeners” (Felman 1992, p. 48) and Felman herself began receiving phone calls at home at odd hours from students who desperately wished to talk, though didn’t know what, exactly, they wanted to say (1992, p. 48). Something “touched” and set off the class’ explosion of incessant, almost compulsive, talk even as words seemed to offer them little solace.

Felman (1992) interprets this never-ending and seemingly futile talk as symptomatic of an emotional situation where the engagement with an other’s story left her students in anguish, feeling estranged from themselves and each other (p. 48). In one striking interpretation, a student gives citation to Mallarme’s concept of the “accidenting of verse” to describe the class’s crisis: “We had been *talking* about the accident – and here all of a sudden *the accident happened* in the class, happened *to* the class. The accident passed *through* the class” (Felman 1992, p. 50). The progression here from “talking” to “happened in”, to “happened *to*”, and finally to “passed through” hints at how something has changed in the class’s relation to the accident in question. In particular, although the accident began as a poetic experiment with words it became an event that occurred *in* the class, then an event that happened *to* the class, and finally as a set of circumstances to be endured *by* the class. Here, a literary accident has become all too literal, all too real for Felman’s students. Freud’s distinction between learning about and learning from helps clarify the accident’s shift in meaning here. Presupposing a distance between object and subject, learning about typically “focuses upon the acquisition of qualities, attributes and fact” whereas learning from is “of a different order, that of insight” which “requires the learner’s attachments to, and implication in, knowledge” (Britzman, 1998a, p. 117). What shocks and undoes these readers is how they find themselves in the affective throes of that which they were studying – questions of testimony and witnessing becoming urgent existential questions for these readers.

The language of the accident here draws on Mallarmé's conceptualization of the "accidenting of verse" (Quoted in Felman 1992, p. 19)—a phrase he used to depict the burgeoning poetic revolution at the end of the nineteenth century. In Felman's (1992) reading of Mallarmé's Oxford lecture, the "accident" under consideration inhabits two registers of aesthetics: the "art of accident" (p. 19) as represented in the poetic form itself and the reader's encounter with such work as an accident pursuing and pursued (p. 22). Firstly, the "art of accident" (Quoted in Felman 1992: p19) is a phrase Mallarmé invents to describe how free verse poetry disrupts and breaks with traditional poetic forms. In contrast to the symmetry and predictability of classical Alexandrine style, free verse introduced a "rhythmical unpredictability" (Quoted in Felman 1992, p. 19) as well as syntactic and semantic surprises that caused linguistic ruptures within the form. Read as a replica and as an effect of the French Revolution, Mallarmé testifies to this poetic revolution as "the historical advent of a linguistic fragmentation in which the verse is violently and deliberately 'broken'" (Quoted in Felman 1992, p. 19). In Mallarmé's view, free verse poetry essentially inaugurates a "Crisis of Verse" (Quoted in Felman 1992, p. 19) by way of rhythmic irregularities and interruptions of expected meanings which cause an explosion of this medium. To read such "accidenting of verse" (Quoted in Felman 1992, p. 19) Mallarmé suggests, has significant impact on readers, as an encounter with this kind of poetry, can invite readerly experience of accident in itself: an unexpected event with "ill-understood effects" (Quoted in Felman 1992, p. 21) that the reader must bear. Likening himself to a traveller, Mallarmé (Quoted in Felman 1992) notes the reader's predicament:

...I am bringing news, and the most surprising...

They have done violence to verse...

It is appropriate to relieve myself of that news right away...much like an invited traveller who, without delay, in breathless gasps, discharges himself of the testimony of an accident known and pursuing him...(p. 21).

In Mallarmé's configuration, the reader bears witness to an accident in verse which he experiences in reading. The symbolic accident has an enduring and unanticipated psychological impact: violated verse shatters the reader. The reader is rattled through their witness to the aesthetic accident. In turn, and with haste, this reader is driven to release her response by giving testimony to this accident, speaking in "breathless gasps" with harried urgency. Indeed, this accident in words seems to follow the reader despite his attempt to move away



from it – his full knowledge of this happening known only “through its aftermath, through its effects” (Felman, 1992, p. 22). One of these effects is the way in which accident and reader are tethered to one another such that it is not entirely clear who is pursuing whom; whether it is the accident chasing the reader, or the reader who is unable to let go of the accident (Felman 1992, p. 22–23). Felman favours the later interpretation, suggesting that it is the reader who pursues the accident of free verse much the way Freud pursued the accident of dream through free association.

Indeed, both Felman and her students pursue this accident after its initial occurrence. In the classroom, Felman moves to offer her students containment in the form of a written assignment where they might each grapple with their own precocious testimony to an accident, and attempt to narrate the first effects of their reading through the course materials. Felman (1992) too, engages in such practice, writing of her own experience, she recalls that:

I did not know [at that time] that I would myself, one day, have to articulate my testimony to that class, whose lesson...turned out to be quite unforgettable, but not in ways that anyone could have predicted. I have never given – and have never given since – any other class like it, and have never been as stupefied by the inadvertent lessons and the unforeseeable effects of teaching as I was by the experience of this course...(p. 6–7).

From this class and its unforeseeable effects, Felman offers a representation of an accident in reading. In my reading of Felman’s narrative and her theorizing I identify three qualities that mark out what constitutes an accident in reading: its unexpected onset, the collapse of sensible meanings, and exorbitant affective upheaval. In the following sections I discuss each quality in turn, beginning from Felman’s descriptions while drawing on relevant contributions from other scholars.

### **The accident’s unexpected onset**

Reading in the wake of, what she calls a “crisis of truth” (Felman 1992, p. 6) wrought by the Holocaust and Holocaust testimony, Felman (1992) suggests that the content of her curriculum is “unwittingly enacted, set in motion in the class” (p. 48). This unwitting occurrence marks the accident in reading as something that cannot be anticipated in advance. That is, just as dreams come unbidden so too is the accident in reading an event

driven by the unconscious that can't be known in advance of its arrival. Like the dreamwork which appears unexpectedly and proceeds by unintentional means, the first (and most fundamental) quality of an accident in reading is its unexpected and sudden onset. This unexpected quality of the accident in reading leans in large part on the general OED definition of the accident as "an event that happens by chance or that is without apparent or deliberate cause". At a most fundamental level, the accident in reading cannot be staged or anticipated rather, it can only be chanced upon, made from the "hap" of happening upon what cannot be known in advance. Specifically, what cannot be known in advance is what will be made in the space between reader and text where one's inner life meets that of an other to unpredictable consequence. This meeting, in all its vulnerability, expectation and uncertainty, is constituted by an orientation of "intimate openness to the Other" (Coleman, 2009, p. 17) that grounds the hap or happenstance of reading itself. Reading's happenstance, and the hap of a reading accident, lies in this "stance towards possibility" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 219) where the readerly posture of openness toward a book "necessitates...the possibility of not just reading but of *being read by* the book" (Coleman, 2009, p. 60). This switch from reading to being *read by* is precisely the situation Felman's students face when "all of a sudden" they are no longer just reading about accidents and instead find themselves disoriented and flailing in their own accident with an others' words. The accident erupts and interrupts both her and her students' expectations: things precipitously fly off the rails as the "unforeseeable eventness" (Felman, 1992, p. 6) of reading erupts in the middle of their practice. Despite best intentions, something has gone awry. As the saying goes, "accidents will happen to the best regulated families" and this is indeed the case with reading as well: despite intention and conscious attention to the interpretive task at hand, accidents are woefully unavoidable.

The accident's sudden onset and the futility of preventative measures against such interruptions can be accounted for by the workings of transference. Two short anecdotes help highlight how the transference establishes the psychical grounds for an accident in reading. In *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight*, Felman (1987) tells of being cautioned against reading Lacan's work. Placing Lacan's *Ecrits* on a cashier's counter, Felman (1987) describes being warned by the bookseller: "I am.... here to give advice to students" he explained "this is an expensive book, and I promise you: it is unreadable, totally incomprehensible. Don't buy it" (p. 14). This warning about the book's expense

implies that Felman's purchase will end up costing her more than the sticker price; the book's incomprehensible prose potentially demanding an excessive expenditure of time and patience as well. Despite this warning, Felman (1987) bought and read *Ecrits*, recalling:

I simply read through it, without fighting with it...a great number of the pages I was reading did in fact seem incomprehensible, but at the same time they profoundly moved me...it appealed to me in the way literature appeals to me: without my being able to make immediate sense of it or translate it, I was made to take in and absorb more than I knew" (p. 5).

In contrast to Felman's delightful pilgrimage through *Ecrits*, Lear likens his reading of Lacan to that of being stuck on a train that he discovers too late is travelling to a dreaded destination. Like Felman's students, Lear's (2003) trouble with Lacan catches him off guard:

As you opened a new book, have you ever imagined it was like getting on a train? You don't really know where you are going, there is the allure of adventure, the promise that you are going to be taken someplace new. As the train pulls out of the station, new vistas start to open up, but somewhere along the route things start to get ugly, you want to stop the train. "Do I really have to go *there?!?*" It's like a dream turned bad. That is how I feel when I read Lacan (p. 137).

Again, we meet a train and a traveller – one who begins his journey with hope and promise only to find that somewhere along the way, things start to "get ugly" and he is taken somewhere he does not want to go. Lear (2003) explains that when reading Lacan "we quickly end up disorganized" (p. 138) and asking desperately: "how did we get here?" (p. 139). To be fair, both scholars describe Lacan's writing in similar terms: "dense and slithering" (Lear, 2003, p. 14) and "obscure and enigmatic" (Felman, 1987, p. 5). However, it would appear that Lear might have appreciated the unsolicited advice of Felman's bookseller –thus avoiding altogether a readerly vacation turned sour.

I want to suggest however, that the bookseller's counsel is futile regardless of his audience. That is, because the accident's occurrence cannot be anticipated in advance, we cannot know before we begin what will set us off and set reading off on a wayward path. That is, what accounts for the differing experience of these two readers is what they bring to their reading of Lacan – the machinations of the transference that drive reading but can also, all

at once, flip a switch and cause one to fall into an accident in reading. In retrospect, Felman (1987) hypothesizes that her capacity to read Lacan could be attributed to her status as an “outsider” (p. 5) to psychoanalytic theory however, I want to suggest that the unexpectedness of an accident in reading can be attributed to the flash workings of the transference. Operating outside theoretical allegiances and conscious intentions of the reader or author the transference can quickly turn a dream of reading into a nightmare that defies even the most careful speculation.

### **The accident’s collapse of sensible meanings**

Indeed, having fallen into an accident Felman’s students struggle to use words to describe what they’ve made from their reading. This struggle manifests in two seemingly contradictory effects: silence and incessant narration. Though appearing differently, both symptoms are the effect of a collapse of sensible meanings and cognitive meaning-making habits – the second quality of an accident in reading. Initially, as Felman notes, these readers were struck silent by an accident that upturned their interpretive competency. All was going well in reading, until it was not: things that these readers thought as belonging to them – meaning, sense, narrative coherence, were seemingly misplaced or scrambled. Having fallen into an accident words no longer felt to be reliable or stable means of communication for these readers. Mouths agape, these readers were stopped in their tracks by an other’s story and left unsure of how to proceed. Shocked by a reading encounter turned ugly, by a reading overturned, defences arise. I read her students’ initial silence as a kind of inhibition – a reticence to use words that can turn on them. Backing away from symbolization and meaning-making, these readers felt disoriented, turned around, and confused about what words can do (to them), and what they can do (to others) with words. Paradoxically, while reading of how literary and biographical testimony can empower or heal their authors and communities, Felman’s student readers experience firsthand how while “words can liberate...they can also distort and wound” (Cheung, 1993, p. 128). And yet, words are the best thing we have for mitigating anxiety and imposing some kind of organization to (even unbearable) experience. Though this accident in reading initially silences Felman’s students, they ultimately return to attempt to find some kind of recourse in words: an “endless and relentless talking” (Felman, 1992, p. 47) among the students even though words seemed to offer little relief. They spoke streams of words and

interminable monologues that bled out into their other classes, and into their private relationships with others. In the weeks that followed this accident's eruption no single word, and no critical mass of words was enough to contain their experiences of an accident in reading. Metaphorically grasping at straws, these readers in distress nonetheless kept searching for language that might mitigate their anguish.

In both silence and excessive, almost compulsive, speech we can see how an accident in reading has interfered with sensible meaning making. Familiar signifiers become strange and meaning defied intentionality such that words came to mean both more and less than had been expected. Brought about by one's over-the-top transference to a text, the accident in reading does not abide established habits of symbolization nor the reader's will. This betrayal of familiar meanings and meaning-making habits appears through a number of different interpretive irregularities as one's cognitive interpretive skills are overtaken by the transference. Accidents evoke wild meanings – words are unhinged from their common sense meaning and instead become tethered to one's internal dramas. There are, for instance, reversals of meaning, explosions of possible meanings, and re-readings that sully one's sense of interpretive competency. Likewise, an accident in reading can cause meanings to shift from persecutory to amelioratory and back again; there is confusion, obsession, second-guessing, and interpretive rigidity sometimes all at once. As an accident brings about a collapse of sensible meanings, we can think of the affected reader as one who is shuttled back to the very beginning time of literacy. Although a reader may possess any number of cognitive skills, the accident renders moot one's critical faculties, leaving even a sophisticated reader flailing in the rudimentary distinctions and fledging symbolic equations that first brought them into language and into relations with a loving other.

Two anecdotes, as framed by Gallop and Grumet respectively, represent what a collapse of sensible meanings can look like within an accident in reading. In analyzing a eulogy that Derrida wrote for Louis Althusser, Gallop (2011) draws unique attention to a one such shift in meaning that left Derrida unsure of what it meant for him to "read" the work of his recently deceased friend. For context: it is the night before Derrida will speak at Althusser's funeral, and he is re-reading his friend's published writings. In eulogies, Derrida often quotes his recently deceased friend so this re-reading is not, in itself, particularly odd. However, preceding his quotation of Althusser, Derrida drops in an unusual caveat,

writing: “rereading him yesterday evening, and late into the night, this [passage] imposed itself on me rather than my reading it – or electing to say it again here” (Derrida, 2001, p. 118). Gallop (2011) hones in on this aside, to suggest that something unusual happened in Derrida’s midnight reading:

Although he tells us he was ‘rereading Althusser’, he curiously claims that he did not ‘read’ the passage he is about to quote. Rather than ‘reading’ or choosing to quote this passage, relations in which he would be doing something to the text, Derrida insists upon his passivity and the text’s active, even imperious relation to him...(p. 69).

There is, Gallop suggests, something “spooky” going on as Derrida is reading and not reading at the same time –caught trying to figure out what it means to “read” the work of his recently deceased friend. At stake here is the signifier “reading” for as Derrida sits with Althusser’s work, “reading” initially means one thing and then it sharply comes to mean otherwise. He doesn’t move to resolve this paradox in the eulogy, but Gallop (2011) gets to the heart of the conflict when she asks: “What is reading that Derrida would insist that he was not “reading” on such an occasion?” (p. 70). Her question brings to light how the signifier “reading” has broken down, it’s meaning made uncertain even for a practiced wordsmith such as Derrida.

Similarly, for readers who experience an accident in reading signification can stall, leaving one at a loss for words as meanings are reversed into their opposite, leach out to cloud sense, or dissolve logical meanings altogether. In an anecdote about two readers who make very different sense from the same reading, Grumet (1988) helps represent how easily meaning can shift and leave one feeling unsteady on their feet. Grumet (1988) refers to an anecdote from Marie-France Etienne where she recalls walking with her Aunt and seeing a big red, black and white poster reading “Workers, unite against poverty for freedom and justice!”:

Very impressed, I stood in front of it. With all the wisdom of my eight years I thought it was great. I did not really know why; I just liked it. My aunt, by that time, had caught up with me. ‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ I asked her, still contemplating the poster. ‘What?’ ‘The poster,’ I answered, wondering how she could have missed it. She grabbed my hand, pulled me away, and told me with a harsh voice, ‘Never, do you understand, never read posters like this one. They tell lies. They are bad. They are communist’ (Etienne quoted in Grumet 1988.)

Without prior knowledge of her aunt's politics, Etienne must grapple with how, while she and her aunt share the text, they do not have a shared reading of this text. Initially, Etienne reads the text as simply aesthetically pleasing however, upon her aunt's arrival the poster also becomes something that is dangerous and potentially harmful. Like a trusted friendship turned sour, Etienne has to reconcile how the poster means two things at once as its significance is unseated by her aunt's reprimand. In an accident in reading in particular, logic and cognitive meaning-making prove to hold no sway as reading is instead taken over by affect run amok.

### **The accident's exorbitant affective fallout**

Indeed, as Etienne must grapple with the influence of something from outside that influences her reading, so too do accidents in reading force readers to engage with something outside conscious intention. This is, of course, the foundation of reading; the work of making meaning from an other's words always resting on one's unconscious transference to a text. However, in an accident in reading the reader is overtaken or overwhelmed by how a text touches on their existing unconscious object relations. Although it is the unconscious transference that makes reading possible, in an accident in reading the transference can mangle and nearly obliterate the text itself, to say nothing of the toll that such an accident takes on the reader. For Felman's (1992) students, the emotional effects of an accident in reading are significant as they find themselves not only set apart from other people, but also emotionally falling apart. As Felman (1992) describes it, these readers feel "entirely at a loss, disoriented and uprooted" (p. 48) as there is an unexpected explosion of affect caused by their engagement with the stories of others. Drowning in their own varied and intense emotions, these readers are shattered and unsettled – they feel anxious, broken open, lonely, hurt and, frustrated by their reading and also by the despairing knowledge that they cannot seem to think their way out of anguish caused by reading. This kind of over-the-top emotional experience is the third quality of an accident in reading and it can manifest itself in any number of ways: tears, aggression, sadness, despair, rage, joy, guilt, fear, relief, or even exhaustion. Reading, in and of itself, is an emotional situation. As Grumet (2006) succinctly puts it: while "we love to read...we also read in order to love" (p. 212) as our emotional engagement with fictional others shapes the emotional relations we imagine possible with real others (Georgis, 2014;

Jacobus, 1999; Mishra Tarc, 2011b; Robertson, 2001). In the scene of an accident in reading however, one's affective engagement with an other's story comes to feel exorbitant – somehow, whether of kind or of degree, affect proliferates beyond the pale and beyond conscious control.

In *Dear Fahrenheit 451: Love and Heartbreak in the Stacks: A Librarian's Love Letters and Breakup Notes to the Books in Her Life*, Annie Spence (2017) captures well the kind of emotional tumult that a novel can usher into a reader's life. In this work, Spence (2017) documents her emotional attachment to a number of texts: those she loves or hates, those she could never put up with, and those that she feels have “ruined” her for other novels. Structured as a series of letters, her opening greeting to each novel introduces the relationship she has made to the work in question: “Dear *The Goldfinch*, We’ve grown apart”, “Dear *Anna Karenina*, I feel like I don’t even know you” or, “Dear *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, I knew that I loved you, but I didn’t remember the reasons...” (Spence, 2017). In novels Spence finds soul mates and dead-beat boyfriends, best friends she never had and, bullies she can’t seem to shake. For her, these fictional characters are just as emotionally significant as the real people who populate Spence’s life beyond the pages – this work being the product of her capacity to think about and narrate her emotional attachments to these novels. Her memoir reminds that reading can introduce intense emotional dramas, even when the figures in play exist solely within the readers’ imagination.

Although Spence is able to narrate her attachments to these novels, the emotional overhaul of an accident in reading can often defy words. As affect goes haywire, the reader who has fallen in to an accident might not be able to put into words their affected experience in reading. For example, Mishra Tarc (2011a) suggests that:

an experience of reading can leave us shaking from the outside in...[as] texts get under our skin, finding their way to the fragile raw material of a carefully concealed self to ... provoke from us intense gut reactions and irrational emotional outbursts (p. 57).

Like the young infant who cannot yet “use their words” in times of frustration, in an accident one can be overwhelmed by affect and act out in unexpected ways. For instance, in her analysis of Coetzee’s fictional reader Elizabeth Costello, Mishra Tarc (2011a)



describes how Costello is emotionally undone from her reading of fictional scenes of torture and suffering. As Mishra Tarc (2011a) suggests, Costello's reading has caused this fictional reader to feel:

...afflicted with palpable, unbearable feelings... she feels ill...she becomes 'sick with the spectacle, sick with herself, sick with a world in which such things took place, until at last she pushed the book away and sat with her head in her hands (p. 57).

Emotionally overcome by her reading of someone else's story, Costello feels sick. The transference in reading having caused her emotional world to go haywire, Costello feels this affective chaos in her body as one might experience a headache, churning stomach, or racing heart before a job interview. In an accident in reading, one's logical thought and moral education have no purchase –there is no match for the force of the transference. Having unexpectedly fallen into an accident, Costello is forced to “wrestle...with resurfacing affects from another time and place rudely transferred on to her present reading event...caught and forced to contend with a surfacing – seemingly from nowhere – flood of affect” (Mishra Tarc, 2011a, p. 60). Flooding is a good metaphor for the emotional mayhem one experiences in an accident in reading: there is a deluge of affect from another time that inundates the reader and stymies their attempts to keep their head above water – to keep cognitive function above this unconscious melee. Like Alice in Wonderland who finds herself floating in a sea of her own tears, the emotional transference in an accident in reading can cause one to nearly drown in bad feelings: there is a feeling of a loss of control, as one is overwrought by affect that overrides cognitive function. Akin to a storm surge after a hurricane, the accident in reading occasions an affective overflow that can force one back into the rudimentary paranoid-schizoid coping mechanisms first used in infancy: violent projection, insatiable introjections and, all-or-nothing categorizations that obliterate the in-betweenness and complexity of external reality.

Along with its sudden onset and the upset of familiar meanings, this over-the-top affective upheaval is the third and final theoretical quality of an accident in reading. The accident contains a confluence of factors – the unconscious, signification, narrative, and the existence of others – a kind of perfect storm that represents reading as an affected and affecting labour. In addition to this theoretical bracketing, the accident also holds epistemological and methodological significance for my research. In the next section I

outline the methodological parameters of my dissertation: how I approach the accident as an object of inquiry, my decision to work with literary representations of accidents, my selection of these fictional works in particular, and my interpretive process.

## **Methodological Considerations: Reading Accidents in Reading**

### **The accident as an object of inquiry**

“It started things. You can’t tell. The most important things just happen to you” (Bouwsma quoted in Phillips, 1998, p. 86). Indeed, an accident in reading “just happens” but carries with it the affective force to “start...things” for the reader, for others who witness the readers’ accident firsthand and for those who encounter the belated story of a reader’s accident. Although one can’t tell when important things are happening, Bouwsma nonetheless insists on the *potential* significance of events, such as the accident, that *just* happen. In Bouwsma’s sentence, “just” modifies the verb “happen”. A few phrases make clear this sense of the adverb: one might request *just* a small piece of cake, attribute a colleague’s irritable tone to her *just* having a bad day, or dismiss the charms of a bartender who is *just* interested in receiving hefty tip. Things that *just* happen tend to be thought of as singular, insignificant, even trifling – “just” functioning to delimit potential significance and close down associations or alternative interpretations. What I find intriguing about the above quotation then, is Bouwsma’s claim to the contrary. Namely, that happenstance events that might otherwise be dismissed as *just* occurring can sometimes be the “most important” ones.

This reversal is central to my recovery of the accident in reading as an object of study and my analytical work in making meaning from reading’s accidents. In this work I align myself with what can be thought of as the central analytic thrust of Freud’s (1949) early work *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Thought of as the “Mistake Book”, in this work Freud explains and demonstrates via a number of anecdotal cases how accidents in everyday life are sometimes meaningful events through which we can differently think about an individual’s inner life (Phillips, 1994, p. 10). Phillips (1994) suggests that the Mistake Book “describes a large number of accidents to prove that there is no such thing as an accident” (p. 11). That is, where there is an accident there also lies a muddle of

disavowed wishes, psychological injuries, and a history of anguishes and pleasures that we might not otherwise access. For the purposes of this research, I am curious about the psychological matter that accompanies, precedes, and follows an accident in reading. To put it otherwise, psychoanalytic reading methods pose the wager that there is no such thing as *just* an accident – our mistakes, blunders and, slip-ups can sometimes tell us something about who we are and who we believe ourselves to be.

This research aims to think about the practice of reading through its accidents. While not all accidents are meaningful, meaning can nonetheless be made from accidents. In his conceptualization of the obstacle, Phillips (1993) describes well my methodological configuration of the accident as a research object writing:

the only way to discover your projects is to notice...what you reckon are obstacles...[for] when we unpack the obstacles in analysis – when we think of them as the way rather than as something in the way – we find them, like Pandora's box, full of the unusual and the forbidden...the obstacle reminds me of what I want, in one part of my mind, to forget (p. 82–83).

To turn to the accident in reading as an object of study is to examine what aesthetic, psychological and symbolic material comprises a textual accident – what unusual, forbidden, or difficult things are packed up in and depicted by difficult readings? And, what can reading's difficulties or obstacles tell us about what we take to be the "project" of reading more generally? Centering the accident in reading as an object of inquiry in this way similarly meets Robertson's (2001) challenge to resist "fixing" the problem(s) of reading and to instead ask "how can we learn from our obstacles?" (p. 52) and, how might the textures of this interpretive labour disclose something about reading itself? Alongside Robertson's urging, this dissertation approaches reading's perceived obstacles as "reliable learning objects" (Robertson quoted in Lewkowich, 2011, p. 80) to offer a narration of my analytic engagement with, and response to, such objects. In the sections that follow, I outline the methodological parameters of this engagement, including: my decision to work with literary representations of accidents in reading; the sampling procedure by which I selected the novels under study; the interpretive criteria used to identify a particular accident in reading in each case, and the reading practice I employ in my analysis of each fictional accident in reading.

## Moving to fictions

My turn to literary objects is guided by the work of others who have similarly used novels to theorize reading as an affected practice related to questions about curriculum, traumatic social history and, ethics (Britzman, 2000, 2009; Eppert, 2000; Georgis, 2014; Lewkowich, 2012; Mishra Tarc, 2011a, 2011b). In this field which engages aesthetic works through psychoanalytic concepts, the novel is situated as an object that can both represent unconscious conflicts and ignite them in real readers. For instance, in her reading of Coetzee's short story "The Problem of Evil", Mishra Tarc (2011a) interprets a character's disturbance in reading as saying something about herself as a reader of Coetzee's work. She suggests that, as we engage with the fictional character's disturbance in reading, we must come to grips with the fact that we too are never very far from experiencing such disturbances when reading (Mishra Tarc, 2011a). Through the workings of transference and projective identification, reading of a fictional character's trouble with reading can touch on something within the real reader. Likewise, in her argument for narrative as a resource for surviving traumatic experience, Georgis (2006) reads Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* to similar ends: the "better story" for the novel's protagonist figures for Georgis as a call to consider how for real readers and writers "surviving difficulty and trauma is a creative act" in making for oneself a "better story" to live with (p. 169). Like these scholars who engage made-up stories, in this dissertation I make from fictional accidents in reading insight significant to our real reading.

My research into the emotional landscape of reading engages three literary works. I approach these novels as affected and affecting "evocative objects" (Turtle, 2007). In an edited collection by the same name, Turtle (2007) conceptualizes evocative objects as "goods-to-think-with and...good-to-think-with" for their capacity to bring intellect and affect together—connecting emotional worlds to the world of theory (p. 5). To think of novels as evocative objects is to look beyond their instrumentalized value (ie. reading for plot, or for a "lesson" to be gleaned) and instead ask: What do these works evoke, in me, as a reader? And, what might I make from these stories about readers who experience accidents?

In *Anecdotal Theory*, Gallop (2002) suggests that one thing we can make from stories is theory; her essays in this collection performing just such work as she engages anecdotal

stories to push thought and thinking further. As a method of inquiry, Gallop centres the anecdote –defined in the OED as “a short, amusing or interesting story...regarded as unreliable or hearsay”, as a starting point for theorizing. In fact, with careful analytic attention to a particular incident and its idiosyncratic moments, Gallop (2002) argues that looking to the anecdotal offers an off stage passageway into a “constellation of excess, opening, and access to the real” (p. 8). Gallop’s essays in this book begin from personal anecdotes, her recollections of reviewing a student’s essay with him line by line or writing a conference paper given in honour of her sister’s fiftieth birthday. Following Gallop’s method, my research centers on three stories of accidents in reading. Unlike Gallop however, I do not draw on my personal archive but look to the library of Canadian literature for stories of fictional readers who experience an accident in reading. The novel isn’t an anecdote in the strict sense of the word as it stakes no claim as to the veracity of its narrative. However, the literary is by definition *just* anecdotal: hearsay, make-believe tales that can’t be proven true or false in any traditional sense. Used as adjective rather than noun, “anecdotal” captures well how literature is unhinged from the burden of proof –how the value of a novel is not determined by its veracity to the material world, but by how the novel might enable readers to think in new ways about the world and themselves.

## **Sampling**

Limiting myself to works written by Canadian authors was, in large part, a pragmatic decision to narrow the field along crude geographic lines. Having grown up in Canadian public schools and conducting this research at a Canadian University also meant that I began my search for fictional representations of accidents in reading with an informal archive of CanCon authors to draw on. However, the decision to limit my sampling to Canadian works is also purposive. Fictional representations of accidents in reading as written by Canadians are not, in and of themselves, any more compelling than works written by others. However, by limiting my sample in this way I want to demonstrate, that accidents in reading are indeed exorbitant –but exceptional only in degree and not in kind to affected reading’s rule. That is, one need not search out obscure titles by unknown small-presses to find stories of reading gone awry. Just as accidents in reading occur unannounced in the most unexpected of places, so too can we find fictional accidents in even a limited library. I suppose I hope that this geographic limitation to Canadian works might lend some

credence to the proposition that accidents in reading are always, “accidents just waiting to happen”, and thus of general interest.

Given my interest in the anecdotal, I began by reading Canadian works that are relatively well-known and popularly accessible. Although I entertained engaging works by new Canadian authors or published by small presses I ultimately decided to select novels that were readily accessible to me and already hold some place within Canadian culture and imagination. To confine my sample in this way is to support the idea that all books –not just high-brow, literary favourites, hold the promise of transference and the possibility that the exorbitant can lie just below the surface of the ordinary and familiar<sup>2</sup>. Beginning from my own knowledge of CanCon favourites and those of my colleagues and peers, I began reading novels that contained a fictional character who reads. My reading was intensely purposive: I read with the aim of finding representations of characters who experience trouble in reading. With this purpose in mind, I paid especially close attention to scenes of reading that I found jarring or unusual and, following Felman’s work, I read for the three qualities of an accident in reading: a sudden shift in reading’s path, a collapse of sensible meanings and, a character’s experience of intense affective tumult. Mindful that these criteria are quiet general, I also noted abrupt shifts in narrative tone or style, prose that seemed nonsensical or tightly recursive, and descriptions of the protagonist’s state of mind in relation to their reading experience.

During these preliminary readings, I was inspired by a turn of phrase in Klein’s clinical case study with four-year old Dick. While observing him, Klein (1986f) recalls herself “acting on a glance he gave” (p. 103) to offer an interpretation of what she thought he was

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<sup>2</sup> Each of the novels I selected are at least 30 years old, and there are a number of copies of each title available for loan through the Toronto Public Library. Each of the works that I analyze in this dissertation are written by acclaimed Canadian authors: Munro, Kogawa and, Atwood. These are not particularly offbeat or obscure writers. Munro has twice been awarded the Giller Prize and is a three-time winner of the Governor General’s award. She most recently received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013, the highest literary award given to an author in the world. Although her bibliography might appear slighter, Kogawa’s contributions to Canadian culture and society are significant: Kogawa is a Member of the Order of Canada and British Columbia, and was honoured with the Order of the Rising Sun in 2010 for her contributions to the preservation of Japanese Canadian history and her activism in the fight for official government redress related to Japanese internment and forced relocation during WWII. Lastly, over the past 55 years Atwood has consistently received accolades for her novels, poetry, children’s books, and non-fiction works. Alongside her political and environmental activism, Atwood’s contributions to, and support of, the Canadian literary community make her a noteworthy figure. Most recently, her novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* – which is the focus of Chapter 5, was reimaged as a TV series and released by Hulu in the spring of 2017.

trying to represent in his play. Somewhat typical of her “anarchic reasoning process” (Likierman, 2001, p. 4) Klein offers an interpretation that is grounded in a glance, a mere glint in Dick’s eye as he played with a wooden coal–cart toy. Similar to Klein’s method of offering analytical interpretations based on subtleties in tone, shifts in posture, or the changed gaze of her patients, I searched expansively within novels that aesthetically offer glancing phrases, enigmatic moments, or ambiguous altercations between reader, author, and text. What this means is that while the novels were selected purposively for their representation of a fictional reader, my identification of accidents is “anarchic”, or somewhat wild, but nonetheless tethered to the accident’s three defining qualities.

I selected three novels that contained, for me, a “glance” that sparked fanciful readings like those of Klein –novels that set me to thinking about what could be going on behind the scenes but was not immediately apparent. The three proceeding analytic chapters each focus then, on a protagonist who experiences an accident in reading: Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Naomi Nakane in *Obasan*, and Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood, 1986; Kogawa, 2006; Munro, 2005). Although the historical, social and psychical dynamics vary, each of these characters unexpectedly finds herself pulled into an accident in reading. The authors of these texts dramatically represent readings gone astray, readers who are pushed to their “limit... at the edge of the cliff and the overhang, looking down literally into the belly of the beast” (Lewkowich, 2012, p. 455). Originally selected for their ubiquity, these novels surprised me with their glancing representations of an accidents in reading – becoming “limit cases” that, I felt, showcased reading’s unconscious qualities.

I employ the concept of the limit case here to describe how each of these novels represent a psychical “cutoff point where relations of communication, intelligibility, and sociability begin to break down” (Low quoted in Lewkowich, 2012, p. 455) for a fictional reader. Although these are ordinary and accessible CanCon novels, they each represent an accident in reading that exposes the “limits of acceptability” (Lewkowich, 2012, p. 455) in reading practice and show how reading is “something other than neutral, cognitive, coherent, observable, progressive, respectful, and rational. Like the anecdote that represents “excess, opening, and access to the real” (Gallop, 2002, p. 8), the fictional texts that I have selected also break the “skin” of reading, representing in narrative form that which haunts, but is

also constitutive of, reading. The novels I selected to study in this dissertation are ordinary and extraordinary at the same time: ordinary in terms of their accessibility and commonplace status as CanCon literature, but extraordinary in their representation of accidents in reading that bring readers to the brink of their affective and cognitive capacities.

In her discussion of the extraordinary situation of “slow reading” Britzman (2009) begins her analysis of Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* identifying the central conflict upon which reading difficulty turns. Adapting this to my interest in accidents, my analytic reading of each text began by first demarcating the precise moment where a fictional character found themselves pulled into an accident in reading. To do this, I searched for an incident in the novel where the three qualities of an accident were all present: the sudden onset of reading trouble, a breakdown in sensible meanings, and an intense affective experience for the fictional reader. These three qualities appear in slightly different form in each novel, so part of my interpretive work here involved creatively applying and finding these traits within each. For instance, while each of the novels contains a fictional character emotionally undone by her reading, the affective content of their central conflict varies: in Chapter 3 I look at the pains of greedy reading, Chapter 4 discusses a reading that occasions trauma’s return, and Chapter 5 imagines an accident that leaves a reader hopeful that her future cannot yet be known.

Guided by Felman’s narration of coming to know of her class’ crisis in reading, the following questions helped guide my search for an accident: Where do familiar and sensible meanings break down for the fictional reader? What specific words or phrases become, for the fictional reader, signifiers that lapse into nonsense and give them grief? At what point does the narrative itself become temporally scrambled, logically confused or, un-readable to me as a reader? I also took into consideration a few contextual details, such as: where in the broader narrative the accident occurs, the time and location of the character’s reading, bodily responses experienced by the character, (day)dreams or nightmares they may have, and how their relations to other characters were acutely affected by the accident in reading.



## Reading accidents in reading

The accidents in reading that I have selected to discuss in the following chapters are only small incidents within each novel. Arriving without warning and temporarily disrupting the novel's narrative, they could almost be missed – sometimes only a few pages in length. For example, the accident in reading that Del Jordan experiences in *Lives of Girls and Women* totals only two paragraphs – my reading and re-reading of this scene being a reading-into, or reading-between-the-lines of this incident. The work of reading between the lines, in fact, describes well the labour of psychoanalytic readings that attend not only to the manifest content printed on the line, but also its latent content; what remains absent, repeats, appears in distorted form, or is nearly illegible (Britzman, 2006). This method of textual analysis that I use carves out room for considering the exorbitant qualities of the accident as silences, contradictions, ambivalences and nonsense in novels that can hint at meaningful “untold stories” as well as the “impossibility of ever telling “the whole story” (Brushwood Rose, 2009, p. 215–216). To read between the lines then is to wager or gamble meanings that we cannot corroborate with conscious intention, or those of the author. Lead by what is not in print on the page, reading between the lines of an other's story requires an openness to the delights and pains of wordplay that come about from the fuzziness of language and representation – we are always doing more and less with words than we believe ourselves to be. There is a kind of hospitality necessary here in that reading between the lines is to say “yes” to the provocations of a literary work, or to take a hint that can:

...starts things off; [although] we have no idea beforehand what might be a hint for us...[and so, while] we need hints to get things going, we can't tell either what they will be, or what they might start off in us...like a cue, each hint furthers the drama; but the play is not one we can know (Phillips, 1998, p. 88).

If this method of reading between the lines proceeds by somewhat enigmatic means, there are a few explicit questions I engaged in trying to think about the anatomy of an accident in reading to fill-in what lies between the written lines on the page: What came before this accident? Or, what social, and historical factors might weigh in here? What is missing, disavowed, or twisted by the reader in the throes of her accident? How, exactly, is meaning turned on its head? What if the nonsensical word salad of an accident could be saying something true about reading? Lastly, what psychical conflict or state of mind makes up

the engine driving this accident? This final question supports my engagement with psychoanalytic concepts used to catalogue and analyze the fictional character's experience as symptomatic with their existent internal dramas. Akin to Felman's use of literary and theoretical works for recourse and as resources for responding well to her students' crisis, I too move to the words and concepts of psychoanalysts and scholars of reading to map out the psychical conflicts and mechanisms operative in characters' accidents in reading. In the proceeding analytic chapters I qualify the affective content of the fictional reader's transference to their reading and demonstrate how this psychical stuff is enflamed in their reading. My detailing of the reader's experience will be crucial to thinking about accidents as "obstacles" that reveal something of the troubled emotional landscape through which reading proceeds. In my reading of each accident I lay out how I interpret these fictional accidents as "unconscious mnemonics of desire" (Phillips, 1993, p. 83). I look to psychoanalytic concepts to describe how the accident, as an obstacle to familiar reading practice, "is used to conceal – to pack up, as it were...unconscious desire[s]" (Phillips, 1993, p. 81) of the fictional reader. In doing this I suggest that each reader brings things to reading that they know nothing of until the accident erupts. The concepts of projection and introjection figure into my tracking of the accident's origin and affective contours – these defences being the means by which one can move things across the line between inside and outside of the self. In accidents in reading however, these mechanisms go haywire – my analytic work aims to sort through the qualities of each reader's confusion of taking-in and sending out bits and pieces of the self and objects. The concepts of projection and introjection also allow me to interpret the identificatory attachments that constitute the collapse of the fictional reader's sense-making while situating these accidents in conversation with existing psychoanalytic theories of reading.

In each chapter I move to a different metaphor to describe the central conflict upon which the fictional reader's accident turns. In Chapter Three I consider reading as need, Chapter Four looks at reading as a difficult return of trauma, and Chapter Five considers reading as a psychical resource in dark times. In my analysis of each fictional accident, these metaphors best describe the psychical stakes of a reading experience gone awry while also situating reading as a practice that is unavoidably caught in one's inner world. Beginning from a particular exorbitant limit case, these metaphors allow me to step back from the accident's immediacy to consider what such an incident could mean for reading generally.

This later step in my analysis of each accident allows me to move from the particularities of one accident to offer a way into thinking about the “fantasies of continuity” that compel us to read and keep reading– the accident being an interruption or deviation only because it interferes with a particular aim. In this way, I engage in the work of anecdotal theorizing: beginning from a fictional moment too strange to contain and constructing from this a framework for reading that engages the exorbitancies of the unconscious. My analytic work pursues readings that don’t proceed as we expect them to, in hopes that these exceptional representations of reading might, as Phillips (1998) suggests “expose...by violation our mostly unconscious assumptions about how the world should be; and how often we take it for granted that it is as it should be” (p. 121). To begin theorizing right in the middle of an exorbitant incident is distinctively psychoanalytic, as Gallop (2002) notes that:

...Freud theorized the psyche based on dreams, slips, jokes; likewise, he theorized sexuality based on perversions rather than the reproductive norm. His insistence on theorizing based in marginal rather than ‘normal’ activity is a model of exorbitant theorizing...by grounding theory in case history, psychoanalysis demands that theory test itself against the uncanny details of story (p. 11).

Anecdotal theorizing follows the exorbitant incident and is always belated for to theorize anecdote is to venture to “think in precisely those situations which tend to disable thought... [and] to keep thinking even when the dominance of our thought is far from assured” (Gallop, 2002, p. 15). Accordingly, this later analytic work parallels the labour of fictional readers in the stories I have selected, for as characters grapple with the psychical ruins of an accident, I too grapple with their accidents, a second time, to imagine a theoretical afterwards.

### Chapter 3.      Reading Greed: *Lives of Girls and Women*

In *Fictitious Dishes: An Album of Literature's Most Memorable Meals*, writer and designer Dinah Fried (2014) curated and photographed meals eaten by fictional characters in novels. Among the photographs, Fried meticulously depicts the famous madeleine from *Swann's Way*, *Oliver Twist's* gruel, and Holden Caulfield's Swiss cheese sandwich and malted milk. In each photograph she captures minute details such as the embroidery work described in Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or Raoul Duke's cigarette butts and lighter in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In her introduction to the work, Fried (2014) notes that the book initially began as a small project at the Rhode Island School of Design:

...after taking the first photos...I was completely hooked...There were so many more books to read, so many more meals to make. The project had to continue; I had to keep going, and I did...Each step of the process of making these tabletop scenes – digesting the author's words, imagining the setting and the food served, doing research, shopping, cooking, styling, and shooting – has been an extension of my own experience of the books (p. 12–15).

Fried's work entangles food with books and reading with eating. Later, she notes that through her work she came to think of reading and eating as “natural companions” as both involve acts of consumption, are emotionally affecting, and require internal digestion. Fried's reflection also hints at how one can get a bit carried away when it comes to reading. Indeed, ballooning from five portraits into an entire book, Fried demonstrates that literary hungers do not obey reasonable laws. Inexplicably the reader can find herself wanting more and more food for thought such that the limits of everyday life are breached.

In the case of Fried, and other greedy readers, we encounter someone who accidentally falls into the dire need to read and cannot seem to stop themselves. Just as one may over-eat at a holiday dinner, go back for seconds or thirds at a buffet, or sneak leftovers out of the fridge at midnight Fried's story describes a reader who cannot get enough. In literature too, we find stories about readers who cannot get enough. For instance, in *The Hours* Laura Brown finds respite from her unhappy domestic life in the 1950's by reading Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (Cunningham, 1998). Instead of joining her family's morning breakfast routine with her husband and son, Laura hides in bed to “read one more

page...[just] one more page, to calm and locate herself, then she'll get out of bed...one page, she decides; just one" (Cunningham, 1998, p. 38). Laura's hunger for *Mrs. Dalloway* is not abated by missed family time. She impinges on her day's tasks and abandons her son to a babysitter. Free from her domestic duties, Laura rents a hotel room outside of town to consume more and more of Woolf's words. Feeding on books to forget the unhappiness of her life, books seem to provide a kind of inner nourishment for Laura who is weary of the external world and its problems. In his meditation on reading, Coleman (2009) recounts a story of his brother who, at six years old, opts to "spend the day in bed with the Word" rather than attend his second day at school (p. 4). In bed with a book, Coleman suggests that the stories of others can evoke readers' unconscious fears and desires, sucking them in to read just one more page to see how it all ends. The image of the child under the covers with a flashlight hoping to covertly take in just one more chapter is familiar to many; the popular reception of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* is a prime example of hungry readers tapping into, and finding literary sustenance to nourish their innermost wishes and anxieties about growing up (Robertson, 2001). Indeed, after every release of Rowling's book tales of readers lined up outside of bookstore proliferated in the news media. In these cases, the desire to read Rowling's work is exorbitant and these readers cannot seem to stop themselves as their literary binges exceed reasonable appetite.

This chapter begins from my curiosity about readers who cannot get enough (from) reading. I take as a literary case study, the fictional character Del Jordan in Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*. Del Jordan's fictional experience offers clues into the psychical movements of greedy reading and the developmental significance of wanting more and more. Three questions guide my mapping of this accident which is driven by the reader's need: What is her hunger for reading a hunger for? What is the emotional situation of this greedy reader? And, what can be made from this greedy accident in reading?

I engage Munro's novel through these questions and in conversation with scholarship that represents reading in terms of digestive metaphors. I focus on Klein's theorization of the baby's initial and unbearable need to take in objects from the outside world to theorize reading as a symptom of one's "need" established during infancy, alongside appetite and its satisfaction. Klein's sense for the infant's need forms the foundation for my understanding of greed: an excess of appetite that locates reading as a practice entwined

with readers' largely unspoken, but limitlessly compelling questions about self and the object relations made from needing others in the external world. Like others who have traced the ways in which identification, idealization, paranoia, and projective identification constitute and interfere with interpretive practice (Britzman, 2000; Mishra Tarc, 2011a; Robertson, 2001; Sedgwick, 2003) my analysis focuses on a greedy accident in reading as portrayed in Munro's novel. From this analysis of Del Jordan's greedy accident in reading, I close the chapter with an argument for considering how this scene tells us something true about reading: that we are born needing to read, and that greed in reading, more than any other appetite, signals our uncontrollable need of others to live.

## **Need and the reader**

*The Lives of Girls and Women* opens with an accident in reading as Del Jordan recalls how, as a young person, she feverishly devoured her Uncle Benny's tabloid newspapers. Sitting on his dilapidated front porch across the field from her family home, Del gorged herself on weeklies with salacious and outrageous headlines. Enraptured by the tabloid's strange world, her reading spins out of control as she scans the lines of text "faster and faster, all [she] could hold" (Munro, 2005, p. 7). She cannot stop herself, cannot moderate her appetite for these bizarre tales of cruelty, revenge, and otherwise outrageous social relations as depicted in the tabloids. Seemingly at the mercy of these wild stories, Del reads on "bloated and giddy with revelations of evil, of its versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness" (Munro, 2005, p. 7).

If virtue is to be found somewhere between excess and deficiency, then it might appear that Del Jordan is in trouble – her insatiable appetite for stories a symptom of wayward self-control, selfishness and, a lack of foresight. Indeed, well-worn moral lessons about greed call the glutton to pull herself together, consider others with whom she should share, and moderate appetite according to social codes. However, what if, as Phillips (2010) ventures, greed is not a problem to be fixed, but itself a fix *to* a problem? (p. 46). Put otherwise: what is it that Del is so hungry for in her hunger for these tabloid stories? Why does this reader inadvertently stuff herself beyond comfort, "bloated and giddy" with the stories of others?

These questions, to my mind, embody the kind of curiosity and patience that Klein brought to her patients who, at times, defied social etiquette in their both their speech and behaviour. As young patients made her consulting room into a veritable war zone – destroying playthings, messing furniture, and otherwise wreaking havoc, Klein held in abeyance moral education to instead wonder about the emotional situation driving such behaviour. That is, Klein did not leap to fix the child's play, but to consider what the child's play was aiming to fix – to make stable, give form to, repair, or to set in order an emotional reality they could not say but nonetheless felt. Klein's analyses of her playful young patients thus breach sensible stories of infancy and development –her theoretical contributions painting a dramatic portrait of the baby's earliest psychical problems and achievements.

For Klein, one of the first problems that the baby meets in the world is the fact that she is born too hungry and too helpless to satisfy her own needs. Previously at one with the mother in utero, the baby, Klein (1986h) suggests “becomes acquainted with reality through the deprivations it imposes” (p. 59) on her. These first, ordinary deprivations that awaken one's need and anxiety about whether this need will be met, are felt to be unbearable. As Riviere (1964) puts it, “the whole of [the baby's] world is one of suffering” (p. 9) and is felt as something like death as she becomes acquainted with the fact of her need of others. Despite this seemingly awful welcome to the world, most babies find their way through this time well-enough by way of infantile mental functions and the loving presence of a mother. Through the rudimentary defence mechanisms of projection and introjection that define the Paranoid-Schizoid position, babies can engage in what Mishra Tarc (2011a) terms “first readings” (p. 59). These early readings are catalyzed by the infant's constitutional neediness of an other and allow the baby to bear a difficult experience of first encountering an external reality that existed before, frustrates desire, and goes on without her (Britzman, 2009, p. 14). To live, the baby feels out rudimentary categorizations like good/bad, inside/outside, self/other, and hungry/satisfied that found the germ of early object-relations. It is from these first object relations that one will eventually be pushed to engage in processes of symbol formation which lay the groundwork for one's capacity to see words on a page and know that they stand in for something else. In the earliest beginning time for the baby however, reading is a need, a necessary labour felt to be a matter of survival – of taking-in bits of the mother that are felt

to be nourishing and sending out other parts that are felt to be dangerous to the self. Originating from the baby's bodily need and asymmetrical relation to a loving mother, a complex of taking in and sending out part objects founds reading as a kind of need itself: a survival strategy whereby one makes a self through making relations to the others that one depends on. If need eventually turns into desire, remnants of its voracious appetite remain, perhaps most viscerally, in the act of reading; a hunger for reading being an expression of appetite for knowledge of the world and a willingness to feel out how appetite links one to others.

In her consideration of reading Madeleine Grumet (1988) explores just such relations that "throb...with the conflicts that shape our mortal condition" (p. 132). As a practice that is "oriented toward what the subject can do in the world", Grumet (1988) suggests that reading lives "between the poles of our actual situation, crowded as it is with our own intentions, assumptions, positions, and the possibilities that texts point to" (p. 130). Grumet does not think reading as a technical skill guided by cognition, but as a feeling-driven practice that bridges our tender bodies to the external world of others upon whom we depend. Akin to an appetite that draws one into relation with others, Grumet (1988) situates reading as a labour in exploring "a world where we can live" (p. 132). This world is tethered to the practical necessities of living a life and sustaining a physical body, as she reminds that:

when we consult the etymology of the word "read," we find that "read" is lodged in the very guts of the word "ruminate," which means to "think things over." Nevertheless, the word "ruminate" is not associated with a group of animals noted for their erudition (Grumet, 1988, p. 132).

Not predicated on intellect so much as having a "stomach" for reading, the problem of digesting a text returns one to the slippery psychical readings that first appeared in babyhood; making sense of bodily sensations, what is taken in or sent out, and the figures who gratify or frustrate desire. Jacobus (1999) traces this idea through a consideration of reading as a form of "mental digestion", where the boundary between self and others is simultaneously established and abolished by the reader's introjective and projective movements (p. 18).



If oral consumption is thought of as one of reading's unconscious projects, then the incorporatory language and digestive metaphors used to narrate its dynamics take on heightened significance. Namely, reading can become "the way we imagine putting the world inside us, disposing of its dangers by making its meanings ours, cannibalistically consuming it, recycling it, savouring its borrowed sweetness as our own" (Jacobus, 1999, p. 31). While these primitive readings are necessary to survival, grounded as they are in the diffusion of boundaries between self and other, Jacobus (1999) also sees reading as a "temporary form of madness" (p. 13) where the stories of others can seep into "the private lair of the skull" as the mind itself "opens on to the streets" (p. 35). As the barriers between reader and read fall away, Jacobus (1999) explains that "you are inside it, it is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside...[for] when the barriers come down, books are us" (p. 17–18). This configuration of reading's movements can bring relief or grief—felt as a melding of two, or a battle between the self and an other. As a mental labour in "digesting" objects from the external world, one cannot know in advance whether reading will figure psychically as a good feed or a forced one—the later returning one to the violent defences first mounted in infancy and the associated difficulties that shape the movements of one's psychical readings (Britzman, 2009, p. 50). To imagine reading as a good feed then, we must also imagine the symptoms of reading gone wrong: of "indigestion, diarrhea, eating one's words, and vomiting them out" (Britzman, 2009, p. 50). Likewise, Todd's (2008) mention of the "bulimic reader" who spews her insides into the text opens room for thinking about the starved "anorexic" reader, or the "picky" reader who aims to encounter only what they already know (p. 51). In Del Jordan's greedy accident in reading, we might ask: Why take in more than one needs? And, by what unconscious mechanisms does greed proceed?

## **Conceptualizing greed**

The construct of greed with which I build my analysis of Del Jordan as a voracious and hungry reader is taken from Klein's psychoanalytic vocabulary of infantile mental function. In particular, Klein links need, and in turn greediness, to the baby's early and necessary defence mechanism of introjection. Emerging at a crisis point for the young infant, the acquisitive measures of introjection are first directed toward the mother's feeding breast—taking in bits of the good from outside as a means of assuaging the internal

pains at having to be in the world and not in the womb. As a defence mechanism that helps build up and protect the baby's fragile self, introjection can offer some solace and security as the good feeding breast is instilled within and experienced to be "not only the source of nourishment but of life itself" (Klein, 1986b, p. 211). For the new and vulnerable infant introjection is the beginnings of their attempts to integrate and stabilize a self –of taking good objects to heart, into one's heart, as it were (Hinshelwood, Robinson, & Zarate, 1999, p. 170). Like a comforting feed that helps buttress a fragile self, the promise of 'taking in' is the promise of an alleviation of pain and an increased sense of stability and security.

Although introjection is a life-building and life-sustaining defence mechanism, the frantic introjection characteristic of the Paranoid-Schizoid position is not a gentle process. Rather, it's workings can at times appear as "a kind of greed for 'good' things figured in terms of ingesting them and holding them inside...distinct and magically alive, doing battle with "bad" contents... [and also] vulnerable to being devoured or fatally contaminated" by those other bad contents (Sedgwick, 2007, p. 633). In these lines Sedgwick captures the violence of introjection shifted into overdrive for the young infant who is eager to acquire life-giving and protective objects that are felt to counter-act the emptying effects of having projected "bad" objects out and the persecutory anxiety that emerges in step (Segal, 1988, p. 26). Riviere (1964) suggests that the baby's omnipotent introjection in the paranoid schizoid position is of great significance as "a means of warding off or ousting pain and tak[ing] in something good in order to increase the feeling of inner well-being" (p. 26).

With the presence of a loving mother, most infants find their way well-enough through their first readings that occur by way of introjection and projection. That being said, Klein did identify that much can go wrong along that way that can interfere with one's ability to move back and forth between the Paranoid-Schizoid and Depressive positions. Specifically, in her essay titled "A Study of Envy and Gratitude" Klein (1986b) explains the origins of envy, jealousy, and greed and how these emotional situations effect one's ability to re-integrate feelings and objects that have been split or re-arranged by Paranoid-Schizoid defences. For Klein, envy, jealousy, and greed each emerge in response to one's feeling that they have been or will be denied of gratifications that are due. While envy and jealousy utilize projective defences –envy ruining the good object because it is good, and jealousy attacking others vying for the good object, greed is an introjective defence run

amok. In Klein's estimation, the voraciousness of greed is intended, in phantasy, to bolster an internal world that feels precarious. Born from the paranoid anxiety of the fragile ego, Klein conceptualizes greed as a means of defending against the self's disintegration through aggressive introjections. She suggests that this is first played out in relation to the mother's body and the objects phantasized to reside within it. The infant's paranoid schizoid greediness is ruthless and relentless; the goal being to take in everything for herself and "completely scooping out, sucking dry and devouring the breast" (Klein, 1986b, p. 213) thought to sustain life. Couched in one's first experiences of satisfaction and scarcity, acquisitive greed is connected with a desperate desire for security: a wildly "impetuous and insatiable craving, exceeding what the subject needs and what the object can and wishes to give" (Klein, 1986b, p. 213). Opposed in terms of directionality, greed can sometimes be twinned with envy: it's introjective aggression working as a manic defence against envy's emptying effects. In this configuration, the desired good object is spoiled through greed's violent possession and control of objects. The emotional logic of this pairing runs something like: "I have everything I want, the good mother belongs only to me" (Klein, 1986b, p. 225).

The trouble here is that whatever is introjected in a greedy state of mind is destroyed in the process – torn apart, ruined, or soiled by violence such that these objects fail to become psychical resources for the baby. In fact, while the promise of greed is a psychical storehouse of all that is good and loving in the worlds, in actuality all that is taken in via greed becomes not only worthless, but later feared to be retaliatory because of the oral sadistic attacks by which it was introjected. For the baby, this fear first comes to life when she phantasizes punishment by the hands of a resentful mother, but one can come to fear any object that has been taken in with haste and aggression (Klein, 1975a, p. 280). As a hunger that begets hunger, when one is greedy the desire for good objects only increases. As one is made insatiable by greed, more and more must be taken in to combat the accumulation of destroyed objects inside. In this greedy state of mind there can never be enough because all that has been taken in is broken to bits and feared to now be retaliatory. Beginning in anxiety, greed's proliferation only exacerbates the worry that there will never be enough to defend oneself against the newly bad bits that now reside within. While in phantasy greed might be felt to fix a shaky self, in effect it ends up increasing one's sense of insecurity. It is this later fear of retaliation that can hold one in a kind of greedy catch–

22: objects have been broken in taking them in, one fears their retaliation and so must take in more and more, only to again fear their retaliation.

In her consideration of the concept, Riviere (1964) puts greed into more palatable terms, suggesting that greediness exists in various degrees within everyone, and is by definition “endless and never assuaged...[for] being a form of the impulse to live, it ceases only with death” (p. 26–27). Though described by Riviere as a kind of over-the-top appetite for life, greed can get in the way of subject formation and object relations. In particular, greed’s indiscriminate pulling in of objects endangers the self because this lack of discernment renders one more susceptible to taking objects that might hurt the self. For example, in her discussion of the baby’s first movements between the paranoid–schizoid and depressive position, Klein tells of a clinical patient who, having been weaned suddenly in babyhood, later demonstrates a kind of compensatory greediness, an indiscriminate hunger to take in anything and everything available. In the long shadow of babyhood deprivations, Klein (1986e) interprets her patient as showing a “tendency to be influenced by other people in an unselective way...to take in greedily whatever was offered...[but] with great distrust” (p. 190). The risk of this “unselective” hunger is not only that one takes in bad or hostile objects, but that greed’s willingness to take in “whatever” overrides basic “readings” of good from bad or, helpful from harmful. In a personal anecdote, Jacobus (1999) highlights the risks of indiscriminancy brought to the scene of reading:

As an adolescent, I used often to annoy my parents by bringing a book to meals. Sometimes I got away with it. But mostly they objected that if I read while I ate, I might not know what I was eating. I could swallow anything...[however] neither parent thought of making the opposite argument – that if I ate while I read, I might not know what I was reading; after all, I could have been swallowing anything (p. 26).

The slippage here between an eaten dinner and a swallowed book constructs reading as a site that marks one’s need of others outside the self. One must take bits of the outside in, but Jacobus’ parents’ caution that in moving to swallow everything she risks swallowing *anything* –including potentially dangerous objects. Put another way: There is something uncanny about how reading a book at the family dinner table replays earlier readings of familial others in babyhood: our hunger to read can oddly resemble our hunger for food. Although psychically configured as a kind of solution, greed’s undiscerning hunger poses a problem for reading. Unfulfilled hunger upsets the projective and introjective measures

by which sense-making proceeds: in a greedy state of mind, one hungers to take in more and more but there is no “enough” – no satisfaction can be felt. The trouble here is that this frenzied and destructive introjection leads to a buildup of ruined objects within the self, which in turn can cause additional strife. With this sense for the workings of greed, I move below to introduce Munro’s novel as a work that gestures toward some of these fundamental questions of inside/outside and reality/fiction.

## **Alice Munro and Del Jordan**

Since its original publication in 1971, *Lives of Girls and Women* has been variously compared to other great works of adolescent literature including: Laurence’s *A Bird in the House*, Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* and, Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. These comparisons situate Munro’s novel in relation to three literary genres: the episodic novel, the coming of age story and, the *kunstlerroman* (Besner, 1990). *Lives of Girls and Women* recounts Del Jordan’s growing up in Jubilee, Ontario in the 1940’s. Only 237 pages in length, the novel does not chronicle every intricacy of Del’s growing up and tentative steps into early adulthood. Rather, like Laurence’s *A Bird in the House*, the novel is constructed as a short story sequence: a set of eight short stories thread Del’s experience of childhood and adolescence, each chapter centering on an event in her life or in the lives of those around her. School friends, family members, teachers, and peculiar figures in the community drift in, some returning again later while others appear as discrete case studies. Beginning in the summer before Del enters grade four and ending in the summer after she finishes highschool, time in the novel flows in a linear developmental path. There are however, moments where time strays: the story doubles-back on itself, gets stuck, replays or, reworks past events through new interpretations. For instance, in “Princess Ida” Del is living in Jubilee and accompanying her mother who sells encyclopedias door-to-door in nearby towns. While driving back to Jubilee on these long days, Del feels a longing for home as “we drove through country we did not know we loved” (Munro, 2005, p. 65). By contrast, the chapter that follows “Princess Ida” jumps back to a time well before the encyclopedia venture when “we lived in that house at the end of the Flats Road, and before my mother knew how to drive a car” (Munro, 2005, p. 87). These time warps remind the reader that the work of growing up is untidy, plunging back and forth through immaturity to maturity.

Telegraphing between past, present and, future, *Lives of Girls and Women* captures well how the past is never left behind and also how anxiety shapes what may come. In particular, the novel's treatment of time shows the "uneven" qualities of Del's growing up. Her developmental narrative contains "its own traces of antidevelopment, areas of irresolvable conflict and incompleteness that return [alongside the] qualities of retroactive time that not only defer its meaning but provide...new understandings of old events" (Britzman, 2009, p. 27). The eight episodes that comprise *Lives of Girls and Women* could each stand-alone however, combined they show how the "time of development is set by a strange clock, one that contains its own tendency to repeat, regress, and fixate on moments of breakdown and gratification" (Britzman, 2009, p. 28). Finding herself in a time of great emotional turmoil and uncertainty, Del's accident in reading represents the exemplary adolescent tendency to oscillate between (pseudo) adult states of mind and those of the infant.

As a consequence of development's irregularity and belated affects, Del's account of her early days from the vantage of later adulthood is similarly uneven; her coming of age story is composed of "reality and phantasy, of avowal and disavowal, of condition and promise, of memory and forgetting" (Britzman & Pitt, 2004, p. 362). Located in the afterwards of experience Del's story is subject to these movements as she tries to make significance of the past; grappling with all that came "too early" in her experience. As such her narration is marked by anxiety and wishes from both past and present (Britzman & Pitt, 2004, p. 363). Munro's novel represents well how history for the psyche is always a mix of:

...what has happened, what has not happened, what could have happened, what has happened to someone else but not to me, what could not have happened, and finally...a statement that one would not have even dreamed of as a representation of what really happened (Green quoted in Britzman & Pitt, 2004, p. 362).

In this busy place of personal history, our stories of childhood and adolescence can become what we need them to be. Consequently, the coming of age novel also becomes what readers need it to be. Teeming with transference, others' stories of growing up are an imaginative space for readers to meet (again) the impossible demands and unresolved conflicts of childhood and adolescence (Robertson, 2001). This insight takes on particular significance when thinking about the life of coming of age novels in education. In

particular, as evocative objects for both teachers and students, the coming of age novel rouses wishes, fears, memories, and forgettings that constitute its reading.

On the flip-side of meanings made from the coming of age novel in education lie questions about Munro's making of the novel. Specifically, *Lives of Girls and Women* has been described as a *kunstlerroman* that blurs the biographical lines between Munro and Del Jordan. The novel approximates the structure of the *kunstlerroman* as Del's story-making of her life can be read as a practice in finding an artistic style and "discover[ing] how language means to her, how words shape her visions and lead to her vocation" (Besner, 1990, p. 14–15). An oft-quoted passage in the first chapter of *Lives* evinces the novel's parallel to Joyce's classic *kunstlerroman* *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In the first chapter of the novel, required to demonstrate her penmanship to Uncle Benny, Del writes: "Mr. Benjamin Thomas Poole, The Flats Road, Jubilee, Wawanash County, Ontario, Canada, North America, The Western Hemisphere, The World, The Solar System, The Universe" (Munro, 2005, p. 12). Though notable that Del locates Uncle Benny (and not herself) at the centre of these ever-widening circles, Besner (1990) suggests that Munro is unmistakably riffing on Joyce's character Stephen Dedalus' construction of his existence: "Stephen Dedalus. Class of Elements. Clongowes Wood College. Sallins. County Kildare. Ireland. Europe. The World. The Universe" (Cited in Besner, 1990, p. 15). *of Girls and Women* itself repeats these expansions into the external world as earlier chapters offer ethnographic-feeling accounts of Del's immediate family while later ones reach out to the world beyond her familiar community. Told from the first-person past perspective of Del, *Lives of Girls and Women* represents an archive of the writer's early life, her attempts to turn facts and events into stories forming the germ of her later vocation. Additionally, Munro's representation of Del's affinities and resistances towards other storytellers in the novel show the protagonist's labour to come into her own readerly and writerly style (Blodgett, 1988, p. 40).

This story of the artist's coming hungrily into her own is most uncanny and affecting in the novel's epilogue where a strange doubling occurs. Here, reading slips hazily between the voice of Del Jordan and Munro. In this final chapter of the novel, Del writes about crafting a novel of her own, having found that "all the books in the Library in the Town Hall were not enough" (Munro, 2005, p. 228) for her. Del's inspiration for her novel begins in a

fascination with the biography and hearsay she has collected about the Sherriff family in her town. Changing the details about these real figures Del's novel begins to take shape. Noting this reference, Smiley (2005) suggests that *Lives of Girls and Women* is grounded in Munro's real life and that Del's sense for literary style and persistent bookishness clearly marks the novel as a semi-autobiographical work (p. x). It is not mere coincidence, Smiley (2005) suggests, that Munro's first novel follows a young woman's first-person account of how she came to be a writer (p. xii). There are other biographical parallels between author and protagonist: both grew up in rural Ontario towns in the 1940's, had fathers who raised silver foxes and, mothers who were academically inclined. Despite the similarities between fictional protagonist and author, when asked to account for the veracity of the novel has Munro offered a famously cryptic answer that refuses the presumed authority of such a question: the novel "is autobiographical in form but not in fact. My family, neighbours and friends did not serve as models" she insists (Cited in Besner, 1990). Challenging the split terms of the question (reality or imagination, fact or fiction, Del or Alice), Munro refuses to settle the matter. In the novel, Del finds herself in a similar quandary and is also a bit cagey regarding the status of biographical facts in *her* novel, commenting that:

the main thing was that it seemed true to me, not real but true, as if I had discovered, not made up, such people and such a story, as if that town was lying close behind the one I walked through everyday (Munro, 2005, p. 231).

For both Del Jordan and Munro the relationships between imagination, biography, the truth, and the real remain up in the air. Blodgett (1988) suggests that this ambiguity in Munro's works indicates "while the world lies there as a gift, it also lies there as a problem in meaning" (p. 6). Specifically, in *Lives of Girls and Women* the biographical intersections between protagonist and author call into question "registers of truth, falsehood, art, feigning, legend, fantasy, and hearsay combine in various ways" (Blodgett, 1988, p. 7) rendering it difficult to draw a line between the fictional life of Del and the real life of Munro. Ironically, the original title for Munro's novel was "Real Life", a wish, an impossibility, or maybe a joke that further tangles conflicts over what is "real" and "fiction" throughout the work (Besner, 1990, p. 104).



The ambiguous relationship between material reality and fiction, as well as the slippery line between need and greed is highlighted in Del's greedy accident in reading. That is, in moments of voracious readerly hunger Del aggressively introjects everything of a text such that the line separating her "real life" from the texts is unclear. Driven by an unconscious history that she cannot know or master, her hunger for reading unbalances the back and forth of reading, pushing her to take in too much: her relationship to the words on the page is affectively "more than enough" for her to reasonably bear. It is this exorbitance that marks Del's greedy reading as an affective accident: too much is hungered for, too much is taken in, and the effects of greed are nearly too much to put into words.

I now move to consider in more detail Del's greedy accident in reading. I will suggest that in this accident an infantile greed erupts in response to the demanding "psychic agenda" (Waddell, 1998, p. 126) of adolescence – adolescence being a time where one returns to the voracious hungers that first characterized infancy. At stake in Del's greedy act of reading is my effort to reconstruct how, "reading recapitulates...or even...copies development" (Britzman, 2009, p. 50). My analysis explores how greedy accidents pull the reader back to grapple with the very first relations to objects that make later reading of texts possible. Specifically, Del's readerly greed to take in everything in hopes that something can make a difference is an anxiety-alleviating measure first used in infancy. That is, Munro's representation of a greedy accident in reading communicates something of how the confusions and pains of infancy are never definitively quieted rather, these first experiences of needing things from the outside world continue to drive reading. I close with a discussion of how greedy accidents in reading matter in a person's literacy development and how an attendance to our need in reading matters for theories of reading in education.

## **A greedy accident in reading**

Away from her parents, Del's reading practices commune with that of Uncle Benny; having ventured away from her family home, Del discovers that there is more than a geographical difference between it and Uncle Benny's – an "uncle" who was "not [her] uncle, or anybody's" and "stood a little way out" (Munro, 2005, p. 3) from the community. In contrast to her staid parents, Del describes Uncle Benny as someone who was a "steadfast

eccentric almost before he [was] out of his teens” and communicates “in all his statements, predictions, judgments...a concentrated passion” (Munro, 2005, p. 4). Likewise, sitting on his porch, Del finds a “concentrated passion” in the newspaper stories she reads and within herself as she encounters “news” of a world drastically unlike that of her parents. Despite her mother’s teasing “but you don’t believe that, do you?” (Munro, 2005, p. 11) of Uncle Benny and his outlandish stories, Del finds herself starving for the newspaper’s seemingly absurd tales. The question of veracity or empirical evidence is of little consequence for Del’s as her visits to Uncle Benny’s is predominantly an adolescent experiment in taking leave of her family to consider the possibilities of an adult world. In fact, in Del’s description of the differences between Uncle Benny and the Jordan family lives an inkling of the protagonist’s emerging adolescent tendency toward “schizoid” (Klein, 1964, p. 96) logics: Uncle Benny is what Mr. and Mrs. Jordan *are not*, his reading material imbued with the promise and danger this dichotomy holds. As the storm clouds of Del’s adolescence begin to roll in, the trashy headlines and salacious stories in tabloid newspapers are a fortuitous find: a field away from her family, she has space to develop and explore her hunger for spectacular “news” far afield from the polite narratives of her parents.

And yet, the “news” stories that Del hungers for are not entirely “new”. While “new” in the sense that they depart from the stories that make up her parents’ world, they rouse in Del old questions and worries from infancy. I read Del’s hunger for these stories in the analytic mode of Klein (1986g) reading the outlandish imaginative games and utterances of her young clients. Refraining from exerting moral or pedagogical influence upon those who turned her consulting room into a violent “battlefield” (Klein 1986g, p. 41), Klein instead ventured “deep-going” interpretations as a way to “open the door to the unconscious” and begin analytic work (1960b, p. 50). Viewing play and games as expressions of the child’s phantasies, Klein (1960a) earnestly wondered for example what Erna’s desire for “eye salad” (p. 68) signified. In her discussion of this clinical case in “An Obsessional Neurosis in a six-year-old girl” Klein (1960a) pays particular attention to Erna’s numerous games that involved eating, starving, poisoning, and vomiting. At one point in her discussion Klein (1960a) suggests, for example, that her Erna’s gorging on water from the “whipped cream tap” and “fish” made from paper represented something of an intense oral envy coupled with greed, that interfered with her experiences of satisfaction and deprivation (p. 70).

With these readings in mind, I likewise think that Del's readerly hunger is tied up with unsymbolized phantasies and anxieties about growing up and needing others. With an eye to Klein's thinking with the outrageous appetites in her consulting room, Del's newspaper reading shows how "good stories satisfy a craving" (Robertson, 2001, p. 209). In particular, I would like to focus on the newspaper headlines that first whet Del's readerly appetite:

FATHER FEEDS TWIN DAUGHTERS TO HOGS

WOMAN GIVES BIRTH TO HUMAN MONKEY

VIRGIN RAPED ON CROSS BY CRAZED MONKS

SENDS HUSBAND'S TORSO BY MAIL (Munro, 2005, p. 6–7).

Read in excess of their factual accounting, these headline stories offer symbols that find correspondence with the conflicts of Del's inner world caught as she is "betwixt the 'unsettling' of...[the] latency period and...'settling' into adult life" (Waddell, 1998, p. 140–141). For Del, as for all young people, the in-between time of adolescence is fraught with psychical turmoil when the sublimations characteristic of latency begin to fail. With the arrival of puberty's physical and emotional changes, the passions that lay dormant or were channeled into other pursuits during latency are passionately reactivated marking adolescence as a battleground where old conflicts from infancy are passionately re-worked in one's grasping for adulthood. There is however, something "new" added to this scene "the power to destroy and even to kill, a power which did not complicate...feelings of hatred that were experienced at the toddler age" (D. W. Winnicott, 1984, p. 146). This crucial difference intensifies the forces of love and hate that preoccupy the adolescent as the tension between dependence on others and a phantasied adult independence reaches a fever pitch. Experiencing the excess of developmental conflicts, the adolescent lapses into the same paranoid schizoid habits of phantastic defence that rendered infancy bearable: inside the deep recesses of the mind there is renewed splitting, violent introjection and projection, and a tendency towards action over contemplation.

It is this complex of defences that form the emotional situation of Del's reading: bringing to her practice revived unconscious and infantile anxieties about love, hate, and vulnerability Del is hungry for, and in dire need of, sustenance that might diffuse anxiety. Read as "food for thought" (Phillips, 1998, p. 13), for Del the newspaper headlines hint at

a number of existential and social questions. First: Where did I come from? Am I safe with these people? Will they fill my need? And then: How am I to meet the hatred of others in the world? What of my own hatred toward others? How is it that love and hate are so close to each other? Desperately in need of clarity, Del stations herself on Uncle Benny's front porch to take in stories of existence as the infant similarly aims, in phantasy, to take in anything that might quell the pains of a paranoid schizoid state of mind.

It is in this emotionally saturated situation that an innocuous comment from Uncle Benny thrusts Del into an out-of-control greed that is nearly as extraordinary as the stories she hungers for. Having noticed Del's interest in the newspapers, Uncle Benny offers: "You're welcome to take those papers home if you want to. I'm all done reading them" (Munro, 2005, p. 7). On first reading it appears that Uncle Benny's generosity seems to fall on deaf ears as Del "kn[ows] better than to do that" (Munro, 2005, p. 7). However, it is in Uncle Benny's mention of "home" where Del's readerly furor takes hold as she feverishly read on "faster and faster, all [she] could hold" (Munro, 2005, p. 7). In this scene Del accidentally falls into a readerly hunger that slips beyond conscious grasp, morphing into an exorbitant binge for more and more words.

I characterize Del's reading as greedy here, as depicted in Phillips (2010) essay "Enough is Enough". In this short piece, Phillips (2010) adopts Harold Boris' conceptualization of the greedy state of mind as being one where we "wish and hope to have everything all the time...want[ing] everything, nothing less will do...[such that] it cannot be satisfied" (p. 16). Appetite, in contrast to greed, is "inherently satisfiable [in that] it goes after what it wants and yet is receptive to what it gets...mak[ing] do, not letting...the better stand in the way of the good" (Phillips, 2010, p. 16). Phillips' qualification of greed as exceeding one's need lies within his broader consideration of the concept of "balance": typically something that we aim to find and keep (ie. balanced judges and juries, work-life balance, and balanced financial books), a virtue of health and wellbeing we cultivate in ourselves and desire in others. The privileged social status of balance means that excesses such as greed are read as symptoms of our primal being, as insatiable animals in need of discipline and control. Caught in discourses that reach back to the capital vices of gluttony and avarice, Phillips (2010) notes that greediness comes to function as our lesson when coming to terms with the fact that "we are born out of control, born too hungry, and need to pull ourselves

together; that life is about learning to be sufficiently contained” (p. 14). Phillips indicates that it is through our will that we contain and pull ourselves together, or pull ourselves back from greedy impulses. For example, in her discussion of the workings of “will” Ahmed (2014) suggests that willpower is often thought of as “something that a responsible and moral subject must develop or strengthen” (p. 7); the exercise of willpower is a toll paid for admittance to the social. Indeed, in growing up and growing into the social world, the greed of others can be oddly reassuring insofar as this “implies that we know our limits...have a sure sense of the proper way to behave...[and] know what is appropriate and right” (Phillips, 2010, p. 4). This is a familiar story about greed that depicts how children “given half a chance, can all too easily make themselves sick by eating, say, too much chocolate” (Phillips, 2010, p. 8). We learn from our own repetition of this fable that development and growing up is about appropriately moderating one’s desire. In fact, excessive hunger often functions as a literary trope where, for instance, the “ridiculously arrested greed-child” (Robertson, 2001, p. 207) figures as an unbalanced foil to a protagonist who demonstrates socially appropriate appetites. A later chapter in *Lives of Girls and Women* invokes a version of this morality tale when Del turns again to the literary to read her Uncle Bill’s “idiot largesse” (Munro, 2005, p. 81) in buying an extravagant bounty of treats at the Jubilee grocery store. His spree reminds Del of “a childish story” she used to read about a young girl who gets everything that she had ever wanted to eat:

I used to get that [book] out and read the description of the food over again for pure pleasure, ignoring the punishments which soon followed, inflicted by supernatural powers always on the lookout for greed. But I saw now that too much really might be too much...(Munro, 2005, p. 81).

While Del used to disregard the fable’s moral injunction against gluttony, Uncle Bill’s frenzied greed brings new immediacy to the danger of having “too much”. Within the story, Uncle Bill’s childish greed is but another example of his stalled emotional development; his failure to grow up and grow into properly adult habits of moderation that Del’s parents demonstrate.

While these fables of greed as a “childish” compulsion carry purchase for Del as well as for readers I would like to suggest that Del’s greedy reading of Uncle Benny’s newspapers is actually of another ilk: her accident does not so much reveal an arrest or delay in development but rather, an eruption of struggle in facing the conflicted adolescent labour

of transitioning from life in the family at home to an adult life in the broader world of others. Del's greed is not an obstacle or resistance to growing up, but a psychical response that might help ferry her through the protracted tumult of adolescence. In my reading here, the psychical significance of Uncle Benny's offer to gift the newspapers to Del cannot be overstated: his mention of "home" evokes from Del increased anxiety over her ambivalent adolescent departure from her parents. That is, there are two things known in Del's knowing "better" than to take the newspapers home. Firstly, that there are objects and stories that lie outside and in conflict with the family and secondly, that in taking interest in some objects one must forego attachments to others. The adolescent project of venturing into adulthood holds both promise and dread as growing up means navigating a complex of gains and losses that are sometimes difficult to distinguish from one another. Waddell (1998) describes well this paradox, as:

...at the same time as gratifying, interesting, sensuous, and emotional experiences are becoming available, arousing joyful exploration and exciting new urges, so too are experiences of deprivation, of loss and sadness, of nostalgia for a state of being which can never be "home" in quite the same way again (p. 57).

Del's desire to read "faster and faster, all [she] could hold" (Munro, 2005, p. 7) is reminiscent of the baby's desperate greed to consume all she can of her mother. Roused to combat anxiety over deprivation and the losses attendant to development, Phillips (2010) characterizes greed as a desperate solution and posits four origin stories that speculate on what greed is used to psychically achieve. Most basically, Phillips (2010) suggests, greed can arise from a fear of losing what we need such that hoarding becomes a safeguard against supplies running out or being used up by others. Alternatively, greed can feel like a solution to the fear that what we're getting isn't quite satisfying in the right ways. Thirdly, greed can allay worries about making choices or about "the road not taken" for if one can have it all, then nothing will have to be given up. Lastly, the fear of needing something that doesn't belong to us can elicit a greed that stems from envy where destroying what is needed is likened to destroying one's need for it. In these stories, greed provides a solution, however illusory, fleeting, or unreliable to the interminable problems of dependency, deprivation, and fears of frustration (Phillips, 2010, p. 15–17).

Returned in adolescence to the infantile conundrum of needing “too much”, Del falls into a greedy accident where her fear of losing what she needs is displaced onto the newspaper stories and her voracious appetite represents a desperate unconscious attempt to stave off anxiety. Driven by this internal situation, Del’s readerly hunger is well out of her hands as her greed for the newspaper stories comes to persist beyond reasonable judgment and sensible need. Gripped by internal conflicts, her relation to the newspaper stories represents a transference re-working of her earliest paranoid-schizoid defences: the introjective pace of Del’s reading spins out of control as she rushes to take in everything she can. Destroying objects as they are introjected, this greedy reading only exacerbates Del’s grief, not to mention the ways in which the content of the stories themselves (over)stimulate Del’s existent schizoid anxiety. Staring down the painful conflicts of adolescence, greed first appears as a psychic solution for Del only to quickly reverse into an anguish: swollen and overwrought by her consumption of the stories, she seeks relief from greed and its false promise. This anguish might be something like Virginia Woolf’s sense for the danger of “over-reading” or how in the blurred lines between reader and text one can face “too much excitement, too much life” (Jacobus, 1999, p. 39) when appetite goes haywire.

Like the infant who relies on action rather than thought or words, Del’s flight from the pains of her accident takes the form of a physical flight, “reel[ing] out into the sun...bloated and giddy with revelations of evil, of its versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness” (Munro, 2005, p. 7). Stumbling from Uncle Benny’s porch, Del’s family home begins to come into sight and this view makes all the difference to Del’s greedy accident. That is, with this vision of a good enough childhood where her psychical needs were met well enough, her greed for the newspaper stories subsides. The ferocious hold of the newspapers suddenly seems implausible; they no longer hold any claim on her.

Del’s greed for the newspaper stories wanes as she runs toward the others who have provided her with enough, both psychically and materially, through childhood. And yet, years later in her narration of this event, something of the greedy accident eludes Del’s telling of it. She finds herself at a loss for words in the afterwards of this accident, wondering: “why was it that the plain back wall of home...should make it seem doubtful that a woman would really send her husband’s torso, wrapped in Christmas paper, by mail to his girl friend in South Carolina?” (Munro, 2005, p. 7). Turning away from Uncle

Benny's newspapers, it is clear that something has happened to Munro's precocious protagonist: she has faced for the first time pains brought on by the storms of adolescence, her greedy accident figuring as a makeshift effort to hold a fragile self together. Although beginning as a conscious project in feeling out a bigger world, Del's engagement with the newspaper stories is interrupted by a developmental conflict of adolescence that gives rise to a greedy reading accident. Her reading practice spirals out of her hands as old news is made new again for Del; this news telling of her own need and forcing her to encounter with renewed intensity dire infantile questions about safety, satisfaction, and her dependence on others. Felt before it is known however, the shock and immediacy of her need rouses anxiety and greed's defence which, in phantasy, works to safeguard her against psychical disintegration. Del's reading pulls her back to an earlier affective tipping point: the paranoid-schizoid position first experienced in infancy which sets the foundation for all future readings of the world. Her compulsion to read the newspapers "faster and faster" represents a desire in excess of conscious curiosity, this unanticipated voracious hunger driven by unconscious maneuvers to acquire assurances and buttress a shaky adolescent self.

Del's need for the news *is* the news here. And yet, the greedy accident delivers old news, possibly the oldest news to the forefront of conversations about the unconscious labours of reading. That is, the excessive greed in reading is seated in the reader's earliest history of needing others and wanting knowledge of the external world. In particular, reading is a problem of need precisely because there is never enough: we are not self-contained, we need others and yet, reading others' words can undo us. Butler (2004) describes this interdependency with some levity, confessing, "let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something" (p. 23). Indeed, to read is to grapple with our need of others, to risk encountering both old and new news of the self's development. Two short anecdotes help bring this idea of reading as need in relation to the scene of education where I will conclude this chapter. In different ways, each anecdote highlights reading as a practice driven by the fledgling object relations of infancy.



## Greedy readings in education

“William the Conqueror” is a nickname Coleman (2009) gives to a student in his literature class (p. 21). Having noticed William’s aggressive hunger for the books and supplementary materials of his course, Coleman (2009) asks after his student’s intense and driving hunger: “Why do you read? Why does it matter?” (p. 21). William offers a pithy account of his ambitious reading list, explaining:

‘...I read to transcend the limits of my environment...to connect with the greatest minds in history, to see through the superficial and the sloppy thinking in the world around me...I read with a will to power. I read not to be a slave’ (Coleman, 2009, p. 20–21).

With an ear to the workings of negation and projection, William’s reply elliptically discloses an inner drama that precedes his readerly furor: Fearful of being a beginner with half-baked ideas, he has projected this part of himself elsewhere (the sloppy thinking in the world) and must now defend against this specter’s return. This defence against his own projection takes up residence in William’s reading practice. As Coleman (2009) sees it, each great book William conquered could become one of many “building blocks in the fortifications he wanted to erect between himself and [this] world... [where] the greater the books, the stronger the defence” (p. 25). William’s situation could be described as a kind of “intellectual binging”, his indiscriminate appetite arising from feelings of emptiness within as his “over-stocked mind is amassing secret reserves against phantasized attacks” (Jacobus, 1999, p. 29). Persecuted by his felt indenture to others (such as Coleman himself) William aims to greedily read his way out of need. Relatedly, I wonder if William’s desire to transcend his environment tells of a desire to transcend his need *of* an environment, of others in the material and textual world? Embedded in William’s reading practice is what Phillips (1993) calls the “total fantasy of greed” (p. 71) where one hopes to eat up their own appetite. The emotional logic here, Phillips (1993) suggests, follows something like: “if I eat everything I won’t have to eat anymore” (p. 71) and I will no longer need to be hungry –the great disappointment being that no reading can deliver on this promise, and greed’s destructive qualities in fact exacerbate felt emptiness and internal persecution.

In a story of a class in conflict, Mishra Tarc (2011b) tells of a second reader who similarly cannot get enough. After reading an excerpt from Alexie’s (2009) *Porcupines and China*

*Dolls*, Mishra Tarc's undergraduate students distressingly find themselves in the throes of pathetic feeling. Anger, resistance, confusion, helplessness, and guilt threaten to break students and teacher who are caught in the grief of reparative learning while reading Alexie's literary testimony of the Canadian government's taking of Aboriginal children from their communities to residential schools. At the edge of this affective outcropping one student "raises an unsteady hand" with comments that seem to bring some relief and offer a pedagogical opening:

'I know we were only supposed to read the first thirty pages but I couldn't get this story out of my head...I had to find out what happened...and when I did, I couldn't wrap my head around it....Why couldn't I see?' (Mishra Tarc, 2011b, p. 362).

The student cannot get the story out of his head and yet at the same time is unable to get his head around the story. Alexie's telling of the social and psychical legacy of Canada's residential schools gives this student grief. Drowning in pathetic feelings, he has gotten both more and less than he bargained for as he falters in attempting to come to grips with someone else's unimaginable experience. As he wades into feeling for the other he is consumed by and cannot stop consuming the novel. Read as a case of greedy reading, the emotional logic here draws upon the early learning in infancy that being fed can relieve one's suffering: so, if relief cannot be found in thirty pages, then maybe in sixty or ninety pages the painful aporia will relent. The trouble is that, by its nature, reparative curriculum cannot be instrumentally delivered by the facts of Alexie's novel—even the "whole" story cannot give the student what he wants. Phillips (2010) describes this kind of greedy craving in the familiar situation where:

...what we are getting is not quite what we want; it's failing to satisfy me so I begin to believe that more is better, that if one cream cake isn't doing the trick, three will, when in fact it isn't a cream cake that I really want (p. 15).

Although quite different in tone, these anecdotes both represent readers trying to remedy inner strife by consuming more and more. Like babies reaching out to the external world to acquire objects for an internal world, their readerly hungers are a kind of rejoinder to psychical insecurity and pain. Engaged in the interminable psychical labour of grappling with the at times unbearable reality that they are bound up with others, old news is made new again in ways that rouse greedy defences first mounted in infancy.

Reading in the intensely transference scene of education, the existence of others as represented in texts evokes for these two readers old anxieties about who others are in relation to the self. Inextricable from one's history of deprivations and satisfactions, readerly appetite (along with its excesses and obstacles) carries the burden and possibilities of one's internal life. Reading in school is thus caught in the patterns of one's first introjections and projections in how, as Klein (1975a) writes "the external world is again and again taken in and put out – re-introjected and re-projected" (p. 155). Although readers cannot know the internal hungers that literary hungers satisfy, greedy accidents in reading interrupt narratives of the reasonable and balanced self. These greedy accidents hinting at how one is always making and taking "more than enough" –more than the facts of a plot line or the analytic details of a theory. This could not be otherwise for as my discussion in this chapter elaborates, reading turns on fraught questions about what is inside and what is outside through the channels of infantile meaning-making structures. For instance, is Derrida a friend or foe, slave master or neighbour in thought? How are the children and adults of Alexie's novel like or unlike me? And, how does the psychical legacy of historical violence live in our contemporary relations to one another?

As we can see in Del Jordan's case, the stories of others can offer a psychical space for wrestling with these kinds of questions. However, the flipside of this intense communion is that reading is also an affective minefield that can rattle the inner world and cause readers to scramble greedily to take in anything and everything that might help support a fractured inner world. There is no safeguard against greedy reading, no procedure or intention that forecloses the excessive appetite of greed and its anxious precursors. However, as I hope to have practiced in this chapter, new significance and thought can be made from chance accidents in excessive readerly appetite. That is, just as schooling offers students a "second chance" (Klein, 1964, p. 94–95) to revise their first relationships in the family, greedy accidents call us to remember our earliest need of a mother who supported our bodily survival and helped us to establish psychic life.

## Chapter 4. Reading Trauma: *Obasan*

In Canada, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (2006) is widely viewed as a stunning achievement. In her introduction to Kogawa's novel, Sakamoto (2006) suggests that Kogawa's novel touches a nation's conscience by giving voice to the experiences of Japanese Canadians who were interned or forced to relocate from British Columbia during the Second World War. Both Sakamoto and Kogawa share a family history scarred by this historical violence, and in her reading of Kogawa's novel Sakamoto (2006) notes: "When I first read the opening line of this book, I felt the shock of the familiar. It was the sensation of being delivered into my own emptiness, only I was no longer alone" (p. vii). In 1981 when Kogawa's *Obasan* was first published, the Canadian Government's Redress Settlement Agreement was a few years away. However, Sakamoto celebrates the novel as a fictional representation of the real experiences that political activists would later catalogue and hold up as evidence in their fight for official apology and compensation from the Canadian government for discriminatory and dehumanizing actions perpetrated against Japanese children and families forty years earlier. Similarly, in her analysis of the novel Eppert (2000) suggests that *Obasan* offers a literary "narrative of historical witness" (p. 214) that acted as a catalyst that dramatically altered the historical imaginary in Canada<sup>3</sup>.

The context of Kogawa's writing and her resultant narrative begins with the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. This Second World War-time event was a catalyst that came to justify the establishment of a 100-mile designated protected area along the Pacific coast of British Columbia. Hinging on little more than paranoia and spurious evidence, anyone of Japanese descent residing within this area was suspected of participating in espionage or sabotage of Canadian war efforts. Japanese Canadians faced various infringements and humiliations: property damage and confiscation; restriction of property rights; prolonged internment at camps that stripped individuals of their right to work or move freely; forced relocation to interior farming projects, and; forced repatriation and deportations which continued even

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<sup>3</sup> In 1988, then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney issued a formal apology in the House of Commons to Japanese Canadians who were affected by the government's racially prejudiced policy and actions during the Second World War. At this time, \$238 million dollars in financial reparations were determined for individual survivors alongside funding for Japanese-Canadian community projects and the Canadian Race Relations Foundation.

after Japan's surrender in August of 1945. This official catalogue does not come close however, to doing justice to representing what it was for Japanese Canadians to live through this time and to live on in the aftermath.

*Obasan* offers just such an accounting of the lived experiences of Japanese-Canadians during this time; presenting readers with an unofficial record of one family's experience of this time and its enduring effects. Sakamoto's praise is warranted. Although Ken Adachi's 1976, non-fiction *The Enemy That Never Was*, had already chronicled the history of the Japanese in Canada from the late 1800's to the 1970's, *Obasan* contributed a previously missing element: a complexly layered story of the psychical dimensions and social-cultural effects of the Canadian Government's systematic racial discrimination of Japanese Canadians.

Set in 1972 in Granton, Alberta *Obasan* tells the story of a three-generation, Japanese Canadian family that was deeply affected by the Canadian Government's actions during the war. The novel opens as thirty-six year old Naomi Nakane's paternal uncle has just died, and she is visiting her grieving Aunt, or Obasan. While there, Naomi opens a parcel she has received from her maternal Aunt Emily which contains various newspaper clippings, letter mail from during the war, and Aunt Emily's diary dated from December 1941 to May 1942 and addressed to Naomi's mother who returned to Japan in the early days of the war to care for an elderly relative. This archival material weaves a grim paper trail documenting the violences perpetrated against Naomi's family – some of which she knows, and others that she has only a felt sense for. As Naomi reads through these texts, real readers of the novel become privy to her readerly transferences; we are pulled between Naomi's present and her past childhood memories.

Unlike Del Jordan's greedy accident in reading – a reader who could not get enough information, gorging herself on fantastical tabloid stories, Naomi is a somewhat reluctant reader. Her engagement with Aunt Emily's archive dredges up for her repressed memories of a childhood full of confusion, heartbreak, racial hatred, and loss. I explore in this chapter an accident in reading that occurs when Naomi's transferences to a newspaper article inadvertently return her to a traumatic childhood memory. I suggest in my analysis that Naomi is thrust into re-feeling a traumatic experience that defied both conscious and unconscious efforts to leave her past behind.

Naomi's accident in reading hinges on her early transferences to the text, and so I begin this chapter with a discussion of the importance and workings of this unconscious mechanism through a metaphor that Kogawa introduces in her novel. In particular, I read the transference as being represented by Naomi's description of dinner leftovers that are stored in the fridge and brought forth in later meals. Kogawa's description of Aunt Obasan's propensity to save and later repurpose even the tiniest scraps of food offers an apt description of how scraps from the reader's unconscious past drive reading's present. Transference makes reading possible, but we cannot know in advance where this will lead. In Naomi's case, her engagement with someone else's story comes to index for her a traumatic accident from twenty-seven years earlier. This is an accident that Naomi believed to have escaped and left behind. I draw on Freud's (1967, 1975) conceptualization of trauma as well as Caruth's (1996) reading of his theory to argue that Naomi's reading reopens an old wound from this time and returns her to an experience that has, until this point, eluded symbolization. I offer a reading of Naomi's fictional accident as a way into thinking about how, for real readers, literacy hinges on one's psychical past – even the past which one does not claim as “theirs”. In this configuration, the promise of transference in reading is a double-edged sword: while it can offer a chance to re-work old dramas, it can also inaugurate a frightful return of unknown and unassimilated parts of the self.

### **“Leftover” history and the transference**

For much of Kogawa's novel, we find the protagonist Naomi stationed at Aunt Obasan's kitchen table with her Aunt Emily's archive of letters, narratives, and newspaper articles that tell of the violence and prejudices that Japanese-Canadians experienced during World War II. Sitting alone at night, a “bulging manila envelope full of letters...[has] burst apart” in her hands, accidentally sending a pile of papers “cascad[ing] over [her] lap, falling onto the floor” (Kogawa, 2006, p. 43) and as she retrieves them from the floor, Naomi reluctantly begins to read. For both Del Jordan and Naomi, reading takes place in the home of a close family member: Del reads newspapers on her Uncle Benny's porch, and Naomi leafs through her Aunt Emily's archive at Obasan's kitchen table. Coincidentally, both readers meet in their hosts someone who has a tendency to hold onto old objects from the past, their homes full of items that others might have discarded long ago. In Naomi's case, Obasan has held onto seemingly worthless objects – “a ball of string full of knots, a number

of balls of wool bits, and even short bits of thread twirled around popsicle sticks that are stacked up like soldiers in a black woven box” (Kogawa, 2006, p. 43–44). After their intended purpose has been fulfilled, these vestiges persist in relation to new objects and ends: lengths of wool and thread that previously tied things together now tie Obasan to her own knotted and balled up history. While Obasan’s house is old its age shows not in dilapidation or dusty corners, but in the sheer volume of accumulated objects and odds and ends scattered throughout the space. Reflecting on the state of Obasan’s home, Naomi ventures that deep emotional ties connect Obasan to all of the objects she’s saved from the trash bin:

Every home-made piece of furniture, each pot holder and paper doily is a link in her lifeline. She has preserved in shelves, in cupboards, under beds – a box of marbles, half-filled colouring books, a red, white and blue rubber ball. The items are endless. Every short, stub pencil, every cornflakes box stuffed with paper bags and old letters is of her ordering. They rest in the corners like parts of her body, hair cells, skin tissues, tiny specks of memory. This house is now her blood and bones (Kogawa, 2006, p. 19).

To look at Obasan’s house, Naomi suggests, is to catch a glimpse of Obasan herself as each of these saved objects is connected to her in some way. While some might view Obasan’s collections of items as mere junk, Naomi has a sense that these objects, on their own and collectively, hold emotional significance for Obasan. As a depository of sorts, a holding ground for all that has come before, Obasan’s house is a metaphor for the internal object relations that drive reading – the unconscious talismans that, while forged long ago, persist and influence one’s present relations and perception. These psychical objects and relations shape the scene of reading by way of the transference – a concept Freud (2006) first introduced to describe his patients’ tendency to substitute the person of the doctor for a person previously known to the patient. In this substitution of one person for another the patient is thus able to transfer onto the analyst impulses, fantasies, conflicts, and experiences from an earlier time (Freud 2006, p. 534). In her engagement with the concept, Britzman (2000) describes the transference as one’s “capacity to bring new editions of old conflicts into present relationships” (p. 41). This transferring defies any linear sense of time allowing us to “mov[e] from present to past and back to our present” without regard for what came first chronologically (Britzman, 2000, p. 31).

In her consideration of the concept, Mishra Tarc (2011a) terms these workings of the transference as the “timeless space of reading” (p. 65) to denote how when we’re reading we can’t help but draw on all that has come before. Reading is timeless, Mishra Tarc suggests, because despite sophisticated critical faculties literacy was first and remains driven by way of unconscious object relations complete with all their curious logics and dramatics. As we read the stories of others we are always reading between the lines our own history of making sense of the outside world and making a self (Britzman, 2009; Georgis, 2014). What this means is that literature can, in Mishra Tarc’s (2011a) estimation, “help us...return to a lost childhood” (p. 65) where we might take a chance at re-considering the earliest conflicts through which we first began to read and make a self. In her analysis of the popularity of the *Harry Potter* series, Robertson (2011) makes just this point, suggesting that the novel’s representation of Harry’s childhood offers a number of transference points through which readers might re-read the stories of their own childhood time. Though most readers of the novels have probably grown up with “muggles” who possess no magical powers, Harry’s emotional experience of growing up with wizards to learn from, villains to best, and much that defies his mastery might not be all that far from reader’s relations in the real world.

There is no way to tell however, what this return to earlier objects and earlier times might bring when reading. That is, we can’t know in advance how unresolved conflicts and affect from long ago will guide, stick to, and resurface to mock our best intentions and learned literacy skills. Governed not by cognition, but by the bizarre logics of phantasy and transference, Phillips (1988) is on point when he glibly confesses that “When I’m reading Henry James, I may be reading pornography” (p. 31). Phillips’ (1998) jest reminds that we don’t always know what we are reading when we read a text because so much depends on our unconscious objects relations and “private preoccupations” –especially those secreted from the reader themselves (p. 32). In the transferential relation of reading, there is no masterful orchestral conductor dictating a score; as desires and conflicts from the past become sutured to the present it can become difficult to disentangle what belongs where, why, or when in our history of reading.

In her 2011 memoir, Winterson offers another anecdote that represents well how we cannot know where the transference will lead – the reader always learning “too late” what resides



within themselves. Telling of how she came to read fictional books in secret from her adoptive mother, Winterson (2011) recalls:

There were six books in our house.

One was the Bible and two were commentaries on the Bible...I asked my mother why we couldn't have books and she said, "The trouble with a book is that you never know what's in it until it's too late" (p. 33–37).

To Winterson's mother, books themselves are the trouble because you cannot know in advance what they contain. However, there is something more to this story if we consider Britzman's (1998b) suggestion that "complaints about the outside world can [sometimes] mask...inner complaints – the anxieties within" (p. 14). That is, I think that Mrs. Winterson's trouble with books might be pointing to a trouble within readers themselves. In particular, how the unpredictability of the transference means that we cannot know what we will transfer onto someone else's story until it is "too late" to turn back. For instance, when reading we may discover, belatedly, an existential matter that lies deep within ourselves – forgotten troubles, repressed desires, or traumatic experience never fully assimilated at the time of its happening. Recast in this way, the trouble with books here might actually be the trouble with reading itself, or how, as Britzman (2006) observes, "even when we read external reality we cannot help drawing upon what is unresolved in our own reading archive – what we wish to see or never want to see again" (p. 47). The internal work of making meaning from someone else's words while reading is a labour that both rests upon, and can unexpectedly invoke, these fragments of internal objects, conflicts, and habits of thought from the past.

In Kogawa's novel, this transferential work of drawing on one's psychical archive is also represented by Naomi's description of Obasan as "Our Lady of the Leftovers" who has a refrigerator "packed with boxes of food bits, a slice of celery, a square of spinach, half a hard-boiled egg" (Kogawa, 2006, p. 44), and other tiny bits of leftover food. Obasan's refrigerator is not unlike the mess of the mind where old objects are retained, repurposed, or lost only to later be found (Kogawa, 2006, p. 44). These scraps of food in Obasan's fridge index what has passed in her life but they also influence what is to come as each of these leftover bits are later incorporated into other meals such that Obasan "orchestrates each remainder of a previous dinner into the dinner to come, making every meal like every

meal, an unfinished symphony” (Kogawa, 2006, p. 44). Likewise, as Naomi sits in Obasan’s kitchen, her reading of Aunt Emily’s documents dredges up “leftovers” from the past. In the act of reading, Naomi finds herself held to someone else’s words without yet understanding their meaning as her transference melds the present with the past and the text pulls her backwards to an earlier time and to experiences she thought were far away and done with. Readers can trace the workings of the transference as the novel bounces back and forth in time through the associations evoked in Naomi’s reading. For instance, as she begins to read Aunt Emily’s diary – written in the form of letters to Naomi’s mother who had left Canada to care for relatives in Japan, Naomi remembers the woman to whom these words are addressed and her family’s life in Vancouver before the war. As the transference moves Naomi from Aunt Emily’s words to her own psychical history, readers learn of Naomi’s earliest memories of living with her parents and grandparents: bathing with her grandmother Kato, watching her brother practicing the piano in the living-room, and listening to her parents’ bedtime fairytales. However, with these pleasant recollections the transference in reading also returns to Naomi painful repressed memories such as her molestation at the hands of a neighbour, as well as her mother’s departure to Japan, and the unanswered questions about why she never returned. As Naomi reads on, her transferences compel a kind of remembrance storytelling through which readers of the novel come to learn more and more of her family’s pain: their repeated displacements, the humiliations they suffered during the war, and the conflicts that have emerged as they each try to grapple with their own injuries.

One of the most compelling conflicts in the novel occurs between Naomi and Aunt Emily; these characters each feel differently about how the transference can unexpectedly return to the reader memories and repressed content from earlier times. In particular, Aunt Emily is described as a “word warrior...a crusader” for whom testimonial narratives form the evidentiary basis for reconciliation. In reading the accounts of others, she hopes to “remember everything” regardless of how painful remembering might be. Advising Naomi, she insists that “you have to remember...you are your history. If you cut any of it off you’re an amputee. Don’t deny the past...Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene (Kogawa, 2006, p. 49). Naomi however, is defensive of the value of her forgetting of how, as Britzman (1998a) puts it: “we forget nothing except what we wish to forget for some good reason or other (p. 10). For Naomi, Aunt Emily’s push to “know everything” conflicts

with the fact that the only way Naomi made it through childhood was by way of repressing pain that she could not bear to know. And so, as Naomi reluctantly reads through Aunt Emily's papers, she finds herself overwhelmed by the return of repressed "memories and dreams seep and mingle through cracks" (Kogawa, 2006, p. 27). Drawing on Obasan's refrigerator leftovers as a metaphor, Naomi questions the value of recalling a past so full of pain:

There are some indescribable items in the dark recesses of the fridge that never see the light of day. But you realize when you open the door that they're there, lurking, too old for mould and past putrefaction.

Some memories, too, might be forgotten...What purpose is served by hauling forth the jar of inedible food? If it is not seen, it does not horrify. What is past recall is past pain. Questions from all these papers, questions referring to turbulence in the past, are an unnecessary upheaval (Kogawa, 2006, p. 44–45).

While Aunt Emily is politically committed to hauling forth and reading every shred of textual evidence, Naomi is ambivalent about such work for her transference to these narratives causes her pain: as she reads (repressed) memories return to her the indescribable, forgotten, and moldy remnants of her own terrible experience. Violently returned to her own anguished history, Naomi doesn't want to read because reading means remembering and remembering seems to only cause hurt.

### **Naomi's accident in reading**

And yet, despite her conscious desire to leave the past behind, to "get away from all this...[and] break loose" (Kogawa, 2006, p. 166) from the weight of her memories, Naomi's readerly transference supersedes her conscious resistance and she finds herself reading on and reading further and further into her own history. Although she would like to insist that Aunt Emily's research work in reading and writing "do[es] not touch us where we are planted here" (Kogawa, 2006, p. 173), Naomi is about to experience an accident in reading that touches off something planted inside her long ago. Sitting at Obasan's kitchen table, she chances upon a file folder containing only a single newspaper article and an index card reading "Facts about evacuees in Alberta" (Kogawa, 2006, p. 177). The clipping shows a picture of a Japanese–Canadian family standing near a pile of sugar beets with the caption "Grinning and Happy" and the article reports on the season's sugar beet production

– a series of, seemingly innocuous, facts: “in 1945, 65% of Alberta’s sugar beet acreage was worked by Japanese evacuees, 363 000 tons of beets were harvested, 19 500 acres worked by Japanese evacuees, 5 000 acres by German prisoners of war, and the remaining 5 500 worked by local farmers” (Kogawa, 2006, p. 177). The facts presented in this article are unambiguous in their description of evacuees’ contribution to the season’s sugar beet harvest. And yet, in her reading Naomi is shocked and feels accosted and rears back on her heels to spew forth a feverish telling of her experience as an evacuee on the Barker family sugar beet farm. Over the next three pages in the novel, Naomi attempts to tell what she “cannot tell about this time” (Kogawa, 2006, p. 180). Her monologue presents a rush of associations that defy logical organization bumping from one detail to the next. For instance, in brief bursts, Naomi tells of feeling trapped, without relief or protection, from the summer’s blistering heat and the winter’s frigid cold. She tells of living in a chicken coop “house”, of the “nightly attack of bedbugs”, and of the coal stove around which her family rotated “like chickens on a spit” (Kogawa, 2006, p. 178) to keep warm on winter nights. She tells of how her tear glands seemed to “burn out” (Kogawa, 2006, p. 179) and dry up, how her skin and lips would crack from the dry air, and how she bound rags around her wrists to stop them from breaking open (Kogawa, 2006, p. 180).

Naomi’s testimony is breathless and harried –as if words cannot come to her aid quickly enough, or words themselves are not enough. Jammed with affect, her speech here reads as a kind of first draft narrative lacking a linear timeline and logical organization. Language and sense-making fail: she stammers and repeats herself charging forward with a jumbled telling of the “facts” about her time as an evacuee. Railing against the newspaper article, she sputters with rage: “‘Grinning and happy’ and all smiles around a pile of beets? That is one telling. It’s not how it was” (Kogawa, 2006, p. 180). Bursting with bad feelings over her reading of the newspapers’ “facts”, Naomi hurls her anguish outwards. Blaming her trouble with reading on Aunt Emily as an external aggressor, she accuses:

Aunt Emily, are you a surgeon cutting at my scalp with your folders and your filing cards and your insistence on knowing all? The memory drains down the sides of my face, but it isn’t enough, is it? It’s your hands in my abdomen, pulling the growth from the lining of my walls, but bring back the anaesthetist turn on the ether clamp down the gas mask bring on the chloroform when will this operation be over Aunt Em?

Is it so bad?

Yes.

Do I really mind?

Yes, I mind... (Kogawa, 2006, p. 178).

This visceral, physical description of *cutting* and *bleeding* captures well Naomi's psychical pain and she begs Aunt Emily for mercy as she's unable to endure the emotional anguish of past injuries now draining into her present. This sensation of cutting is, I think, a repetition of trauma's earlier breach in Naomi's mind: how, long ago, something cut in, broke in without any arbitration by her. Naomi wishes for this gruesome surgery to end, and at the close of this chapter, makes a wishful plea "What is done, Aunt Emily, is done, is it not?" (Kogawa, 2006, p. 182). And yet readers of the novel sense that she is far from being "done" with what lies in her past. In particular, I will suggest that Naomi's accident in reading occasions a return to childhood trauma not fully assimilated at the time of it's happening—a psychical return to the very experience she fled from once before. In the next section, I offer a brief discussion of trauma's workings as imagined by Freud and then re-read by Caruth. Following this, I return to analyze the contours of Naomi's accident in reading and close the chapter with a consideration of how her particular accident poses vital questions about the relationship between reading and affective life generally.

## **Two cuttings, trauma's return**

By many accounts it would appear that Naomi has moved forward from her childhood as an evacuee in Alberta—she has grown older, lives away from home, and doesn't speak much of this time. And yet, something here lingers as Naomi is slashed and wounded by the newspaper's words that force out of her a jumbled narrative of her experience as an evacuee. Reading this scene in the novel I am reminded of how Freud (1975) reads another fictional scene of cutting. In his endeavour to better understand experiences that seem to defy the pleasure principle—such as the nightmares of soldiers returned home from war or those who have survived railway accidents Freud turns to a scene in the epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata*. In this work Tancred unintentionally kills his love Clorinda in a duel. After Clorinda's burial, Tancred retreats to a "strange, magic forest" where he "slashes his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda...is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again" (Freud,

1975, p. 24). There are two cuts here: the one that originally killed Clorinda and the cut Tancred inflicts on the tree which Freud suggests is an unwitting traumatic repetition of the former. (1975, p. 24). Although Tancred has sustained no physical wound, Freud suggests that a *mental* wounding compels him to repeat –to re–enact, the cutting that killed Clorinda. This unconscious repetition, or compulsive returning to something painful, is a hallmark of Freud’s (1967) conceptualization of trauma, as is what he calls the “latency” (p. 84) of trauma or, how the effects of a frightful event manifest long after its occurrence. In thinking about the status of repression and return in Jewish history, Freud (1967) offers the following anecdote which draws out both of these qualities of trauma’s return:

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever happened at the time of the accident....The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the “incubation period,” a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease...[for] there is a long period...during which no trace is to be found...(p. 84)

What marks trauma as such is this delayed onset of symptoms and the way in which one, against their knowledge or will, is returned to the traumatic experience.

What is most bewildering here is how in between the occurrence of the traumatic event and its repetition, there is no “trace” of symptoms – it is as if nothing ever happened. Indeed, in her consideration of trauma’s workings, it is this quality that Caruth (1996) takes as her focus: how trauma isn’t known the first time but only through its repetition. Caruth (1996), contends that the experience of “fright” – of having “run into danger without being prepared for it” (Freud 1975, p. 36), interferes with one’s capacity to know, and claim for themselves what has happened. Essentially, in cases of trauma she suggests that while something has indeed happened, one does not have knowledge of this happening at the time. In her work by the same title, Caruth (1996) offers the phrase “unclaimed experience” (p. 4) to describe how, at the time of its happening, one is unable to claim, assimilate, or fully know trauma. Touching on Freud’s sense that trauma is a kind of psychic invasion – an extensive breach of the mind, she suggests that fundamental to trauma is its radical unknowability, or how something can happen and be taken inside someone without them fully knowing or making significance from their experience (Caruth 1996, p. 4). With

traumatic experience an “incomprehensible outside of the self has...gone inside without the self’s mediation” (Caruth, 1996, p. 132), only later making itself knowable through unwitting repetition in symptoms. The question of time figures significantly here: not only in how trauma belatedly repeats itself years after one’s original experience, but also how the initial traumatic experience occurs out of time, disjointed from one’s capacity to take in and make sense of it. Caruth (1996) explains:

What causes, trauma, then, is a shock...a break in the mind’s experience of time...It is not simply, that is, the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*. The shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known. And it is this lack of direct experience that, paradoxically, becomes the basis of repetition...(p. 61–62).

In this configuration, one essentially *misses* the experience of trauma as something awful from outside passes inside without conscious knowledge or mediation. Essentially not knowable the first time, the disturbing affective remnants of trauma nonetheless lodge themselves within, inconveniently reappearing and forcing one to belatedly reconcile the experience’s meaning for their life and sense of self.

Naomi’s accident in reading instantiates just this: as she accidentally falls into a transference with the newspaper article she is forced to return and reconcile her own unclaimed experience as an evacuee. Although physical wounds may have healed over the years, Naomi’s psychical experience of this time returns as an accident in reading that forces her to reconcile affective impressions ignited by trauma’s unwitting repetition in her reading. Caused not by the return of something she never wanted to see again, but by something that she never fully saw or understood in the first place, Naomi’s experiences on the Barker farm were taken inside without any relation to the self –“unclaimed” at the time but nonetheless held over in her readerly archive of object relations. It is this “unclaimed” quality of Naomi’s trauma that establishes her accident’s surprise –she could not know of the accident beforehand because she did not know in the first place the trauma that would come to repeat itself in her reading. While readers can never escape their own history, this is especially true of traumatic experience that one has not “claimed” as their own but nonetheless holds inside. Read through Caruth’s (1996) sense for trauma’s

unknowability, Naomi's accident in reading can be thought of as an unconscious "attempt to overcome the fact that [her experience] was *not* direct...to master what was never fully grasped in the first place" (p. 62).

Twinned with repressed memories, and that which has failed to be repressed, Naomi does sense however that reading holds some kind of threat insofar as the transference can provoke painful memories. Throughout the novel she expresses her ambivalence about reading, about how she "want[s] to get away from all this. From the past and all these papers, from the present, from the memories, from the deaths, from Aunt Emily and her heap of words" (Kogawa, 2006, p. 166). She puts off Aunt Emily saying that she will read it all another time, and even when she acquiesces, finds herself asking "do I really want to read these?" (Kogawa, 2006, p. 166). There is, she feels, something dangerous about engaging with texts that might describe something of her childhood as a Japanese–Canadian during the war. And yet, despite her ambivalence, and my insistence that the accident in reading comes unbidden, both Naomi and I were taken by surprise at her accident in reading. Specifically, I was surprised that it is the "facts" as written by a distant and anonymous author that should give her such trouble. While Aunt Emily's diary entries are teeming with affect–telling of the humiliations and sufferings of family members, the newspaper article contains neutered newspeak, propaganda driven by government–sanctioned racism that Naomi already knows all too well. Despite my own theoretical insistence that accidents in reading happen where and when we least expect them, Naomi's trouble with the "facts", at first, bewildered me: Why is it that this reading is experienced as such an affront? How, after her earlier reading of such a painful and affectively charged family archive, does this cold account of facts hurt Naomi so deeply?<sup>4</sup>

In grappling with my surprise at Naomi's trouble reading, I am reminded of how Britzman (1998b) engages her students' trouble with reading Anna Freud's work. Assigned each week to compose a question for Anna Freud, Britzman (1998b) puzzles to consider what

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<sup>4</sup> These questions disclose how my early readings of Naomi's accident in reading were constrained by what Britzman describes as one of the "regulating fictions about 'information'" (1998a, p. 88). Namely, the presumption that receiving "just the facts" will pose no problem for the learner (as opposed to the pathos–heavy testimony that I imagined might give her grief). Neither Naomi nor I saw this accident coming – even though one of us was looking for it! This might be a kind of hubris on my part, a methodological conceit that my own reading practice might anticipate the accident that, by definition, can only be known "too late". However, I prefer to read my surprise as a reminder that because the accident proffers no conscious precursors and no tell–tale clues it's surprise may be felt by both the fictional reader and the reader of such fiction.



students might want from questions that range from: “Anna, are you suggesting that parents should allow children to continue putting excreta in their mouths in order not to force them to suppress their every desire?” to “Anna, how does it feel to have a pig for a father?” (p. 7, 8). Chock full of students’ affect and transferences, Britzman (1998b) thinks of these questions as “first effects” that say something of how, when faced with new ideas, learning can often begin in fearful ways as one approaches and then retreats or defends against that which is new (p. 6). To respect these “first effects” she suggests is to respect, and be curious about, how “one can make anxiety from anything...[such that] the smallest detail, the tiniest word, can provoke the ego’s defences” (Britzman, 1998a, p. 10).

In Naomi’s accident in reading there is indeed a tiny word that seems to set things off and scramble her critical faculties: “facts”. Although Aunt Emily insists that “it matters to get the facts straight...[as] reconciliation can’t begin without mutual recognition of facts” (Kogawa, 2006, p. 167), Naomi’s relationship to the facts of her own experience is anything but straightforward. The word gives her trouble and, as she meets Aunt Emily’s file folder titled “Facts about evacuees in Alberta”, her attention catches on the word itself: “Facts about evacuees in Alberta?” she spits, “the fact is I never got used to it and I cannot, I cannot bear the memory. There are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep” (Kogawa, 2006, p. 177). The mere mention of the word “facts” rubs Naomi the wrong way, and she repeats the word as if she is unclear as to what the signifier stands for. While “facts” can help clarify matters when teaching in her own classroom the presence of the word here seems to distort Naomi’s thinking, making her second-guess the “facts” she has of her own experience.

Specifically, for Naomi these “facts” do not so much tell something true *of* her experience, as they represent the *psychical organization* of her difficult and traumatic experiences. What I mean to draw attention to here is how in reading, Naomi comes to feel the incompleteness and partiality of the “facts” she has constructed from her own experience. In particular, there are established facts of her history recalled via the transference in reading, but there also remains unclaimed traumatic experiences that have not been properly taken in and so have not yet come to be known as facts. Imagine street lights shining down on a darkened avenue: bright, ossified pillars of symbolized experience compose the official facts of Naomi’s childhood, but in between these spotlights there is

that which is darkened and unknown. These dark expanses between “the facts” constitute leftovers, or the unsymbolized bits of traumatic experience that can’t yet be put into words or made sense of by Naomi. The “facts” that she reads trip Naomi up *because* their selective narrative curation of “what happened” mirrors the way in which her own self-narrative fails to capture the whole story. In reading, Naomi encounters a niggling sense that something of her own experience has defied her mind. Indeed, as no “facts” can be made of trauma, there are details of Naomi’s life history that she herself doesn’t fully know – “unknown unknowns” in the truest sense of the phrase (Defense, 2002). Feeling all that is omitted by the newspaper’s facts, Naomi is returned to that which, although having happened to her, has remained inaccessible save for its repetition. Although Naomi would like to “turn the page and move on” (Kogawa, 2006, p. 42), her reading of someone else’s facts pulls her backwards in time, provoking in her a felt sense that there is more to her own story than the facts she knows.

American psychiatrist, Robert J. Lifton’s (1967) concept of “psychic numbing” can help explain how, while having had an experience, Naomi can’t quite account for that experience. Building on his service as an Air Force psychiatrist in Japan and Korea, Lifton conducted interviews with survivors of Hiroshima from the 1960’s through the 1980’s. His concept of “psychic numbing” was originally used to describe a collective phenomenon where a large portion of a society withdraws from engaging the social issues felt to be too overwhelming. Having faced the threat of mass extinction via nuclear weapons, Lifton (1967) found that as a group survivors of Hiroshima demonstrated an inhibited engagement with current social problems.

In conversation with Caruth (1995), Lifton explains how such numbing also occurs at an individual level: a kind of psychological “shutting down” (p. 134) or absence of feeling that occurs at the time of the trauma and can persist long after the traumatic event itself. Different from repression where one excludes or forgets difficult content, in numbing Lifton suggests that the mind is actually “severed from its own psychic forms [such that] there’s an impairment in the symbolization process itself” (Cited in Caruth, 1995, p. 134). In these moments, it is as if one is psychically at a loss for words as there are no symbols that can adequately contain or translate the traumatic experience into narrative.

From his experience, Lifton found that those experiencing psychic numbing can often appear zombie-like –alive, but not able to put words to their living. In one recollection of childhood, Naomi nearly perfectly expresses such a zombie-like existence where she was not fully awake, not fully able to perceive her own life:

those years on the Barker farm my late-childhood growing-up days, are sleep-walk years, a time of half dream...The sadness and absence are like a long winter storm, the snow falling in an unrelieved colourlessness that settles and freezes, burying me beneath a growing monochromatic weight. Something dead is happening, like the weeds that are left to bleach and wither in the sun (Kogawa, 2006, p. 183).

Unable at the time to think in relation to any forms or imagery, it is an unexpected accident in reading that permits Naomi to first feel and begin to put words to her “sleep-walk years”. The word “facts” is, for Naomi, imbued with this history – with some felt sense that there are “facts” of her life that defy knowing. It is on this word that Naomi’s anxiety attaches, making “facts” into a kind of flashpoint that causes her to fall into an accident in reading. This means more to Naomi than she knows: unconsciously bringing to the newspaper article this felt conflict between the facts she knows, and the facts of her experience that elude the mind. Her shock in reading then, is not one of surprise, but of a terrible recognition of how both she and the article’s author have missed something of the lived reality of evacuees. She is not upset then by the article’s rosy *representation* of Japanese Canadian evacuees but rather, how this text mirrors something of her own capacity to know and narrate her experience of working on the Barker farm. Her accident in reading hinges on this uncanny parallel between the news articles’ obfuscation of evacuee experiences, and the way in which something of her own history is obfuscated from knowing.

Both the newspaper article and Naomi are missing something– the word “facts” setting off a feeling that something has been left out of her own telling of this time. It is this fraught emotional situation that Naomi brings to her reading of the newspaper’s “facts” –the word being imbued with an excess of meaning as it revives all that she has remembered, forgotten, and does not yet know but nonetheless feels. In her reading of the “official” account of her time as an indentured child-servant on a farmyard, Naomi is returned to a time of untold suffering and dehumanization. Her affective impressions from these experiences cause her to fall back into this time and she is compelled to sustain her engagement with an archive she can barely stand to read. The affective force of her own

unknown traumatic experience cries out; the “difficult return” of this accident in reading being the return of something that, while unknown to, or missing from, consciousness, Naomi cannot simply leave behind her. Reading has torn open an old sore that Naomi did not know she had and as past and present are collapsed she desperately tries to convert old affect into new words that narrate her time of living on the Barker farm. Her telling of this time is difficult to read as buried trauma comes hurtling forth and bits and pieces of her experience spew out in a rush of words that testify to her time as an evacuee in a. Caught in an imagined tussle with Aunt Emily asking if it is really “so bad” and whether she really minds this psychical excavation, Naomi expels a list of all that she “minds”, all that hurt her while living on the Barker Farm:

Yes, I mind. I mind everything...It's the chicken coop “house” we live in that I mind...It's the bedbugs and my having to sleep on the table...It's Obasan uselessly packing all the cracks with rags...it's everybody taking a bath in the round galvanized tub, then Obasan washing clothes in the water after...it's standing in the beet field under the maddening sun...it's standing in the field staring out at the heat waves that waver and shimmer...(Kogawa, 2006, p. 178–179)

In a frenzy of words and details, Naomi tells in these pages of an experience that occurred too soon and was too much for her to bear. Unlike the recollection of memories dredged up by her transference in reading, this swell of words is not framed in by narrative –as if she has just experienced this all for the first time Naomi has not storied these grievances into a coherent telling. Fragmented and disoriented, she searches for a way to retell a story that has been hidden from her own sight and mind. Her outpouring reads as a kind of first or, rough draft and is a first effect of her accident in reading: her reading of the newspaper article coercing Naomi back to a childhood from which she sought escape but has continued to hold her captive.

### **“News” of the self**

Naomi is moved to read, moved by her reading, and moved to make meaning from her reading experience by something other than education and logical thinking. Despite Aunt Emily's furor to “know everything”, the facts that drive Naomi's reading of the world are not known to her. Here, the unknowability of trauma –the “fright” of childhood experience that bypassed narration, means that Naomi comes to reading and reads by way of something

she does not know but can nonetheless feel. Her resistance and ambivalence towards Aunt Emily's archive cannot be remedied by way of education. Rather, as one overstuffed envelope of letters tears at its seam, Naomi is affectively brought back to her own wounding: gazing down at the mess of documents near her feet this accidental spill tears open in Naomi a painful, fractured childhood that she can only now begin to pick up the pieces of and make rough meanings from. The split envelope with its contents spilling uncontrollably onto the floor foreshadows Naomi's accident in reading that is felt to split her wide open, exposing her to remnants of her own previously unnamed traumatic experience. Unlike Del Jordan who finds in her reading assurances that can help hold her together through adolescence, Naomi feels her reading as a "surgery" that cuts into her, troubling her sovereignty of mind and self-knowledge. Reading, for Naomi cuts to the bone upsetting the repressed memories upon which her survival has depended and unearthing incomprehensible traumatic experience that puts strain on her enunciation.

Kogawa's representation of Naomi's accident shows reading to be a practice that cannot be educated for there is that which always resists thought and language. Naomi's accident in reading represents this limit as her engagement with someone else's writing comes to exhume details of her own history that she had not known prior and can only now frantically fumble to put words to. Her undoing at the hands of a newspaper article lives in Kogawa's novel as a reminder that experiences of racial hatred and violence cannot be captured by fact and oftentimes cannot be properly committed to memory or placed into story. *Obasan* invites readers into Naomi's mind at this crisis point as she reads and composes a bricolage of facts, partial memories, old pains, and unanswered questions.

In her consideration of the uses of *Obasan* as a work of historical witness in classrooms, Eppert (2000) notes that in her English classroom, student frequently express frustration and aggression towards Naomi, they ask: "Why does [she] complain so, and why does she not know the details of Japanese-Canadian history, particularly considering that she is a schoolteacher? (p. 227). In Eppert's description, the students' impatience with Naomi's complaints and incredulity at her ignorance are palpable. Naomi is troubled by her unclaimed experience returned in reading and students are in turn troubled by Kogawa's fictional representation of this emotional situation. Something is contagious here, something about Naomi troubles Eppert's student readers. Ironically, "Why are you

complaining?” and, “how do you *not* know?” are the very questions of self that Naomi battles in her accident in reading for she does not know why she continues to suffer and does not know that which has so intimately shaped her growing up. Likewise, we might consider how these questions push at familiar ideas about the relationship between reading and inner life: that readers be able to clearly narrate the origins of their affective responses to a story, and account for the “facts” that are missing in self-knowledge. As I hope to have shown in my analysis of Naomi’s accident in reading, these ideas about the relationship between reading and inner life are untenable when we take into consideration the weird, uncontrollable machinations of the reader’s unconscious. That is, like Naomi, we as readers cannot fully know from where our affective responses arise, nor the “facts” that make up a self.

## Chapter 5. Reading Hope: *The Handmaid's Tale*

Reading Atwood's (1985) *The Handmaid's Tale* is an uncanny experience. Things are and are *not* as they appear. Set in Cambridge, Massachusetts in a near future time, Atwood's fictional Republic of Gilead has done away with the US Constitution and Congress in favour of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century puritan values upon which the United States was first born. A theocratic dictatorship has established itself as the central governing body charged with responding to two related crises: severe environmental degradation and a dramatic decline in birthrates. The premise of *The Handmaid's Tale* is, Atwood (2017) admits, "fairly outrageous":

In the novel the population is shrinking due to a toxic environment, and the ability to have viable babies is at a premium. Under totalitarianisms — or indeed in any sharply hierarchical society — the ruling class monopolizes valuable things, so the elite of the regime arrange to have fertile females assigned to them as Handmaids...And so the tale unfolds.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is an epistolary telling of one Handmaids' experience in the fictional Republic of Gilead. While Atwood (1986) claims that this premise seemed "fairly outrageous" to her at the time of her writing in 1984, she has always been quick to insist that the novel is not a work of science fiction, a genre that she conceives as being "filled with Martians and space travel...and things like that" (p. 393). Rather, when writing *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1984 in West Berlin, Atwood (2017) constructed a unique parameter that tethered her fictional work to the material world in which she was living at the time. She explains:

One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the "nightmare" of history, nor any technology not already available. No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities.

In fact, in Atwood's seventy-four boxes of archived materials housed at the Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto, one can view the sheaves of mid-eighties newspaper clippings that catalogue the historical antecedents for the fictional Republic of Gilead. Sullivan (2006) suggests that Atwood's novel essentially starts with a "what if" that was grounded in the world news of her time and pushed a hypothesis as far as it could go (p. 850). So, although Gilead is make-believe, Neuman (2006) likewise argues that

Atwood's novel represents well how the real political wins of feminist movements in the 1970's were curtailed by a backlash to these changes in the early 1980's. For instance, as the archive shows, Atwood was immersed in news of Republican attempts to deny federal funding for abortion services for women in the US, and the outlawing of contraception in Romania. Ayatollah Khomeini's rule in Iran also provided Atwood with information about unique means of torture that appear in the novel as prisoners shocked with electric cattle prods and beaten with frayed steel cables (Neuman, 2006, p. 859). This was also a time when the American New Right, Phyllis Schlafly, Rush Limbaugh, and various televangelists gained significant popularity. Likewise, Atwood drew upon public concern over technologies that were just emerging at this time: one clipping in her archive is from the *Globe and Mail* and describes the concerns of Canadians over modern debit cards: the embarrassment of "insufficient funds" in the checkout lines and worries about identify verification via PIN numbers. These bits of news and other echoes of "nightmare" of history find their way into Atwood's novel where she transformed fledging concerns for women in a technological world into a fictional worst-case scenario. For instance, in a coup to overthrow the government and regulate women's reproduction, all debit cards belonging to women are rendered defunct and funds transferred to male next of kin. Still, thirty years later, Atwood (1986) maintains that "there is nothing new about the society depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* except the time and place...all of the things have...been done before, more than once" (p. 392).

Despite Atwood's insistence that the novel is old news, *The Handmaid's Tale* is experiencing a resurgence of relevance in the contemporary moment as Hulu's television adaptation of the novel has renewed public interest and critique in the novel (Crispin, 2017; S. Jones, 2017; Onstad, 2017; Valenti, 2017). Located between the past in which Atwood wrote the novel and contemporary adaptations of her work, I engage *The Handmaid's Tale* as a work of literary witness that invites readers to look both forwards and backwards in time. Referencing the novel's protagonist, Atwood (2017) has not minced words explaining how she sees *The Handmaid's Tale* as belonging to the genre of literary witness:

Offred records her story as best she can...trusting that it may be discovered later, by someone who is free to understand it and share it. This is an act of hope: Every recorded story implies a future reader. Robinson Crusoe keeps a journal. So did Samuel Pepys, in which he chronicled the Great Fire of



London. So did many who lived during the Black Death, although their accounts often stop abruptly. So did Roméo Dallaire, who chronicled both the Rwandan genocide and the world's indifference to it. So did Anne Frank, hidden in her secret annex.

With this insight, Atwood avoids commenting on any parallels between the present day United States and the fictional dystopic Republic of Gilead. Instead, she directs our attention to the significance of literacy and literature in dark times. She draws attention to writing's function in bearing and documenting the present in search of a future reader who may listen to and learn from this difficult experience. Offred, the main character in Atwood's novel, is one such writer hopeful that someday someone will encounter her words.

A number of scholars have considered the status of Offred's testimonial writing. In particular, Offred's writing has been read as a reclamation of her personal identity – a way in which she inscribes her subjectivity through her use of language and narrative (Hogsette, 1997; Stein, 1991). Beyond the personal, Offred has also been described as “a heroine of language” (Hogsette, 1997, p. 270) as she represents a kind of feminist resilience and feminist voice. In their reading of Offred's writing for instance, Ghosal and Chatterjee (2013) employ the concept of the “hysteric” to argue that Offred's storytelling of her own life can be understood as a refusal to let go of her imagination and mind within a phallogocentric world. Similarly, Offred's humour, wordplay, irony, and double talk also prove effective tools in her survival in a misogynist society (Wagner Lawlor, 2003). Across these analyses and others, Offred's writing carries political significance as a representation of resistance and rebellion against domination (Fairbrother Canton, 2009; Hogsette, 1997; LaCombe, 1986; Stein, 1991). As a “hidden transcript” her story conflicts with the public stories told about her and her role as a Handmaid (Hansot, 1994). In telling her story then, Offred positions herself as a dissident offering a counter-construction of her reality.

While Offred is a writer, she comes to writing her tale by way of an accident of reading. While there is much scholarship that discusses Offred's labour as a writer, there is little discussion of her as a reader, and of how her world is reconfigured through an accident in reading. Unlike the cases analyzed in previous chapters, Offred's accident in reading is not dramatic: there are no tears, no yelling, and no immediate rush to action. She stumbles into reading by accident and her encounter forms a unique contrast case where the three

qualities of a reading accident are indeed present but appear in slightly altered form. To account for this difference, my chapter proceeds by way of demonstrating how each of the three qualities of an accident are represented within the broader context of Atwood's novel. In particular, I discuss the accident's surprise as owing to how Offred's reading contravenes state-sponsored censorship, and how the inscrutable meaning of the text permit's her a wild re-interpretation of her own circumstance. Additionally, while there is a quietude to Offred's accident, this stillness does not belie the affective intensity of her reading: the written words "nolite te bastardes carborundorum" become for this reader a touching experience that moves her to imagine her survival into a dark future.

### **"In the corner where the darkest shadow fell"**

In previous chapters, I described how Munro's character Del Jordan and Kogawa's character Naomi Nakane could not have anticipated their respective accidents in reading. For both of these fictional figures, an unnerving encounter with another's words seems to come from nowhere. Both readers find themselves blindsided, taken by surprise when their reading of another's words suddenly morphs into a reading of their inner worlds. This too is the case for Offred however, her accident in reading is itself an unbelievable event. In a world where the written world is eradicated, Offred does not even expect to find any words to read. Women of the fictional Republic of Gilead are strictly forbidden to read or write – literacy is deemed an enticement denied to all women and secreted away by men. The four words she finds carved into her closet wall are words she is not allowed nor meant to see—"Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" having been left behind by a stranger and found only by accident.

This social and political context of Offred's accident is crucial to understanding its profound significance for Offred and for my reading of the case. Set in a near-future time when birthrates have fallen well below replacement value, Gilead is a nation-state preoccupied with raising birthrates by way of returning to conservative family values and deeply misogynist political policy. The territory once known as the United States is a highly-militarized nation rife with paranoia, persecution, and shockingly cruel physical and psychological violences. Most notably, in my consideration of Offred's social position and state of mind, this theocratic dictatorship has shrewdly curtailed women's rights and

freedoms: women's bank accounts are transferred to male relatives, women can no longer work for pay, "unwomen" are exiled, and all remaining fertile women have been forcibly removed from their families to begin training as "handmaids".

Assigned the occupation as a handmaid, Offred is indentured to Fred and Serena Waterford, a heterosexual couple who have been unable to conceive a child. As a surrogate for this couple, Offred's life is highly prescribed by a rigid set of rules and religious rituals that limit her physical movement and social interactions. Valued only for her potential reproductive capacity, Offred is clear that she and other handmaids "...are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans...there are to be no footholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 1986, p. 170–171). Similarly, her name, in and of itself signifies her as being "Of Fred: a shorthand marking her diminished status as the mere property of a man, and the same name given to past and future handmaids of Fred Waterford. Women in this calling are indispensable and yet each is interchangeable for another.

Offred's epistolary telling – literally, a handmaid's tale–testifies to several physical violations and violence perpetrated against women, and especially Handmaids. In the Republic of Gilead women are raped, maimed, hung, electrocuted, tortured, shot, and limbs are amputated for even minor transgressions. Next to these physical violences, the prohibition against reading seems minor at first, but as the narrative develops the totality of this prohibition becomes increasingly eerie as we learn how it's bolstered by the physical environment, prescribed social relations, and through Offred's forced re-education as a handmaid.

At a physical level, most books have been destroyed within Gilead and the few remaining are kept under strict lock and key. Regarded as an "incendiary device" (Atwood, 1986, p. 108), even the bible is hidden away. Likewise, printed words are removed from consumer products and street signs are replaced with visual symbols: a red hexagon erased of letters is now taken to mean "stop", (Atwood, 1986, p. 24); stores are referred to only by images on their outside signage. For instance, the butcher shop is signified by a wooden pork chop hanging outside the store and is referred to colloquially (and painfully literally) by the name "All Flesh" (Atwood, 1986, p. 34). Despite efforts however, to remove the written word from public space, there is an eerie palimpsest inscribed beneath this censorship: although

the local dress shop bears a picture of a lily in place of a printed name, Offred notes that “you can see the place, under the lily where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation. Now places are known by their signs alone” (Atwood, 1986, p. 31). Despite official efforts to erase the written word, Offred’s knowledge of and longing for literacy persists.

The palimpsest reveals itself in the trace of inscription but also in memory. In Gilead, there is memory of a time before and of how this new world came to be. All are familiar with the story of how women who were once able to read are now not permitted to read themselves. Instead they can only be read to. Here, to borrow Marshall McLuhan’s famous phrase, the medium is the message – at least insofar as the orator’s authority is reinscribed by his privileged access to the written word. As Offred describes:

Our heads turn towards him, we are expectant, here comes our bedtime story... He takes his time, as if unconscious of us. He’s like a man toying with a steak, behind a restaurant window, pretending not to see the eyes watching him from hungry darkness not three feet from his elbow. We lean towards him a little, iron filings to his magnet. He has something we don’t have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once (Atwood, 1986, p. 108–110).

In a startlingly literal-minded dictatorship such as Gilead there is little room for interpretive practice attesting to the power of reading. Here, the ritual of being read to is an attempt to disrupt the radical-communion of meaning typically passing between reader and writer. In Gilead, being read to ensures that words will not be misunderstood, that one’s reading will not go astray. Indeed, the perceived danger is not thought to lie in any particular book in and of itself, but in what women might make of a book (Atwood, 1986, p. 108) – danger lies in the unknown affect and ideas that could be provoked or roused by another’s words.

Offred is first brought into a practice of reading propagated by prescribed meanings at the Rachel and Leah Centre which has a re-education mandate for all future handmaids. During breakfast, lunch and dinner at a facility that houses only women, an audio tape is played for residents so as to dodge the “sin of reading” (Atwood, 1986, p. 110): “for lunch is was the Beatitudes. Blessed be this, blessed be that. They played it from a tape...[and] the voice was a man’s” (Atwood, 1986, p. 110). The Rachel and Leah Centre might be

described at best as an extreme version of what Freire (2008) called the “banking model” of education and at worst, brainwashing. In the Rachel and Leah Centre, while teachers read, handmaids are called to memorize and recite aloud religious doctrine and state laws that establish a new reality within which they hold subordinate status. Here, as in Freire’s (2008) analysis, “words are emptied of their concreteness and become hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity” (p. 71). Things become “lifeless and petrified” –this goes for state doctrine and for those upon whom such doctrine is imposed (Freire, 2008, p. 71). The lectures piped-in to the handmaids mean everything and nothing at once: words can mean only what they are said to mean, nothing more and nothing less. This re-education aims to impose a single interpretive frame, to foreclose, truncate, or make smaller women’s capacity to read their world: in this education there is no room for interpretive play, no ambiguity, and no possibility of women’s readings gone awry. In other words, there is no chance for learning.

It is this cruel pedagogical mandate, alongside merciless physical and social conditions prohibiting reading, that make Offred’s literary encounter so unexpected. At every turn, Offred’s life has been regimented by others who aim to prohibit her literacy: handmaids have been stripped of interpretive authority in their re-education, physical texts have been removed from the public world, and social mores exclude women from literacy. In Gilead, the powers that be have seemingly thought of everything. And yet. In a world where books are kept in lockdown, and women are blinded for daring to peer at a printed sentence, Offred finds herself, quite by accident, tête-à-tête with an unknown author.

Forbidden to read, this highly improbable literary encounter occurs right under the nose of a powerful Gileadean family: The Waterfords. Under the watchful eye of Commander Waterford, Offred could not have expected to ever read again, nevermind to find a text to read in the home a family entrusted to police her literacy. Atwood’s representation of Offred’s initial reading of the phrase “Nolite te bastardes carborondorum” hints at the unlikelihood of this literary encounter. Having little to do after completing her duties for the family, Offred stumbles on this text while exploring her ascetic bedroom:

I saved the cupboard until the third day...I knelt to examine the floor, and there it was, in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell: Nolite te bastardes carborondorum (Atwood, 1986, p. 65).

*In the corner where the darkest shadow fell*, something is read. Reading in the darkest shadow depicts Offred's dire situation of forced existence in a physically dark space, and in a psychically dark time. And yet, it is in this dark time and space where she stumbles into a reading that overtakes and will come to enliven her life. Against all odds, and contrary to the rule of the land, Offred finds words that are open for interpretation and call her into an intense communion with their imagined author.

### **“I didn’t know any Latin”**

Offred's reading occurs in dark shadow, revealing writing in an unknown language. To say that she encounters words open for interpretation here is an understatement: these words are radically open for interpretation as Offred meets them first as gibberish, gobbledygook, nonsense. Unable to share her discovery of these words with others, or seek out a translation dictionary, she is thwarted from decoding what this text *really* means. And yet she seamlessly, and nearly instantaneously, makes something from nothing –makes meaningful words that defy denotative translation:

I didn't know what it meant, or even what language it was in. I thought it might be Latin, but I didn't know any Latin. Still, it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next (Atwood, 1986, p. 65).

What matters here is not the content of this message, but the fact that Offred has received a message at all – the *existence* of writing is meaning enough for this reader prohibited to read. In contrast to the reading accidents discussed in previous chapters, Offred's accident does not represent a collapse of cognitive meaning-making where sense mutates into nonsense. Rather, having encountered words that cannot be rationally comprehended, Offred swiftly disregards concern for what these words could *really* mean. She does not immediately seek out a Latin–English translation dictionary, nor does she speculate as to the author's intentions: she will make sense of these words by other means.

Another way in which Offred's accident in reading is different from earlier cases is that she is not upset by the fact that she cannot rationally decode these four words. Caught in the muck of words that don't make proper sense she does not cry or shout, she does not spew vitriol or fling her body away from the enflaming text. Rather, without recourse to

intellect, Offred's wild reading is guided by her passionate and unruly insides. Like the baby who must first try to make sense of her world without adequate symbolic resources, Offred's reading of this phrase does not follow rational process but rather, is a bit "wild". I borrow this adjective from Tarc's (2013) concept of "wild reading" (p. 537), used to describe the less rational means by which we read our circumstances and relations to others. This interpretive mode is aligned with Virginia Woolf's (1923) brief description of "the wild horse" in *Jacob's Room*: how we can "blame it or praise it, [but] there is no denying the wild horse in us. To gallop intemperately; fall on the sand tired out; [and] to feel the earth spin...there is no getting over the fact that this desire seizes us pretty often" (p. 113).

Offred's wild readings of "nolite te bastardes carborundorum" make sense from nonsense turning the phrase into a password, a prayer and, a command to action. Firstly, she reads this phrase as a clandestine password – a message passed to Offred "for whom it was intended" (Atwood, 1986, p. 65) in a dark corner of her room. Like passwords whispered to allow passage to a secret club, "nolite te bastardes cardorundorum" is, for Offred, a code that signifies the existence of an underground resistance that she hopes to gain membership to. Secondly, Offred reads this phrase as a prayer to silently commune with God:

I pray silently: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. I don't know what it means, but it sounds right, and it will have to do, because I don't know what else I can say to God. Not right now. Not, as they used to say, at this juncture (Atwood, 1986, p. 113).

In moments of anguish, Offred rereads this text directing her reading towards a God who might hear her existential need: in trying to grapple with the physical abuse of one of her friends, Offred cries out "Oh God...*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. Is this what you had in mind?" (Atwood, 1986, p. 114). Thirdly, while Offred turns to this phrase for spiritual comfort, she also reads *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* as a command to fight –a rallying cry for feminist activism against a state that subjugates women. Following Hulu's television adaptation of the novel, this has become a popular reading of the phrase (Bradley, 2017; Caplan–Bricker, 2017; Nussbaum, 2017; Onstad, 2017). Yet, in the novel Offred expresses, at moments, an ambivalence toward this injunction. For example, having learned that the handmaid most likely to have authored *nolite te bastardes carborundorum* hanged herself in the bedroom that Offred now sleeps in, she begins to second-guess the potential costs of dissidence:

I don't have to tell [my story]. I don't have to tell anything, to myself or to anyone else. I could just sit here, peacefully. I could withdraw...

Nolite te bastardes carborundorum. Fat lot of good it did her.

Why fight?

That will never do. (Atwood, 1986, p. 281)

Offred's thought leaps quickly in this passage, and her negations cloud a clear reading. Though initially emboldened to compose a testimony, Offred momentarily feels that this "fight" might be futile if one doesn't live to see her words read and her world made different. Sure: the handmaid-author's life may not have been made good by having etched "nolite te bastardes carborundorum" into the wall of a closet. However, in this moment and in her question "Why fight?" Offred confronts how having read this phrase *has* done her some good. Namely, although she does not know what the phrase means, or even what language in which it is written, Offred nonetheless reads this writing as a relation that helps her imagine that maybe things could be different.

## Tracing traces by way of feeling

In place of rational translations and critical faculties Offred makes meaningful unreadable words by way of feeling her way through the text. In fact, all Offred has to go on is feeling as her first reading occurs in the dark. In place of sight, Offred *traces* with her fingertips letters etched into wood:

...Here I am in the closet. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. I can't see it in the dark but I trace the tiny scratched writing with the ends of my fingers, as if it's a code in braille...an ancient hieroglyph to which the key's been lost (Atwood, 1986, p. 184).

Atwood's representation of Offred's first reading here is evocative. The character is cramped into a dark closet extending her hand to feel out the words someone else has traced into the wall. As a verb, the work of tracing can describe two different kinds of activity: that of finding or investigating something unknown ("tracing a white Ford Bronco..."), or that of copying something by superimposing a piece of transparent paper on top of an original (as an architect traces design elements). As a noun, a trace can at refer to an indication confirming the likely existence of something (traces of previous water damage),



or it can refer to the existence of something so small it barely merits mention (“trace amounts of nuts or other allergens”).

Across these varied uses of the word trace, two qualities stand out to me. Firstly, to trace as Derrida (1998) suggests, is to acknowledge and inscribe a relation to an other. In reading, a trace signifies the presence of an other – an author who is now absent, but who we nonetheless connect with via their trace (Derrida, 1998). Secondly, the existence of even a tiny trace can have great significance for one’s reading and life. As Derrida (2005) reminds, there is always “the itinerant work of the trace, producing and following its route, the trace which traces, the trace which breaks open its own path” (p. 269). This breaking open of a new path is one way of thinking about “the seminal adventure of the trace” (Derrida, 2005, p. 369) – an adventure that Offred could not have prepared for, but can also not refuse.

For Offred, reading “*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*” is first and foremost evidence of an other’s existence – her meeting with these words cracking open a desire for relations beyond those that have been imposed upon her. Literally extending a hand outside the self, Offred’s desire for tactile perception in place of the visual can be read as a window into her emotional need to touch and be touched by the text. Paradoxically, and terribly, being touched is an experience she knows too well. Offred physically touches and is touched by others throughout the novel: she is beaten and electrocuted in a re-education program, prodded by doctors who monitor her fertility, coerced into participating in a “Lottery”-esque sacrifice, shares in intimate birthing rituals with other handmaids, and is regularly sexually assaulted by the Waterfords during her tenure in their home. For Handmaids in Gilead there is no shortage of physical contact. Offred’s encounter with these words in the closet however, upset these patterns and reveal an other way of touching and being touched. That is, as Offred privately lays her fingertips across letters etched into wood, her isolation and loneliness is pierced with startling consequence. The words receive her touch, her need to communicate with another and return her need back to her. Her affective relation to these words is immediate and heady for she is “ravenous for news, any kind of news; [because] even if it’s false news, it must mean something” (Atwood, 1986, p. 24). The “news” of Offred’s reading here is the news of an other’s existence – an other with a story, however brief, that lies outside the repressive society and rigidly circumscribed and brutal relations orchestrated by the state. Reading these words etched into her closet –literally closeted

from the view of others, Offred is thrust into a deeply passionate liaison with an unknown other away from watchful eyes. There is indeed something mistakenly sensual about her reading by feeling up the words in the darkness of her closet, resounding with Barthes' (1975) description of reading's sensuality and power:

...for the text, it produces in me, the best pleasure if it manages to make itself heard indirectly; if, in reading it, I am led to look up often, to listen to something else (p. 24).

These words in Offred's closet are at once a trace of someone else and a call to trace and interpret their uncertain meaning— *to look up....to listen* otherwise to an other who cannot be known directly but who's inviting trace is nonetheless felt. This encounter, and its affective reverberations, is immensely pleasurable for Offred and she begins to imagine the person of the author she is now in conversation with:

...It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman...It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened and read by me (Atwood, 1986, p. 65).

Like the young infant for whom meaning-making hinges on an other's gift of words, Offred's encounter with this graffiti spurs interpretive work as she traces the trace of another from these cryptic words. Driven by her desire for an other inscribed by her words, thoughts race as Offred imagines the author with whom she is communing:

...When I imagine the woman who wrote [these words], I think of her as about my age, maybe a little younger. I turn her into Moira, Moira as she was in college, in the room next to mine: quirky, jaunty, athletic, with a bicycle once, and a knapsack for hiking. Freckles, I think; irreverent, resourceful.

I wonder who she was or is, and what's become of her (Atwood, 1986, p. 65).

Overcome with positive affect from her encounter with four words of graffiti, Offred churns this affect into thoughts about an "Offred" who came before her and was similarly confined to this same bedroom. She fictionalizes this handmaid into a person named Moira, a real person she remembers from the days before this time. This imagined author is not the same person but a person who resembles someone she once knew in the days when she too was not Offred but herself. Offred brings all her yearning to this text and its author –

her desire for another life, or a life she once knew. Projecting traces of her memory and psychological need onto this text, Offred makes an unknown author into an old friend – an old friend that she can identify with and imagine surviving alongside.

Offred's transference with the text exceeds her psychological need during this dark time in her life. In particular, while reading in the shadow of her closet, the words of someone else offer to Offred a tiny sliver of light and lightness. Feeling her way through this sliver of connection is pleasurable for Offred and, as she repeats the unreadable words to herself, she confesses that "they give [her] a small joy" (Atwood, 1986, p. 65). This "small joy" is an example of the second sense of the word "trace" –as a noun, a trace refers to a very small quantity that might even be too small to empirically measure. Even though a "trace" might elude precise measurement, we know that "trace" quantities nonetheless matter: trace amounts of tree nuts have shaped school lunch policies, and the ability to detect trace amounts of steroids have dramatically changed a number of professional sports. Likewise, in the scene of reading the presence of a single word can make all the difference because what's important here is not the denotative meaning of the word itself but the dynamic relation that word suggests for the reader (Britzman, 1998a, p. 10).

In Offred's case, the mere trace of an other occasions a trace of joy and marks an important turning point in the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her accidental encounter with an other's words produces in her "a small joy" – a frisson of delight when most pleasures have been denied. To say that Offred's accident in reading gives her a small joy is not to say that her experience maps onto my own breezy beach read with a pina colada in hand. Rather, for Offred, her trace experience of joy while reading comes to effect change first in her internal world, and then in her relation to the world at large. In her consideration of hope and political action, Solnit (2016) describes well how joy is integral to one's nascent capacity for resistance and psychological survival. In times of difficulty, loss, or frustration, Solnit (2016) insists that:

Joy sneaks in anyway, abundance cascades forth uninvited...joy doesn't betray but sustains activism. And when you face a politics that aspires to make you fearful, alienated, and isolated, joy is a fine initial act of insurrection (p. 24).

Offred's reading of these four unreadable words is indeed an initial act of insurrection not only because she is forbidden to read, but more importantly for how this reading calls her into a relation that reshapes what she imagines possible for her life. Specifically, both the reader and writer of "nolite te bastardes carborundorm" face a dark future –which, according to Virginia Woolf is "the best thing the future can be" (Cited in Solnit, 2016, p. 1). On first reading, a dark future sounds like a grim prognosis, Solnit however insists that the future's darkness is precisely what grounds the possibility of hope and political resistance. In her explication of Woolf's position, she elaborates:

Dark, [Woolf] seems to say, as in inscrutable, not as in terrible. We often mistake the one for the other. Or we transform the future's unknowability into something certain, the fulfillment of all our dread, the place beyond which there is no way forward (Solnit, 2016, p. 1).

While Offred has no shortage of reasons to believe that her future might be terrible, her fluke accident in reading and her communion with the text's unknown author remind that one can never know for certain what is coming around the bend. In her experience of an accident in reading then, Offred moves from seeing her future's darkness as necessarily terrible to consider, as Solnit (2016), that "the future is dark, [but] with a darkness as much of the womb as the grave" (p. 5). Diverging from the cases analyzed in previous chapters then, Offred is not psychically undone by her accident in reading. She is not reduced to shambles at the feet of trauma's repressed or failed to be repressed content as Naomi Nakane is. Nor does she find herself biting off more than she can psychically "chew" as Munro represents in Del Jordan's greedy accident. Offred's accident in reading does not so much present her with an existential conflict as her identification with the author propels her into a more reparative reading of her existential circumstances.

## **Reparative reading as a life skill**

Offred's accident in reading opens up an unexpected opportunity for her to reparatively re-read her own life from a different interpretive vantage. Klein's sense for the work of reparation is grounded in the depressive position which is an "anxiety-mitigating achievement" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 128) for the infant: a state of mind where one is able, however briefly, to hold love and hate together and reassemble part-objects that were earlier destroyed in phantasy. For Klein's infant, this movement to a more depressive

orientation is driven by guilt felt in consequence of the sadistic attacks assailed on the mother. Klein (1964) describes the promise of reparation: “all these [attacks], in phantasy, we may undo in retrospect” (p. 68). In her clinical work, Klein (1986d) observed this reparative desire to make good in drawings and paintings where patients used aesthetic work as a “means to make people anew”, at least in the mind (p. 93). Although the depressive position is indeed an achievement for the infant –crucial to sublimation and mental health, Klein (1986g) is careful to note that it is not a telos of development (p. 48). Twinning the depressive and paranoid schizoid positions, she writes that “side by side with the destructive impulses in the unconscious mind...there exists a profound urge to make sacrifices, in order to help and to put right loved people who in phantasy have been harmed or destroyed” (Klein 1964, p. 65–66). Throughout one’s life then, there is an oscillation between these two positions as we do not leave behind our earliest means of dealing with bad feelings and conflict.

Moving Klein’s concept of reparation into the field of scholarly criticism, Sedgwick (2003) postulates that there are likewise depressive and reparative orientations to knowledge production. In particular, her essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re so Paranoid, you Probably Think this Essay is about you” (Sedgwick 2003) offers reparative reading as a corrective to the knowing, masterful, paranoid readings that she saw dominating scholarly discourse. To my mind, the distinguishing quality of paranoid reading is the insistence that “there must be no bad surprises” or, put otherwise “that bad news be always already known” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 130). In consequence, paranoid reading performs a hatred (or denial) of newness that often manifests as a commitment to what is already-known. By contrast, reparative reading practices arise from one’s willingness to be surprised, and an expectation that surprise is, in fact, “realistic and necessary...because [if] there can be terrible surprises...there can also be good ones” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 146). The capaciousness in reparative reading reminds me of two seemingly disparate scenes: the improv comedienne Tina Fey insisting that the first rule of improv is to “say, ‘yes’” to what your partner creates onstage and Derrida (2000) claiming that we must “say *yes to who or what turns up*” (p. 77) when it comes to the ethics of hospitality. Though I can’t imagine a meeting between these two figures, their almost devil-may-care orientation represents well reparative reading’s openness to encounters with others. This is not to say however, that reading reparatively is simply deferral to the

other. Rather, in working to put pieces back together, reparative readings hold together love and hate, good and bad in service of constructing complex representations of the self and other. A product of depressive anxiety, reparative readings can be seen to stake out interpretations that defy all-or-nothing logics to tell stories that lie somewhere between bleak despair and naïve hope.

In Offred's case, an accident in reading moves her to re-read her circumstances from a more reparative perspective and consider that not all has been lost and that, as Sedgwick (2003) puts it, "the future may be different from the present" (p. 146). While her material conditions are dark in the sense that they are difficult to bear, Offred's accident in reading—in its unexpectedness and affective saliency, impress upon her the fact that the future is also dark: inscrutable, unknowable, but perhaps not as difficult as her present. Offred's shift toward a more reparative reading position has great significance for the novel's plot<sup>5</sup>. In particular, her accident in reading marks a turning point where she begins to replace the narratives that have hurt her with a story of her own—a story she can live by for now. This aesthetic work is done from the depressive position: Offred's narration holding together love and hate, pain and pleasure in a story that represents the complexity of her inner life and her relations with others. This story that Offred tells is, as Georgis (2014) describes, "not a compensation for suffering, but a return (and reparation) of suffering" (p. 13). That

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<sup>5</sup> Here, I celebrate the effects and reparative potential of Offred's accident in reading—how, in an accident in reading, she comes to see that her future might be different from her past. This is a position that most women in Gilead cannot imagine, and one that would be virtually impossible for women of colour whose subjugation has been exponentially compounded in white supremacist Gilead. Modern critiques that have blossomed with the adaptation of the novel into a television series suggest that *The Handmaid's Tale* doesn't substantively engage with questions of race and intersectionality. How while drawing extensively on narratives of black women who were enslaved, the novel misappropriates these narratives into a white feminist fantasy that further silences and erases the historical realities of women of colour (Bastién, 2017; McDonald, 2017; Mitovich, 2017; Priya, 2017).

This is a compelling critique, and yet I don't think that it gives adequate weight to the critical and satirical elements of the novel. After all, Atwood's epigraph quotes from Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" in which the author suggests that poor Irish families might sell their children *as food* to increase their household income. In the novel, there is one scene in particular that captures Atwood's satire and its function as social critique. Secretly called to Commander Waterford's private quarters, Offred catches a glimpse of his ambivalence about the society that he and his compatriots have built: "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs...We thought we could do better...[but] better never means better for everyone...it always means worse, for some" (Atwood, 1986, p. 264). In this passage, Waterford reckons with the unanticipated effects of making things "better" for some. Namely, that making things better for some risks making things worse for others—despite best intentions. So too, does Offred grapple with her relative privilege in the novel, this subject positioning however does not necessitate that we, as readers, in 2018 disregard the psychical significance of her "better story—a concept that I discuss further below.

is, her narration cannot undo or erase painful history, but signifies a shift into a depressive position from which she can differently read her past, present, and future in ways that might better support her survival. Rejecting the state-led proselytizing and “banking” style re-education she has received, Offred records her narrative onto an audio tape, endeavouring to tell a story that better represents her experience as a handmaid and her hope for the future. The resulting narrative is *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Though we later learn that this narrative was composed after her departure from the Waterford home readers are nonetheless addressed by Offred’s testimony:

It’s a story I’m telling, in my head, as I go along...But if it’s a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don’t tell a story only to yourself. There’s always someone else.

Even when there is no one.

A story is like a letter. *Dear You*. I’ll say. Just *you*, without a name.

...[and] if it’s a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don’t tell a story only to yourself. There’s always someone else. (Atwood, 1986, p. 50).

As Offred is addressed by the author of the words “nolite te bastardes carborundorum” we, as readers are in turn addressed by Offred’s words: *Dear you*. In particular, we hear what Georgis (2014) calls a “better story” (p. 1)– a story that serves as an emotional resource through which Offred can begin to imagine her own survival. Georgis’ (2014) conceptualization of the “better story” is grounded in a conviction that “we are not obligated to live by the stories that no longer help us to live well” (p. 26). Rather, she suggests that a better story can capture what (still) remains possible in dark times, or, how “in our stories we can “imagine our safety,...resist threat...construct [new] terms of community, [and] find ego ideals” (Georgis, 2014, p. 2) that can allow us to go on living.

Offred’s accident in reading inaugurates just such meaning-making work: having made something from her accident with the unreadable words in her closet, this experience compels her to re-make sense of her own experiences as a handmaid. Her readerly communion with this unknown author moves her to tell a better story of her own life, though this story is not without ambivalence, anxiety, or conflict:

I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light...I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one's life...I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force... (Atwood, 1986, p. 333).

Offred's better story does not deny the suffering and violence of her reality – it exchanges certain despair for a hopefulness grounded in the uncertainty of the future. Indeed, in her reading of Offred's storytelling, Stein (1991) argues that, regardless of plot or content, “the act of storytelling itself... is a gesture of hope, of love, of reaching for connection with other readers and hearers” (p. 278). In this way, Offred's reparative accident in reading has not so much hastened a “sunny everything-is-getting-better” narrative, but moved her to consider a new story that at very least “may be a counter to the everything-is-getting-worse narrative” (Solnit, 2016, p. xiv) most commonly seen in paranoid readings.

Offred's tale, occasioned by an accident in reading represents how, in dark times, reading the stories of others can open up a space where one can make better stories of and for the self as a method of survival. Indeed, what is most moving (and possibly most instructive) about Offred's accident in reading is how just a tiny trace of someone else's story – a mere four words, has such significant effect on this fictional reader. “Effects are not proportionate to causes” (Solnit, 2016, p. 61) and this is no more true than when it comes to reading and its accidents where one cannot know in advance how the story of someone else might touch the self, and help make possible their psychical survival in the world of others. In Offred's case, her accident in reading does not allow her to physically find a way out of Gilead, but its chance occurrence does allow her to find a way out of stories that cause her pain, and a way into a story she can live by. This is not always the case –as my earlier chapters suggest, accidents in reading can also leave one weeping in shambles when the words of someone else touch on tender internal conflicts or open wounds. Offred's accident in reading nonetheless reminds that with the possibility of terrible accidents in reading comes the possibility of good, or hopeful accidents in reading as well: reading can radically affect one's life even if it cannot change the conditions of one's life. Likewise, the value of Atwood's novel does not lie in its predictive capacities but in how this made-up story might help us come to tell better stories about our own dark times – stories that tell of a future we do not yet know, a future that is, thankfully, dark.



## Chapter 6. Conclusion

In an interview with the New York Times, Tayari Jones (2018) shared that, “the dreamiest setup for reading is a hardcover book and a first-class seat on an overseas flight. I accepted a gig in Dubai just for 18 hours of luxurious reading time”. In the company of strangers, Jones finds comfort in hours of communion with authors of fiction who are also strangers. The indulgence of incidental “found” pockets of reading time also finds representation in literature. In Schlink’s (1997) *The Reader* for instance, fictional protagonist Michael muses about the pleasure of devouring stacks of novels in bed while recovering from hepatitis:

The outside world...is only a distant murmur in the sickroom. Inside a whole world of characters and stories proliferates out of the books you read. The fever that weakens your perception as it sharpens your imagination turns the sickroom into someplace new, both familiar and strange (p. 17–18).

Confined to bed-rest, his reading of novels makes of Michael’s convalescence a reprieve from reality. He explains that in this “enchanted” time there are:

... hours without sleep, which is not to say that they’re sleepless, because on the contrary, they’re not about lack of anything, they’re rich and full. Desires, memories, fears, passions form labyrinths in which we lose and find and then lose ourselves again. They are the hours when anything is possible, good or bad (Schlink, 1997, p. 18).

Here Michael describes a kind of fever dream conjured as much from physical illness as from his psychical encounters with literature. Away from the pressures of life outside his bedroom “anything is possible” as there is a melding of his internal stories of self with the stories of other authors.

Resting in bed with my third confirmed case of strep throat in as many months, I read Hanya Yanagihara’s (2015) *A Little Life* to similar effect. Although *A Little Life* at first appears to be a novel that will track the lives of four men whose friendship began in college, we quickly learn that it is Jude’s devastating history that will take front stage. How, save for a (literal) handful of characters, nearly every other person Jude comes to know will beat, rape, humiliate, or otherwise harm him. The abuses are gruesome and too many to list. And, for many readers, Jude’s sufferings are too much to bear. On social media readers have spoken about compulsively crying while reading the book on public transit, locking

themselves away for days to endure the novel in private and, needing *A Little Life* crisis hotline to cope with the emotional fallout from reading. As I read Yanagihara's novel, I sobbed through Jude's interminable sufferings to the point that I had to put the book down swearing that I would not continue, that I couldn't bear to witness his pain any more. There was, I felt, something unkind or wrong about continuing to read what some have described as a voyeuristic work of tragedy porn. I felt bad, as if I was somehow contributing to Jude's pain in my reading about it. I figured that if I stopped reading I might feel better, and Jude's pains might also stop.

I know that this makes no sense: my reading (or not reading) would have no impact on the life course of Yanagihara's fictional character. Quitting however, momentarily mitigated the guilt and dread I felt whenever I picked up the book. And yet, like an addict struggling with sobriety I could not give up the novel that so appalled me: I would put the book down and vow to stop, but each time I would somehow justify returning to the morass of abuse and hurt making up Jude's life. I have never felt so ambivalently about reading a novel: I was obsessed, despite myself, and read *A Little Life* cover to cover over the Easter long weekend. Watching from my apartment window the Good Friday procession of St. Casimir's Roman Catholic Church on Roncesvalles Avenue, it did not escape me that as I despaired over the miseries of a make-believe character, parishioners similarly bore witness to the 14 Stations of the Cross depicting the agonies of another figure.

In her review of *A Little Life*, Maslin (2015) notes that the novel's difficulty owes in large part to Jude's "relentless downhill trajectory" where, from babyhood onwards he experiences abuse at the hands of "sadists who simply defy belief". In her estimation "the full parade of [these abusers] adds up to almost more misery than one novel can contain" (Maslin, 2015). Maslin is not alone in her sense that *A Little Life* represents a gruelling story of suffering, unlike any other contemporary survivor narrative or misery memoir. Mendelsohn (2015), in his scathing critique of the novel (which provoked a heated response from Yanagihara's editor) suggests that the excessive quantity of degradation experienced by Jude will not only alienate readers, but that "the abuse that Yanagihara heaps on her protagonist is neither just from a human point of view nor necessary from an artistic one". His charge being that Yanagihara has gone one step too far, her gratuitous scenes of abuse "dupe" readers into feeling something –an aim that more skilled novelists

accomplish by less mawkish means (Mendelsohn, 2015). While Michaud (2015) celebrates how Yanagihara refuses the reader consolation in a happy ending he likewise confesses that *A Little Life* will “drive you mad, consume you, and take over your life” as you are drawn into Jude’s world that is, by and large, unlivable.

This is precisely the conflict that Yanagihara hoped to represent, sharing in an interview that she is skeptical about whether “life is the answer to life – [if] one should always keep on living” (Cited in Digges, 2016). In her novel, she hoped to provoke in readers a question about the limits of repair “want[ing] them to think about if there’s a point in which a life becomes unlivable ” (Yanagihara as cited in Digges, 2016). This is a daring question. One that, despite critics’ and readers’ difficulty, Yanagihara insists falls within the purview of fiction to ask. Responding to charges that her novel might be too much for one reader to emotionally bear, Yanagihara (2016) asks, in all sincerity:

...as readers, don’t we read fiction exactly to be upset? A novel, in its truest form, is a questioning of what it means to be human, of what a life is. But what makes it different from, say, a work of philosophical inquiry is, among other things, the way it uses (or misuses, or differently uses) language and, second, the particular sense of discomfiture it can provide. Not that a novel needs to disturb or dismay or unsettle in order to mesmerise or provoke, but it does, or should, force us to reconsider, to rethink.

Nonplussed as readers and critics have their hearts broken by her novel, Yanagihara ascribes to a theory of reading that not only has space for affective “upset” but positions readers’ “discomfiture” as central to literacy itself. In fact, Yanagihara’s tongue-in-cheek question above almost implies that readers are “asking for it” –“it” being a moment in reading where they feel more, less, or differently than expected while reading.

Yanagihara’s defence of “upset” in reading strikes at the heart of this dissertation – at how, the experience of upset, as represented in an accident in reading, is not purely accidental, not strictly an out-of-the-blue, unprecedented event. Rather, as Freud claimed that there are no jokes, that bungled actions always point elsewhere, this dissertation suggests that there are no accidents— the over-the-top experiences in reading analyzed in the preceding chapters each erupting out of the unconscious, churning object relations of the reader and the existential questions that most preoccupy them. While readers of *A Little Life* (myself included) were wracked with and shocked by their own unbearable feelings, Yanagihara

earnestly wonders: What, exactly, were you expecting? With an ear to my own hubris, I hear her asking: Have you forgotten of that earlier, murky time when reading truly felt like you were figuring out “what it means to be human, of what a life is” before you had words? Indeed, the fictional characters discussed in previous chapters each confront an accident in reading imbued with their own burning question of “what a life is”. For Del, Naomi, and Offred an accident in reading occasions a collision with an existential question, and in the in-between space among reader, author and story these scenes become a space to entertain and engage possible answers. In concluding this study I highlight how each fictional accident in reading engages some facet of the question of what a life is. How, although these accidents in reading appear different from each other, each fictional character confronts, in their own way, a question about their own humanness.

On the precipice of adolescence, the unbearable question driving Del’s greedy accident in reading hangs on the problem of need and appetite. In particular, across the field from her parents Del, in her reading, feels out a world beyond the securities and certainties her family has provided. Uncle Benny’s tabloid papers tell of a world where anything is possible – even the most terrible, cruel, and brutal things. Representations of this world bring promise but also renewed anxiety akin to that of infancy where one’s safety and satisfaction was wholly in the hands of others. As Del accidentally falls into and then proceeds to stuff herself with these bizarre tales, we sense that there is something more at stake – some behind-the-scenes hunger that can’t be sated. In my analysis I suggest that Del’s insatiable hunger delivers to her, and to us as readers, old news. Del’s greed for Uncle Benny’s tabloid newspapers harkens back to her, and our shared history of needing others, of how our survival was, and continues to be dependent on others. The first felt questions in infancy do not go away, are not answered once and for all as adolescent Del wonders: Do I have enough nurturance? Will there be enough for me? Will I be sustained with what I get?

In *Obasan*, Naomi’s accident in reading similarly reckons with a question of what resides within the self –in particular, of a traumatic experience taken in, but never taken *up*, never made meaningful to her. While there are historical “leftovers” she can put words to, there remains something in Naomi’s readerly archive that is not properly hers but nonetheless comes to interfere with her reading. In her case, it is again an accidental stumble into a

news story that provokes an eruption of affect and jumbled testimony to her time on the Barker farm which was too shocking and too painful to have been made meaningful at the time. What upsets about Naomi's accident in reading is how in reading the words of a stranger she is brought to meeting her own strange and estranged traumatic experience. In reading, one encounters the strangeness of others, but what might prove more frightening is the strangeness that resides within – that which cannot be known or said aloud but may nonetheless be touched-off in reading an other's line of prose. I am reminded here of Thomas' (2014) *We Are Not Ourselves*, an epic multi-generational novel that represents the ripple effects of one family member's early-onset Alzheimer's. Thomas' title might just as easily describe readers' lament that a made-up story could cause one to wonder: Who *am I*? Who do I think I am?

Lastly, grappling with despair and paranoia bred by state violence, Offred's chance reading proves to be a catalytic moment for her capacity to imagine survival, even as her dire material circumstances remain unchanged. What is particularly unique about Offred's accident in reading is the fact that she does not know the English translation of this Latin phrase. Cognition holds no purchase here as she reads this illegible sentence by way of feeling with an unknown author whose words move Offred to tell a story she can better live by even as her life trajectory remains severely delimited. In English, the phrase “*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*” roughly translates to mean “don't let the bastards grind you down” and it has been taken up as a contemporary feminist rallying cry copied onto protest posters, adapted into personal tattoos, and printed on all manner of consumer goods. Thousands of people are making disparate attachments to the same words that occasioned Offred to compose a “tale” through which she might better survive her own life. These real-life engagements with the phrase parallel Offred's accident in reading —it's new ubiquity evidence of how we make what we need from the stories of others, even in times when it feels like we cannot make the world as we wish it to be. Offred's accident in reading is fueled by the question: (how) will I survive? Reading offers no magic bullet answer here, though her accident in reading does represent how even a tiny textual trace of an other can touch off better stories that might shepherd one through politically troubling times.

An accident in reading brings each of these readers face-to-face with an emotionally upsetting question: Do I have enough? Who *am I*? Will I survive? These are questions that

we read for and through —the very questions that first tore us apart in infancy when we were desperately dependent and just beginning to understand what it meant to have a self. For the baby who is new to distinguishing her self and only beginning to build up rough internal sketches of her relations to others these questions are everything. And, when an accident in reading occurs in adulthood, one is returned to the felt urgency of these questions that can defy even the most sophisticated learned literacy skills. As each of these fictional readers encounter “news” from the outside world as represented by words on the page, they also encounter “news” within the self: the questions that first appeared in infancy and are made anew in their reading.

As the preceding chapters discuss, an accident in reading can leave one struggling to get a grip on the text and likewise failing to get a grip on their own feelings. The reader who has fallen into an accident in reading finds themselves in emotional mayhem: affect ricocheting off the sightlines of one’s object relations as the self and internal objects catch shrapnel in the process. The accident in reading places the reader in a “fix”: where, despite best laid plans reading has touched on emotional life in an unanticipated way such that they are left groping around in the dark to try and put to words to what reading has done to them. Each of the fictional readers discussed in the previous chapters find themselves in a pickle as they do, feel, and think things that disrupt expectations about reading as well as their own conduct.

This dissertation argues however, that emotional tumult is the very stuff of reading the self into a novel by accident —the place where one’s inner world comes in contact with that of someone else to unpredictable effect. As I ventured in my introductory chapter, reading’s promise lies in these potential contact points made between the self and the other even as these meetings might first be felt to threaten the self and the reading relation. In the analytic afterwards I offer to each fictional accident in reading I provide no procedure or protocol to “fix” — to order, contain, or nail-down, the idiosyncratic relationships between the reader’s emotional life and their reading practice. In so doing, I join other scholars of education and literature who are similarly reticent to pin-down or operationalize the enigmatic machinations by which we read others, their stories, and our own existential history. We cannot “fix” the game of reading such that the house always wins. Nor would we want to fix this relation because to do so would be to strip reading of its existential

promise – of how reading is integral to the construction of a self, and our orientations to others.

In this way, my study holds implications for the lead role that emotional and autobiographical life holds in reading. It demonstrates that we learn to read from a need to learn more about ourselves, the other, and the world, and this need helps us to make relations with others which is the basis for which each of our survival depends. In particular, my case study analyses offered in this dissertation contribute to conceptualizing reading as our shared existential “fix” –a thing we need in order to survive and the thing we first needed to learn in order to live. This need does not go away as we learn ever more sophisticated language and meaning-making skills in school. Rather, the accident always arrives unbidden, it’s eruption exposing the reader’s need for a “fix” that only becomes knowable when sensible language and meaning disintegrates.

Like a junkie who needs another hit to stave off the shakes, we read with unconscious cravings for a literary fix to the existential questions that cannot be spoken but are nonetheless felt. In this way, reading can come to occupy an important role in development when the fictional story of someone else opens up a space to feel and work through the conflicts that come to make up a self. Two advice columns come to mind here: “Match Book” from the New York Times and “Poetry Rx” from The Paris Review. In each of these, a literary therapist of sorts responds to readers’ emotional and existential complaints with book recommendations. In place of directives or ten-step programs, these columnists advise: “Why don’t you give this novel a try, and see where that gets you?” or “Maybe you’ll find some relief in this poem?” These columns are each grounded in a conviction that engagement with literature can change how one perceives their own internal conflicts as well as their relations with others in the social world. While we can’t know what will act as a “fix” for any particular reader, these columns nonetheless reaffirm my hunch that questions of development and questions of reading are always caught up with one another.

To think reading as a fix, is a proposition we are only beginning to make room for in education. That is, it is hard to place reading as a “fix” in school because it’s kaleidoscopic unconscious processes and affects are hard to name, and its wild effects are always known too late. We can consider however, what it might look like to reserve pedagogical space for reading effects and affects that are hard to put words to –for that which gets under the

reader's skin but defies attempts to tell of it. To grant primacy to emotional life in reading necessitates a willingness to tolerate and bring curiosity to our own and others' bizarre and fumbling efforts to say what has taken place between us and the others we meet in literature. By comparison, questions of content expertise and plot summary are a cake walk. The murkier questions about the interaction of one's emotional life with someone else's fictional story are harder to know and pin down. However, in my research here, I have suggested and shown that something can be made from reading experiences that, initially, defy words. If we cannot fix reading to eliminate its blunders and exorbitant effects, I argue that we might fix our attention on better understanding and narrating its accidents.

I am reminded of Phillips' (1998) description of the promise of perception here, of how he insists that "whether we like it or not, we [always] are making something of what we are given even when we are merely making do" (p. 3). This holds true for reading as well. Even when we, as readers, are barely keeping our heads above tumultuous emotional waters, struggling to stay afloat in a sea of the others' words we are always making something from what has been given by an other's words. We cannot know in advance when or what or why we are making something from reading, but it is precisely this sense of surrender to an other's touch from which reading begins and endures; a surrender to the others who make our self and life possible, but also a surrender to that which we do not know of ourselves.



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