

For my mom

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Indeterminate Subjectivities

*Performative Appraisals of Mimesis through
Representations of Women
in Wharton, Larsen, and Barnes*

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Preface

The socio-political theory of performativity and the aesthetic concept of mimesis can make us re-think what can be considered normal or acceptable, true and real, in society and in fiction. Recent theories accentuate *difference* on the same level as *similarity* in the processes of mimesis while performativity highlights how *difference* permits possibility. Possibility, for this project, is in line with Judith Butler's idea of the term having to do with intelligible identities. Performativity is an exposé of axiomatic epistemologies demonstrating how our understanding of images, behaviors, genders, sexualities are created and naturalized into commonplaces that materialize recognizable identities.

According to Butler, identities are constituted through – and consequences of – repetition, regulated by the processes of signification (the repetition of discursive practices). Because it is a repetitive process, something that must be done again and again to create the effect, because the identity is always in the act of *becoming*, there is the continuous potential for variation in the process. This is where Butler assigns possibility, in the variations (the difference, the alterity) found within the repetition of discursive practices that construct identities. And, possibility in the repetition of *becoming* is what is most important to this project. For, as characters *become* with each reading of a text, variations in the repetitive practice of reading allow different possibilities for the characters, and different representations of the characters.

The literary representation of women – the crux of this study – was an important avenue of exploration for second wave feminists. Beginning roughly in the 1970s, American Literature was re-read and re-analyzed by feminists to offer different interpretations of female characters within the canon, and female novelists were studied and integrated into the rigorous work of the academy. Constructivists in feminist theory, in line with Simone de Beauvoir, began looking at gender as a process: a woman *becomes* a woman, is made, not born. Later theorists such as Judith Butler take Beauvoir's idea to its logical conclusion projecting that the *becoming*, the process of gender, is continuous and everlasting, that it never quite culminates into a finished

product. As gender congeals into identifiable form, so do characters, through mimesis, congeal into identifiable identities. Yet how those identities are interpreted in literary criticism have as much to do with the critic's performative creation of those characters as their narrative mimetic makeup. For, neither the processes of mimesis nor performativity are ever finally settled, but continue to be re-read and re-interpreted through ever innovative ways of thinking.

This study, then, is a retrospective piece of literary criticism in line with what was begun by second wave feminists. Each chapter, using Judith Butler's theory of performativity – as well as her theories of subjectivity in general – is an exercise in finding more possibilities within the mimetic literary representations of women in the novels. As critics have analyzed the novels critiqued in this project, the repetitive processes of criticism have repeated the heteronormative assumptions about the female characters simply by doing what we do: building on previous criticism. By introducing different ways of looking at these characters and questioning more stringently what has become our heteronormative perspective, these characters can be seen in innovative and interesting ways. Questioning characters' fidelity to heterosexuality, examining power relations via gender suppositions, exploring temporal devotion, investigating love of inanimate objects and beauty over people, probing anthropomorphic architectural space, all are the different ways this project deconstructs our heteronormative assumptions about female characters in these novels. Through these approaches, some rather uncommon, we find different representations of these female characters, demonstrating a variety of unconventional women who are often seen entirely too conventionally.

This study was made possible through a project at Ghent University in Belgium from 2007 through 2010. The project was entitled *Judith Butler Revisited*¹ and its purpose was to critique Butler's theories through the analysis of a group of literary works in order to "address the political and literary-critical potential of [her] theory." As my research had previously revolved around the aesthetic concept of mimesis, and Butler's theory of performativity intersected interestingly with the former, my study became an integration of both ideas.

The project at Ghent University began with the study of novels written by Edith Wharton and Djuna Barnes, two incredibly dissimilar writers whose female characters were also on opposite extremes. For my study, I included the Harlem Renaissance writer, Nella Larsen in order to represent a wider slice of American writers. Larsen was also included to bridge the gap, chronologically, between the works: Wharton's novels in this study were written in 1905 and 1912, Barnes' published hers in 1936; therefore, Larsen's 1928 and 1929 novels diminish the chasm, if only slightly. Larsen's characters

¹ Please see the project abstract "Judith Butler Revisited" in the appendix.

also bridged the gap between the extremes of the “conventional” Wharton protagonists and the “unconventional” Barnes’ female characters.

Inevitably, I imagine some readers may wonder why I have chosen only women writers for this project. My response to that question is that I am not entirely sure. I assume that women’s literature is now a stable enough contribution to mainstream fiction that the segregation within a study such as this does not express quite the distinction as it once did. However, because three of the novels were already chosen before I began my project, I attempted to select two novels whose characters related to the protagonists of the other three in a mediating fashion: I attempted to span the gamut of chronology (the dates in which the novels were published) as well as the gamut of personality type (from the conventional to the radically unconventional). And, since this is a feminist project, and one that in its repetition of that project continuously returns to an historical second wave matter of interest – representation – even while integrating contemporary thought, re-engaging in a feminist project by privileging women authors over others seemed not so terrible an offense. In fact, it is a re-doubling of the two historical literary feminist objectives: analyzing the representations of women in literature through the feminist-generated, female, literary tradition.

This project does not suppose itself to be an end to or conclusion of queries within the tradition of feminist critique, rather it is just another beginning (again?) in the *becoming* of feminist literary criticism. This study, merging contemporary critique with a mature feminist paradigm of analysis, will hopefully create another foundation that future projects can build upon in order to evaluate, again and again, the representations of women in literature.

Abbreviations

Frequently Used Primary Literary Texts

- NW Barnes, Djuna. *Nightwood*. 1937. New York: New Directions, 1961.
- QS Larsen, Nella. *Quicksand and Passing*. 1928 and 1929. Ed. Deborah E. McDowell. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1986.
- PSS ---. *The House of Mirth*. 1905. New York: Signet, 1964.
- EF Wharton, Edith. *Ethan Frome*. 1911. New York: New American Library, 1987.
- HOM ---. *The House of Mirth*. 1905. New York: Signet, 1964.

Frequently Used Primary Theoretical Texts

- AC Butler, Judith. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000.
- BTM ---. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- ES ---. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- FW ---. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009.
- GT ---. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 1990. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- GA ---. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005.
- PLP ---. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997.
- SD ---. *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. 1987. New York: Columbia UP, 1999.
- UG ---. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

On the one hand representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language, which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women. (Butler GT 3-4).¹

The representation of women in society has been an issue with which feminists have had to grapple as we continue to struggle for “political visibility” (4). In literature, for those of us who engage in feminist analysis within literary criticism, the exploration of women’s representation has seen a similar struggle with (in)visibility, where certain distinctiveness in women, certain presentations of femininity are difficult to see, are invisible, or unintelligible.² As we analyze the ways in which women materialize in fiction, we must remain wary of the normative tendencies of representation, the repetitive processes that *performatively* culminate in the semblances we see (or do not)

¹ According to Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender*, a norm “is not the same as a rule, and it is not the same as a law. A norm operates within social practices as the implicit standard of *normalization*” (41). She continues in her assessment by observing that “norms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce” (41). In this project, “normative” and “normativity,” and “normalization,” then, will refer to the various ways in which the norm is manifested.

² Butler explains that although one might be oppressed, at least an oppressed subject is visible: “for to be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed other” (UG 218). There are identities that are simply invisible because they actually cannot be seen; they are unintelligible in that they cannot be thought; they do not exist.

in the text. The situations of these fictional images, these actors, these subjectivities, are constructed through the myriad effects of *mimesis*.

Performativity and *mimesis*, two concepts that will be used in this project to discuss women's literary representation, have everything to do with what is intelligible about women, on the page and in society. These processes are the very ways by which the subject *becomes* (genealogies if you will), the ways by which we make meaning of representations; therefore, they have a sticky correlation with age-old ideas of *truth* or *reality*. For example, women on the street everyday are seen as representatives of the accepted notions of "women" and each is gauged according to what others believe is the truthfulness of her performance to those notions. The truer the performance – the performance aligning with taken-for-granted assumptions of what women are – the more intelligible the body. In art, such as literature, a similar process occurs with the female subject on the page. The female character *becomes* intelligible through our preconceived conceptions of what makes up a "woman." These conceptions, unfortunately, even now include matrices of heterosexuality and gender performance that keep the representations of women normative.

However, although the processes of performativity and mimesis can be seen as normative through their repetitive natures, theories of the concepts have also found that both are open to other possibilities... through their repetitive natures. It is the repetition, that very repetition of *becoming* that manufactures normativity, which also permits – in fact must permit – something else, something *otherwise*.³ The repetition in reproducing subjects on the page and in society necessarily consists of both *similarity* and *difference*. Performativity and mimesis rely on this repetition, this repetition with *alterity*, which will be the way in which we can question our normative assumptions. It is through this repetition that these concepts become indeterminate, and through this indeterminacy hold a sense of promise and potential of seeing *otherwise*. More than anything, that is what this project seeks: *possibilities* within the normative repetition of representations of women on the page.

Among other things, asserts Arne Melberg in his study *Theories of Mimesis*, "modern theorists have become modern [...] with their emphasis on repetition as difference rather than as similarity" (4). This is where *possibility* can be found, then, within the modern tendency to acknowledge *difference* (alterity) within repetition, otherwise known as *iterability*. As noted by Derrida, iterability "does not signify simply [...] repeatability of the same, but rather alterability of this same idealized in the singularity of the event" ("Afterword" 119). It is this *difference*, this *iterability*, within mimesis and

³ Butler suggests repetition works thus: As a consequence of being in the mode of becoming, and in always living with the constitutive possibility of becoming otherwise, the body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation" (UG 217).

performativity that provides both processes with something else, something other than, something otherwise. Both concepts' repetitive natures serve as naturalizing⁴ forces that shore themselves up through the visible *similarities* of their processes. And *difference*, although only recently emphasized is no more new to these processes, but its current prominence allows us additional ways to think about possibilities. Paradoxically, then, it is through the dual and dueling strains of similarity and difference that we can see possibilities within representation.

One of the most important feminist goals of the second wave was the feminist impulsion to see/read the world differently, to interpret women differently on a massive scale. This endeavor has proved monumentally challenging, as seeing, reading, and interpreting *otherwise* defies our comfort and shakes the very (assumed) bedrocks of our society. The representation of women in literature, which will be discussed in depth later, is controlled by such bedrocks, hegemonic norms that form and make intelligible the subject's image and identity in society. Socially, according to Judith Butler, "hegemonic norms" are "mimed" and this mimesis is "difficult – if not impossible – to avoid" (Bell 103). "Within the hegemonic heterosexual project," Vicki Bell notes in her book *Feminist Imagination: Genealogies in Feminist Theory*, "subjects are produced that are engaged in a repeated endeavour to imitate the idealizations of that project" (103). And, that repetition, that citation of idealization in literary mimesis, is performative: a social construction of meaning through discourse that brings about that which it names,⁵ which becomes intelligible to the reader of literature.

The stages of feminist literary theory have been fruitful. Finding a female tradition, the first task, brought us a well-established canon of and on literature within which to investigate the representations of women by authors both female and male. By the same token, it has been fruitful for feminists in literature to go in search of subversion within the representations of female characters, sexualities, and genders in order to bring to light those identities that have been previously unspoken, invisible, or simply unintelligible. Yet, there is still work that can be done to break down the barriers of normativity as we engage in the task of reading, by questioning even more stringently our preconceived ideas about what we will allow representations to represent, and investigating the ways in which the representations are constituted and made visible. In the year 2010, with feminism in a pervasive but precarious position in American culture and contemporary feminists unable themselves to express their progress (e.g., are we even in a third wave?), it seems an appropriate enterprise to engage in a retrospective second wave feminist endeavor. However, as in all things retro, the importance of this

⁴ The terms "naturalization" and "normative" in this project will refer to the ways in which repetitive machinations performatively create the illusion of a tradition, a genealogy, a *before* by which the present moment, thing, person is related.

⁵ Butler states that the "'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (GT 177).

project will be its incorporation of the past and the progressive; it will assimilate the second wave feminist project of deconstruction, especially deconstructing accepted/acceptable representations of women, with a novel vision informed by Judith Butler's political thought and contemporary mimetic theories. Joining these aims will assist me in creating innovative and sometimes unusual readings of women in my selection of literary texts, which is exactly the anticipated effect. As stated succinctly by Bell:

Genealogical feminism has to resist the tendency to see always the same patterns, has always instead to begin again, in order to make the present strange, in order to consider being otherwise (*Feminist* 150).

And to be otherwise, one must read otherwise. Therefore, this project is a performative exercise exhibiting an extreme form of feminist deconstruction of the mimetic rendering of women in order to find indeterminacies that enable these readings.

1.1 Representation

represent

\re-pri-'zent\

- 1: to bring clearly before the mind: present <a book which *represents* the character of early America>
 - 2: to serve as a sign or symbol of <the flag *represents* our country>
 - 3: to portray or exhibit in art: depict
 - 4: to serve as the counterpart or image of: typify <a movie hero who *represents* the ideals of the culture>
 - 5 a: to produce on the stage b: to act the part or role of
 - 6 a (1): to take the place of in some respect (2): to act in the place of or for usually by legal right (3): to manage the legal and business affairs of <athletes *represented* by top lawyers and agents> b: to serve especially in a legislative body by delegated authority usually resulting from election
 - 7: to describe as having a specified character or quality <*represents* himself as a friend>
 - 8 a: to give one's impression and judgment of: state in a manner intended to affect action or judgment b: to point out in protest or remonstrance
 - 9: to serve as a specimen, example, or instance of
 - 10 a: to form an image or representation of in the mind b (1): to apprehend (an object) by means of an idea (2): to recall in memory
 - 11: to correspond to in essence: constitute
- intransitive verb*
- 1: to make representations against something: protest
 - 2 *slang* : to perform a task or duty admirably: serve as an outstanding example

(Merriam-Webster Online, October 2009)

As noted in the above dictionary excerpt, representation is forever dependent on its likeness to something else. Yet, the representation of something is by necessity different than that something else because it is a re-doing, a re-presentation of that

something else (if there is in fact a something else). Noteworthy in the above excerpt, however, is that nothing within the many definitions of representation even suggests anything other than its similarity to another thing. Since representation falls under the umbrellas of mimesis and performativity, this is where contemporary theories of both can not only inform our understanding of how women in literature are represented, but how we can re-view and re-do conventional images by reading/seeing them otherwise. These theories note difference along with likeness, not to emphasize difference over likeness, but to remind us that it is as much a part of our epistemological experience with texts as is similarity.

Ceci n'est pas une pipe



Magritte's brilliant series of paintings *La trahison des images* (The Treachery of Images), and especially his notorious "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe") is an ingenious example of the slipperiness of representation. As one recalls, the painting is of a pipe with the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" positioned beneath it. The image and text question each other communicating an uncanny sense of the heretical commingling of true and false, likeness and difference; for the picture is a visual rendering of a pipe, recognizable as a pipe, yet the words are correct: indeed, it is *not* a pipe. The picture utilizes the affirmation of visual mimesis insomuch that the viewer sees the truth/likeness of the pipe (to its referent), simultaneously as the textual mimesis confesses the image's falseness/difference (to its referent). Both mimetic phenomenon performatively call forth a contradiction that remains indeterminant. Within this work of art, that which is *not* is as important as that which *is*. That which is true or alike is performatively created and only recognized by that which is false or different. The truthfulness and falsity of the pipe is neither true/like nor false/different, but *both*. The automatic affirmation of the image is incessantly annulled by the text, the correlation between signifier, signified, and referent flashes back and forth in a queer perpetual motion between text and representation, which is infinitely more than one thing, more than the true or the false yet tentatively bounded by disconcerting conceptions of both. About Magritte's work Foucault notes: "Ceci n'est pas une pipe exemplifies the penetration of discourse into the form of things; it reveals discourse's

ambiguous power to deny and to redouble” (“This” 197). These processes of denying and redoubling “demolish the fortress where similitude was the prisoner of the assertion of resemblance” (200). With the denial of truth/likeness via falsity/difference Magritte divorces the collusion of resemblance with representation, and representation with affirmation. This divorce, encapsulated in the perpetual motion of affirmation and denial, is what this project seeks to encourage in the reading of female representations.

Ceci n’est pas... une femme



Ceci n’est pas une femme

The kind of commingling discussed above between signifier, signified and referent, truth and falsity, affirmation and denial, occurs during the reading exercise, yet often we overlook the representation in its entirety – which includes the mimetically inconsistent (negative rather than affirmative mimesis) just as Magritte’s painting includes it – to secure, instead, a stable identity or a coherent representation. The optical illusion of the old woman/young woman above is a demonstration of how I hope we critics can attempt to see images on the page. The image in the illusion transforms itself from old woman to young woman, a constant back and forth demanding from us a sense of indeterminacy, quizzicality, and finally sanctioning (approving *and* punishing) our view when we settle on any one interpretation. Unabashedly stealing Magritte’s scheme, adding *Ceci n’est pas une femme* beneath the image reminds us not only that what we see is *not* in fact a woman, as an image/representation it is not and never will be a woman, but it reminds us also that it is not *a* woman, *one* woman. This perpetual doubling of similitude back on itself, repetitively reclaiming and disowning its own contradiction between referent, signifier, and signified is a way in which the picture keeps the viewer open to ambiguous interpretations. It opens liminal spaces, fissures, gaps in our repetitive attempts to settle on any one interpretation: now the image is this, now it is not, now it is that, now it is both, now it is neither.

The representations of women in this project’s texts, the images that mimetically appear through the text – the words on the page, their structure and form – and those

that performatively materialize through the critic's theoretical lens affirm and deny each other simultaneously, and all are a part of the overall experience of literary images. Yet, we tend to disregard that which is contradictory (different) or that which we do not automatically recognize in order to cling to a stable idea of "woman," even within our texts. The spectacular tension between the two supposedly diametrically opposed extremes of the false and the true, difference and similitude, art and reality, demonstrates the ways in which performativity and mimesis work together on the viewer/reader/audience in creating a spectrum between these representational extremes.

Chapter 2.

Feminist Representations of Women in Literature

The study of the representation of women in American literature has been an important feminist enterprise for over forty years, and Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* (1968) along with Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) were at the forefront of this endeavor. These texts were the "basic source of inspiration for what is often called 'Images of Women' criticism," which is the "search for female stereotypes in the work of male writers and in the critical categories employed by male reviewers commenting on women's work" (Moi 32). Ellmann's overall goal was to demonstrate the "insidious effects of thinking by sexual analogy" (39). Through graceful wit and irony, Ellmann implicitly argues the absurdity of gauging the merits of literary texts by holding them up not as literary texts, but as the product or evidence of gender. As she notes at one point, the male critic cannot separate the work of women authors from the woman author herself, so overwhelming is her femaleness:

With a kind of inverted fidelity, the discussion of women's books by men will arrive punctually at the point of preoccupation, which is the fact of femininity. Books by women are treated as though they themselves were women, and criticism embarks, at its happiest, upon an intellectual measuring of busts and hips (Ellmann 29).

Ellmann's study, entirely focused on literary analysis, did not hold the appeal to the general feminist cause that Millett's would, but remains a foundational text in feminist literary theory and an invaluable contribution to the study of women's representation in literature.

Following Ellmann, *Sexual Politics* was published in 1970 by Kate Millett. Hers is a book of feminist cultural criticism – especially grounded in criticism of the systemic, patriarchal subjugation of women – which argues that the cultural suppression of

women is manifest in all aspects of society. Politics, philosophy and psychology are affected factions, and her argument culminates in her exploration (explanation) of how that cultural suppression is reflected finally in our literary tradition. Her approach is innovative and would become a model for future feminist literary criticism. In her preface, she seems aware of the originality of her approach:

I have operated on the premise that there is room for a criticism which takes into account the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived and produced. Criticism which originates from literary history is too limited in scope to do this; criticism which originates in aesthetic considerations, 'New Criticism,' never wished to do so" (xx).

Millett's analysis of texts by D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet offers close (and scathing) readings of the unsympathetic and even savage ways in which these authors represent women, juxtaposing this savagery against the ways in which men were idealized. Millett's acerbic analysis and wide appeal would make this text a useful model for future feminist forays into literary analysis.¹

Following Millett's significant text, Judith Fetterley published *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978). In this study, Fetterley picked up the reins of Ellmann, contributing to the canon of investigations into the representations of women explicitly in literature. True to the second wave feminism she represents, Fetterley opens with the line "Literature is political" (xi).² She then takes "classic" American literature to task, revealing its male orientation disguised as a universal American subjectivity (xi). Fetterley's intention is to illustrate how the "major works of American fiction constitute a series of designs on the female reader" that are "potent in their effect because they are 'impalpable' (xi). These designs, she asserts, come in the form of "one reality" that is "encouraged, legitimized, and transmitted," and which is specifically a male reality (xi). The danger in this for women is that:

¹ It must be noted that Millett's book was a controversial one, both widely praised and criticized. She was especially reproached for her failure to acknowledge prior thinkers whose work clearly influenced her own, her lapses in accuracy through hasty readings of primary texts, and her neglect of women writers of fiction. Although the criticism of Millett is justified, it does not take away from the fact that *Sexual Politics* has proven to be a vital piece of feminist literary criticism within the tradition. For a concise and insightful commentary about Millett's text, please see Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*.

² This is clearly a reference to the feminist mantra "the personal is political" coined by Carol Hanisch in her 1969 essay of the same name. This mantra was written to defend the feminist activists who gathered in "consciousness-raising groups to discuss their own oppression" against those within the movement who criticized these gatherings as "naval-gazing," or "personal therapy," and were especially bound to separate the activity from "real" political action (Hanisch *Preface*). Hanisch's essay argues that because of the systemic oppression of women in society, the supposed 'personal' problems women face are in reality collective problems for women as a class, and must be fought against collectively. Therefore these 'personal' problems are inherently political (Hanisch *Personal*).

As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny (xx).

In other words, women are in the perilous position of believing a literary tradition that has espoused itself as simply imparting a kind of “truth” without recognizing the inherent prejudices within the very writers (and thus the writings) of that tradition. The political urgency, then, is to “alter the way a woman reads the literature of the past so as to make her not an acquiescent,” but a resisting reader, “one who resists the author’s intentions and design in order, by a ‘revisionary rereading,’ to bring to light and to counter the covert sexual biases written into a literary work” (Abrams *Glossary* 112).

The year following Fetterley’s publication, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar released their study, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979). But in this text, crucially, they chose to focus on not just the representation of women, but those representations of woman as displayed through women writers. The two authors investigated British and American representations of women by women, and their book would become an important part of the mapping of a “female literary tradition” (Gilbert and Gubar *Preface* xi). The two authors were struck especially by,

Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors – such patterns recurred throughout this tradition, along with obsessive depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia” (xi).

Because women writers’ anxieties played out in such similar ways, Gilbert and Gubar concluded “that the striking coherence we noticed in literature by women could be explained by a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society” (xi-xii). The authors realized the importance of their task when they branched out from their main concentration on Charlotte Brontë in order to “recover not only a major (and neglected) female literature but a whole (neglected) female history” (xii).

Echoing one of Fetterley’s concerns regarding the influence of the male tradition on women’s views of women, Gilbert and Gubar note that one pattern they see in the women writers of their study is that they do just that:

That literary texts are coercive (or at least compellingly persuasive) has been one of our major observations, for just as women have been repeatedly defined by male authors, they seem in reaction to have found it necessary to act out male metaphors in their own texts, as if trying to understand their implications. (xii)

That female authors themselves would be vulnerable to and carry on some of the same oppressive traditions of male authors even while subversively negotiating the tradition's terrain is one of the important contributions *Madwoman* has made to literary theory, and this text remains a germinal one for any scholar in feminist literary history today.

An interruption in chronology is warranted at this point in order to offer a nod to a pre-canonical collection that is not always recognized as a contribution to feminist literary criticism, but is nonetheless a survey that is invaluable to those who have been (and continue to be) interested in women marginalized by the mainstream feminist tradition. Twenty years prior to *Madwoman*, Jeanette H. Foster – the first librarian to the Kinsey Institute³ – aided the feminist literary cause when she published *Sex Variant Women* (1956). Before second wave feminists had even begun their literary endeavors, Foster had collected an anthology of all Western literature to the present that held representations of sexually problematic, or as she identifies them, “sex variant” women.⁴ Foster’s collection spans 2600 years of history and is virtually the first of its kind.

To return to sequence, another important text of representation is *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, published in 1983. Although not a conventional literary study, it is an important collection of original creative, academic, and political writings by Black women as well as an exploration of Black women’s representations (or lack thereof) in American literature. The purpose of the anthology, as noted in Barbara Smith’s preface to the Rutgers University Press edition in 1999, was to establish a Black feminism (xiii). “Black feminism,” she states, “has probably been most successful in its impact on the academy, in its opening a space for courses, research, and publications about Black women” (xiii). About the success of the overall Black feminist movement in general, Smith is less optimistic, but continues to be positive:

The fact that there is an audience for the writing in this collection, as a new century begins, indicates that *Home Girls* has made a difference as well, and that in itself is a sign of progress and of hope. (xvii)

³ The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction was founded as the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University by Dr. Alfred Kinsey in 1947. The Institute continues to be an important research facility.

⁴ “Sex variant” in its simplest form suggests “persons having emotional experience with others of their own sex” (Foster 11). But Foster makes more clear that the women she is concerned with are either lesbian – those who imply “overt sexual expression” – and/or variant, those who may “exhibit indirect responses which have all the intensity of physical passion and which quite as basically affect the pattern of their lives” (12). “Hence,” she notes, “this study includes not only women who are conscious of passion for their own sex, with or without over expression, but also those who are merely obsessively attached to other women over a longer period or at a more mature age than is commonly expected” (12).

The next text I will emphasize is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Interestingly, it is not a text that analyzes the representation of women at all, but rather turns its attention to the representation of men. Following in the footsteps of its predecessor *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Sedgwick's work was a breakthrough in the methods of feminist (and queer) deconstruction in order to analyze those things unsaid and unapparent within literature. Sedgwick herself states that the book "is to attend to performative aspects of texts" (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 3):⁵

An assumption underlying the book is that the relations of the closet – the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition – have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally. [...] [I]n the vicinity of the closet, even what *counts* as a speech act is problematized on a perfectly routine basis. As Foucault says: "there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things.... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses." "Closetedness" itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it. (3)

In other words, unlike Fetterley and Gilbert and Gubar, Sedgwick is not looking for representation *per se*, but a kind of anti-representation. That which is not conventionally "represented" is just as present as that which is. Therefore, although not focused on women themselves, her insightful readings are considered a feminist exercise informed by her feminist expertise, which reveals new ways of analyzing texts. Of course Sedgwick's study has been criticized for being the book it is and not the book that many wish it had been. Her focus on gay men (or queer men) instead of, say, lesbians made it a target for those who wondered at the soundness of Sedgwick's decision to spend valuable time and resources on this topic when a lesbian tradition – which she states she is equally sympathetic with – was just as much in need of academic validation. It was therefore frustrating for some to see that her use of an "alternative, feminocentric theoretical space" seemed not to be a feminist undertaking at all (39).⁶

⁵ The linguistic performative that influenced Sedgwick's text is that which Judith Butler would concentrate on and capture so wholly that same year with her hugely popular book, *Gender Trouble*.

⁶ Carolyn Dever, for example, takes Sedgwick to task for favoring gay male and feminist concerns over that of lesbians. Lesbians, Dever suggests, exist within a triangular structure with feminism and queer theory and because they belong to both groups, they are doubly marginalized. Dever quotes Adrienne Rich in her germinal article, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," to explain the phenomenon: "Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through 'inclusion' as female versions of male

Along these lines, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1995) by Terry Castle shows close readings of various texts in order to deconstruct her way into representations of women. Castle, much like Foster almost 40 years prior, specifically searches for the shadow of the lesbian or lesbianism within literature that is usually read 'straight.' But, like Sedgwick, Castle takes up the unsaid to identify the existence of the female homoerotic/homosexual in the texts. She suggests that the figure of the lesbian in Western literature literally cannot be seen "even when she is there, quite plainly, in front us," because she has been ghosted out of existence, "made to seem invisible – by culture itself" (4).⁷ The reason for her invisibility is because the lesbian, as is many a marginalized identity, "represents a threat to patriarchal protocol" (4-5). "Western civilization," she continues, "has for centuries been haunted by a fear of 'women without men' – of women indifferent or resistant to male desire" (5). Therefore, the lesbian remains "elusive vaporous, difficult to spot – even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent" (2). Castle's study is an important one, then, for the representation of women, especially those identified as or who identify as heteronormative outsiders.

The previous survey of feminist texts were specifically selected for their examinations of the representations of women in (American) literature,⁸ and are the best representatives of a canon in which my own study may usefully fit. By bringing together the above approaches to feminist literary theory, some approaches quite diverse in their focus (e.g., representations of women of color, femininities, women more generally, the lesbian and the homoerotic), I hope to illustrate a way in which my own work can find its niche. This project, narrowed expressly to analyze the representations of women in literature written by women, is meant to revisit the feminist tradition begun by the aforementioned canon of literature. But, it is also meant to rework both feminism as a mode of inquiry and the assumptions of its older conclusions, commenting on the literature in original and innovative ways using

homosexuality. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to erase female reality once again" (qtd in Dever 39). Please see "Obstructive Behavior: Dykes in the Mainstream of Feminist Theory" (37-39).

⁷ The "ghosting" of the lesbian, for Castle is accomplished in the myriad ways in which society places the lesbian under erasure. "Historically," states Castle, "ghosting of the lesbian has taken a number of forms. One will search in vain for any unambiguously lesbian heroines in the annals of modern civilization: from Sappho to Greta Garbo, Queen Christina to Eleanor Roosevelt, virtually every distinguished woman suspected of homosexuality has had her biography sanitized at one point or another in the interest of order and public safety. Lesbian contributions to culture have been routinely suppressed or ignored, lesbian-themed works of art censored and destroyed, and would-be apologists [...] silenced and dismissed. Politically speaking, the lesbian is usually treated as a nonperson – without rights or citizenship – or else as a sinister bugaboo to be driven from the scene at once. [...] As soon as the lesbian is named, in other words, she is dehumanized" (5-6).

⁸ Gilbert and Gubar's study is heavily weighted toward English Literature, in actuality, but it is so imperative to any chronology of feminist literary criticism that I felt it necessary to include it in this inventory.

contemporary critical theory and fresh analyses of the novels. I intend to explore a diverse range of female characters and femininities within a diverse group of texts written by three women. I will analyze such characters as Edith Wharton's Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Helga Crane in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), Zenobia Price in Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1912) and Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry in Larsen's *Passing* (1929), and finally Nora Flood, Jenny Petherbridge, and Robin Vote in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936). The diversity of characters I have chosen range from the reasonably conventional, Lily Bart, to the relatively perverse, Robin Vote, a vast and varied spectrum of images of what we call "woman." Yet, our recognition of conventionality and perversity are dictated by mimesis what we are able to see, what is visible or intelligible to us as readers and critics, what can be performatively created through our epistemologies. Therefore, this project as a whole will act as a performative exercise to open our interpretations of mimesis to a wider assortment of representations of women.

Chapter 3.

Judith Butler and Performativity

Categories of true sex, discrete gender, and specific sexuality have constituted the stable point of reference for a great deal of feminist theory and politics. These constructs of identity serve as the points of epistemic departure from which theory emerges and politics itself is shaped. In the case of feminism, politics is ostensibly shaped to express the interests, the perspectives, of “women.” But is there a political shape to “women,” as it were, that precedes and prefigures the political elaboration of their interests and epistemic point of view? How is that identity shaped, and is it a political shaping that takes the very morphology and boundary of the sexed body as the ground, surface or site of cultural inscription? What circumscribes that site as “the female body”? Is “the body” or “the sexed body” the firm foundation on which gender and systems of compulsory sexuality operate? Or is “the body” itself shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex? (Butler GT 164)

Judith Butler is a philosopher bent on trouble. She is best known for her gender theories and is often referred to as a queer or gender theorist, but if she is to be placed under the umbrella of any label, she most readily identifies with the overarching term of feminist. She seems most comfortable with this category because theories of the subject in general are truly at the heart of her interests, and feminist strategies that deconstruct theories of subjectivity formation continue to inform and remain important touchstones for her political and phenomenological thought. Indeed, she is indebted to a number of feminists, philosophers, and critical theorists whose work culminates in her most influential text *Gender Trouble* and beyond. But, perhaps the one who most

obviously resonates throughout her theories of gender, indeed the one whose thought underlies Butler's most influential thought, is Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir's classic line: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," is arguably one of the most if not the most significant foundational element of Butler's work on gender. But it is her variations on this idea, i.e. her literalization of *becoming* that profoundly informs not just her gender theory, but her entire philosophy of subjectivity formation.

Although gender remains a central point of contention in her theory as she moves from her earlier to later work, one can get a better view of how her hypotheses about gender work into her more overarching philosophical questions regarding subjectivity, identity, desire, and agency. Her theory of performativity, for example, through a quasi-Hegelian dialectic,¹ interrogates the assumption of the "coherence and purity of identity, especially the presumption that identity is there from the start" i.e., identity is a natural fact (Kirby 61). Similar to her arguments about gender, sex, and desire, Butler asserts that identity itself is also an "effect" of repetitive social practices, rituals, and proscriptions, and it is through this repetition that identity (and gender, and sex, and desire) is open to change... which for Butler, equals the possibility of agency. From her feminist beginnings, through her theories of gender, and her more general political arguments – regarding AIDS, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Iraq war – it becomes apparent that one of her most basic concerns is that of agency.² And for Butler,

¹ The Hegelian dialectic is well known as the thesis, antithesis, synthesis formula: a "concept (thesis) implies its opposite (antithesis), which through dialectical resolution (the so-called 'negation of the negation') produces a synthesis" (Lloyd 18). This negation, Butler explains, "understood in the sense of *Aufhebung*, cancels, preserves, and transcends the apparent differences it interrelates" (SD 41). In her book *Judith Butler*, Moya Lloyd calls Butler's approach a "non-synthetic dialectic," since Butler clearly rejects the full Hegelian dialectic (19). Closer to the likes of Derrida and Foucault, Butler thinks *Aufhebung* is "nothing other than a strategy of concealment, not the incorporation of difference into identity, but the denial of difference for the sake of positing a fictive identity" (SD 183). Like them, she theorizes "from within the tradition of a dialectic deprived of the power of synthesis" (SD 183).

² Since her theory of performativity was first articulated, Butler has been criticized by other feminists who read her philosophy as foreclosing agency. Because Butler takes up Foucaultian technologies of power – a theory of power that creates but subjects the individual, whose existence and agency are both bound up in the nature of power – many critics see her theory as deterministic, leaving the subject in a lose-lose existence void of choice. The most famous attack on Butler regarding agency (among other things) was by Martha C. Nussbaum in her review-article "The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler: Professor of Parody" in 1999. In it she argues that the "new feminism" of which she assumes Butler to be a part, does not care about the material conditions or issues of "real" women but rather "instructs its members that there is little room for large-scale social change, and maybe no room at all. We are all, more or less, prisoners of the structures of power that have defined our identity as women; we can never change those structures in a large-scale way, and we can never escape from them. All that we can hope to do is to find spaces within the structures of power in which to parody them, to poke fun at them, to transgress them in speech. And so symbolic verbal politics, in addition to being offered as a type of real politics, is held to be the only politics that is really possible" (38). I will comment more about Nussbaum's critique later in the introduction.

agency is found by troubling our presupposed or unquestioned stability of ideological categories, identities, or processes.

Butler came late into the heady but contested second wave of feminism³ in which identity politics⁴ was the norm and as a result feminism itself came under critical attack from within by lesbians, women of color, and working class women who questioned the insidiously exclusive universal definition of “woman” touted by mainstream feminists. As she stepped into the residual of the feminist scuffle it was obvious that she meant to disturb and disrupt. Applying the linguistic performative of speech act theory by J. L. Austin – taken up also by Jacques Derrida – to the world of gender and subject formation, Butler established her theory of performativity.

To explain Butler’s quest for agency one must look to this theory and how performativity opens space for the radical resignification of the subject. This means we must explore performativity through Butler’s understanding of subject formation and signification. The process of signification for Butler is a repetitive one, and one that is performative in its nature, a continuous cyclical mode of *doing* that creates what it says it *does*. But, in its compulsion to repeat, signification becomes vulnerable to its own machinations, for the very nature of that repetition opens spaces or gaps for alterity whereby radical resignification may occur. More will be said about this later.

3.1 Toward Agency 1: Denaturalizing ‘Woman’ and *Becoming*

To understand fully Butler’s political thought, one must be acquainted with those thinkers who most influenced the aspects of her theory applied in this project. I will first begin with influential feminist philosophers and critical thinkers and then proceed to specific structural/poststructural philosophers who have impacted her work.

Feminist thought and Butler’s practical engagement with feminist theory is a basic foundation of her work, and therefore, I think it fitting to begin with those thinkers if not most pervasive at least crucial to her philosophy. Each of these thinkers, as progressive and/or outrageous as she could be, still held on to certain ideas about sex, gender, or desire that were deemed natural. Perhaps the most important contribution

³ I do not assume here any clear lines between second wave and third wave feminism, nor do I assume the second wave has ended or a third wave is in progress. These terms will be used in this project for the sake of temporal placement only, not for argument’s sake.

⁴ Identity politics is a term that describes the ways in which feminists assumed a feminist politics that “require[d] a notion of feminine identity, of essential features that women share as women and that give them common interests and goals” (Culler 512). As Vicki Kirby states, “Woman” was a “category whose substantive referent in sexual anatomy seemed to provide natural support for feminism’s earliest struggles toward emancipation” (22). See Vicki Kirby, *Judith Butler: Live Theory*.

that Judith Butler's theory made in *Gender Trouble* was the assertion that all of them were "discursively constituted"; [...] in other words, Butler treats none of these features as a natural fact of human existence" (Lloyd 30).

A. Simone de Beauvoir: Becoming

The first entry is given to Simone de Beauvoir (1906 – 1986), the French Existentialist philosopher and feminist whose *La Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) published in 1949 became a philosophical icon for second wave feminists and one that gave constructivist feminists a sturdy toe-hold in the sex difference debate.

One of the pivotal messages of the book is that which builds on Beauvoir's statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 267). For Butler, this statement denaturalizes gender through the assertion of *becoming*. A woman does not jump fully formed from the head of Zeus, as it were; rather, the statement implies, she becomes one through repetitive and ritualized societal pressures and practices. The category of "woman," then, is exposed as an unnatural construction, one that is created by the historical, careful and consistent crafting of "woman" as the *other* to "men."⁵ The importance of this hypothesis will be fundamental in the theory of Judith Butler, for her entire theory of performativity is built upon the kernel of *becoming*, and the constructedness of identity through power.

As much as Beauvoir is influential in Butler, she also does not go far enough in her constructivist assertions. Indeed, Butler notes outright that,

Beauvoir's theory implied seemingly radical consequences, ones that she herself did not entertain. For instance, if sex and gender are radically distinct, then it does not follow that to be a given sex is to become a given gender; in other words, 'woman' need not be the cultural construction of the female body, and 'man' need not interpret male bodies. This radical formulation of the sex/gender distinction suggests that sexed bodies can be the occasion for a number of different gender, and further, that gender itself need not be restricted to the usual two. (Butler *GT* 142-3)

⁵ It will be helpful to note that Beauvoir's theory of woman as *other* takes its cue from G. W. F. Hegel's view that "each conscious being enters into a struggle for recognition with every other conscious being, and each concludes that he or she is the essential subject (the 'self'), whilst all others are the inessential object (the 'other')" (*Literary Theory* 321). It is how we come to grasp a sense of our own identities. "De Beauvoir, however, argued that woman is *always* situated as the other to man. The man is always the subject-self, the 'I', whilst the woman is always the object, the other. This belief [...] permeates human history, and informs the whole of Western philosophical thought" (321).

Beauvoir's assumption of "the body" underlies her axiomatic belief of the natural fact of a binary sex difference, an assertion that Butler will argue against in her own theory. One of the criticisms Butler has about the existentialist thinker is exactly her view of the body. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler notes that on a number of occasions in Beauvoir's work "'the body' is figured as a mute facticity, anticipating some meaning that can be attributed only by a transcendent consciousness, understood in Cartesian terms as radically immaterial" (164). She is perplexed by this assumption that "'the body' [is seen] as indifferent to signification" (164), and asks, "[h]ow are the contours of the body clearly marked as the taken-for-granted ground or surface upon which gender significations are inscribed, a mere facticity devoid of value, prior to significance?" (165).

Ironically, this subject of the materiality of the body will be one that Butler takes up later in *Bodies That Matter* after being criticized herself for her own apparently inadequate theorization of the body.

B. Monique Wittig: "The Mark" and Anachronism

Influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's germinal text noted above, Monique Wittig (1935 – 2003) riffs on de Beauvoir's (in)famous line publishing "One is Not Born a Woman" in 1981. In this essay, Wittig furthers the earlier feminist's argument. Not only does she argue that the idea of "woman" has been constructed, but further refutes the existence of the construction altogether. Following Beauvoir, Wittig embraces the idea that "woman" is a myth, an "imaginary formation" (Wittig 15).⁶

Wittig's approach is a materialist feminist one,⁷ an approach that she suggests "destroys the idea that women are a 'natural group' (9), for it makes "evident that

⁶ "Woman" for Wittig is the myth of historical misinformation unlike "women," which is the "product of a social relationship" and a "class within which we fight" (15).

⁷ Material feminism is the name of a feminist thread that appeared in America in the late 19th century and continued into the early 20th century. This thread is identified most readily with the recognizable feminist, sociologist, and author – her most influential treatise *Women and Economics*, published in 1898 – Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860 – 1935). These feminists were interested in advancing the "material conditions" of women's lives especially attempting to "overcome the split between domestic life and public life created by industrial capitalism, as it affected women" (Delores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* 4). French material feminism – Wittig's strain – is its own distinct type of feminism "conceptualising sexual divisions and relationships as (antagonistic) class relationships in their own right in the Marxist sense." This materialist feminism "represented a fusion of radical feminism with elements of Marxist feminism that in the process extended the meaning of 'materialism' beyond the primacy given within Marxism to the capitalist mode of production" (Lisa Adkins and Beverly Skeggs, *Feminism after Bourdieu* 43). For more on material feminism, please see also Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions* 47-104; and *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women:*

women are a class, which is to say that the category ‘woman’ as well as the category ‘man’ are political and economic categories not eternal ones” (15). This is directly in line with the denaturalization of sex that Beauvoir is doing in her work as well. But, Wittig compels it further by focusing even more closely on the performative nature of the making or becoming of ‘woman.’ “[S]ex,” she declares,

is taken as an “immediate given,” a “sensible given,” “physical features,” belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an “imaginary formation,” which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived. (11-12)

She warns against returning to an essentialist/biological ideology, an “illogical principle of ‘equality in *difference*’” (15), noting that “what we take for the cause or origin of oppression is in fact only the *mark* imposed by the oppressor: the ‘myth of woman,’ plus its material effects and manifestations in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of women. Thus,” she concludes, “this mark does not predate oppression” (11).

This is an important hypothesis, and one on which Butler will draw for her own theory of gender performativity. Wittig’s reconfiguration – and reversal – of cause and effect is a key move in a number of poststructuralist thinkers and one that Butler will make again and again within her own work. Her assertion that nothing can “predate” oppression that defines the *mark* (or *effect*) that is gender – and women are the ones who are marked – is an important observation as well.⁸ It suggests what Butler will expound on later in her argument against an original gender, or a clean slate of a body that awaits inscription, or a pre-period before culture’s effects take hold. For Butler, there is no “outside” to signification. No innocent or untainted time exists for women, no clean slate before the “mark,” for the mark and the oppression are simultaneous. We are marked by oppression from the start.

C. Luce Irigaray: Feminine Articulation

Global Women’s Issues and Knowledge, Volume 2, Education: Health – Hypertension 766; *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women’s Lives*, ed. Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham.

⁸ Of course Butler points out that Wittig “presumes the subject, the person, to have a presocial and pregendered integrity” (Butler *GT* 38), that we must attempt to tap into in order to resist the oppressive powers that tyrannize women. And this is where Butler diverges. For her the “mark” and oppression always already exist.

While Wittig argues that “sex” is a mark and that marked sex is feminine,⁹ Luce Irigaray argues the opposite: the “mark” of gender signifies the “masculine that operates through the self-elaborating mechanisms of specularization that have virtually determined the field of ontology within the Western philosophical tradition” (Butler GT 34-5). Irigaray argues that woman is “this sex which is not one,”¹⁰ punning on the singular of the number “one” while asserting that women are multiple, but also playing on the word “one” that implies the viability of a subject, the elusive “I”.¹¹ While Wittig searches for original states, of bodies, of language, movement in order to find our way “out” of the language and symbolic systems that govern us in order to fight against them, Irigaray argues that our symbolic system, including our language cannot articulate the feminine. Both the ideas of subject and other (as noted in Beauvoir), according to Irigaray, are “masculine constructs of [...] the ‘phallogocentric symbolic,’” and within this system, “women are not simply the inferior of men,” they “cannot be represented or thought within masculine discourse” because of their multiplicity (Lloyd 31). Instead, Irigaray suggests that we need a “feminine symbolic that could represent women” (31).

Judith Butler is influenced by Irigaray’s deconstruction of masculinist discourse and her insightful ways of unearthing the masking of the feminine within that discourse. Although Irigaray “suggests that binary sex is a ruse,” Butler is troubled by the fact that her theory allows the binary of sex difference to be considered a natural fact (Lloyd 31). This is the same argument Butler has with Simone de Beauvoir, and will be an important factor in Butler’s theory of agency through performativity.

3.2 Toward Agency... Again: Performativity

To understand more fully the process by which Butler discerns the possibility of agency through her theory of performativity, we must look at the four-pronged bases of her theory that enables her to think otherwise. In her book *Judith Butler: Live Theory*, Vicki

⁹ “Indeed,” Wittig states, “there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the ‘masculine’ not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general” (“Universal” 60).

¹⁰ Please see her essay of the same name (1977) in the bibliography.

¹¹ In *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, Irigaray’s position in this essay is described as such: Irigaray’s title is a heavily loaded pun; the woman is not the self (‘one’, or ‘I’) in masculine language, but at the same time, Irigaray is undermining the masculine binary system of positive/negative, by arguing that the female is not a unified position, but multiple: she is not one, but many. Like the multiple perspectives often used in *écriture féminine* which disrupt the idea of a single unified voice and a sole objective truth of the one God/father/author, the multiplicity of femininity defies the masculine compulsion to create strict boundaries between self and other in order to define a stable, indivisible self” (336).

Kirby discusses these four prongs of philosophical arguments that create the “empty space” i.e., the gap, fissure, or disjunction within the repetition of signification:

Locating and understanding what we might call the technology of the negative, this apparently empty space where so much can happen, remains the enduring political objective of Butler’s work. In the reflexive disjuncture of Althusser’s interpellative *mise-en-scène*, in the infelicity and delay of Austin’s perlocutionary, and in the iterative reinvention of Derrida’s citationality, we are offered several approaches which together reinvigorate ‘the performative’ and undermine the sovereign stamp of meaning and identity. Butler also deploys a Foucauldian approach to power which disperses its presumptive concentration throughout the body politic, rendering the subject a product of its ‘manifold forms’ rather than the helpless object of its sovereign constraint. (100)

The four theories/approaches mentioned above: Althusser’s interpellation, Austin’s performative, Derrida’s iterability/citationality, and Foucault’s power, reworked by Butler, are integral to the mechanism of performativity, a curiously cyclical theory in itself that cannot be deconstructed to its kernel or most basic tenet because all theoretical kernels are inextricably linked. If one begins discussing the significance of a single idea, one must explain the others. The concept is a tightly interwoven network of theoretical strands that must be parsed out for the reader to wholly comprehend it. To begin, then, I will simply dive into one concept, which will eventually flesh out the rest. I will discuss each of the four philosophers mentioned above and their related concepts, followed by an explanation of the significance of each concept to Butler’s own theory of performativity.

A. J. L. Austin: Performatives

A vital part of Butler’s theory of performativity is built upon J. L. Austin’s philosophy of “performatives” in *How to do Things with Words* (1962). In this book Austin “questioned philosophy’s tendency to think of language as descriptive (constative) statements or reports *about* the world, reports whose truth or falsity could then be verified” (Kirby 91). Therefore, his explication of the linguistic performative,

shifted the terms of the discussion entirely by insisting that language was itself an instrument of social action that could realize effects and produce truths whose validity derived from the speech act itself. (91)

A linguistic performative, we are told, is an utterance that is not just a *saying* but a *doing*.¹² There is much to be said about the performative, but for the purposes of this project, we need only focus on two types: the illocutionary and the perlocutionary. The first are speech acts that “in saying do what they say, and do it in the moment of that saying” (Kirby 91; Austin 121). The second are speech acts that “produce certain effects as their consequence[s]; by saying something, a certain effect follows” (91; 121). Along with these characteristics of the performative there are two more points within Austin’s method that will be integral to Butler’s own theory: Austin’s stable idea of *context* within which these acts or utterances are performed (there are right and wrong contexts), and his enduring faith in the *intention* of the speaker to guide those utterances.

Moving the linguistic world into the social, Butler transforms the performative from utterance into discursive constructions of meaning. People are literally uttered into existence through their disciplined social behaviors or performances (specifically, Butler, of course, is known for examples regarding gender). Butler’s argument with Austin’s use of *context* and *intention* need not be argued here, as they will be discussed in subsequent sections on Althusser and Derrida.

B. Louis Althusser: Interpellation

In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Butler does a close reading of Althusser’s theory of interpellation in his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Interpellation, for Althusser, is the hailing of an individual into subjectivity by ideology. In his well-known example, a police officer (the representative of the law, or ideology) yells “Hey, you there!” at an individual on the street who recognizes the summons is “really” for him and turns around, becoming a subject (Althusser 301). There are a few important things in this scene for Butler. First, the turn of the individual and the hail are not temporally divided; they happen simultaneously:

Ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: *individuals are always-already subjects*. (302)

¹² In his book *How to do Things with Words*, J.L. Austin defines an “utterance of [the] performative kind” to be one in which “to say something is to do something” (13, 12). For example, Austin suggests that the performative is in action when one says “‘I do ([...] take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)’ – as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony,” or when someone states “‘I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*’ – as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem” (5).

And, second, the hailing is what Butler would describe as performative in that the subject recognizes herself as that which the law has named her. The first detail is important because it is one of Butler's basic philosophical hypotheses to disallow a "before" that appears to reside *outside* culture and/or discourse.¹³ As Althusser notes: "But in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing" (301). Disallowing this "before" is a crucial move against a "before" that has been used by others and that Butler believes to be a dangerous naturalizing tendency, for it can be said to describe a time of wholeness the individual resides in before moving into the state of the subject, which is inevitably a state of deficiency. It is important for Butler to defy the urge for an "outside" of culture because the "before" or "original" of that outside then becomes a pristine mythology that gains value over the quasi-fallen state of the subject. The before becomes an ideal (place/time/individual/nature) that we will always desire, or more dangerously, that we *should* always desire; a *natural* or *original* state. This association between *before* and *outside* (which is very simplistic for the sake of time and space) is a significant underpinning of Butler's political stance. Her refusal of an *outside* is a move that will play into her larger political arguments about the construction of the subject. Indeed, in *The Psychic Life of Power*, she, like Althusser, argues that the subject is always already constituted; there is no before that is outside of subjectivity. There never was an individual free of culture or ideology. This assertion may sound restrictive, in that the subject then has no escape from the ideological/cultural ties that bind her, but it actually underlies a political position that Butler believes offers hope and possibility; for if the subject is always already a subject, then it is not *outside* but *within* culture that we will find agency. In other words, no matter how difficult it is to find agency, it is at least within our grasp instead of residing forever beyond it. This simple thesis has far-reaching effects in political thought, for if there is no unattainable outside of culture then the possibilities must lie within; they must come from inside the matrices of ideologies themselves.

This brings us to Butler's second detail, which becomes interwoven very quickly with the first. Not only is the subject always already constituted, but the nature of that constitution is performative in that the subject is named by the power of ideology and

¹³ Derrida and Foucault hold similar stances as well. In his 1971 debate with Noam Chomsky, "Human Nature: Justice versus Power," it is clear that Foucault comes from a position that assumes "there is no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that is beyond history and society" (Rabinow 4). And Derrida's now infamous line "there is nothing outside of context" (*Limited Inc.* 136) or "there is nothing but context" (*A Taste for the Secret* 19), suggest a similar philosophical position. And, finally, Althusser himself notes that "what seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denial* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology" (301).

brought about by that naming. For Butler the performative of J. L. Austin moves from the linguistic realm into a phenomenological one, becoming a founding principle of Butler's philosophical views. Performativity will be discussed again later.

C. Michel Foucault: Power and Genealogy

Foucault's philosophy of power is one of his most important contributions to critical theory. His definition, which I quote in full below, is integral to Butler's own understanding of power, especially having to do with the location and nature of power and power relations.

[...] power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. Power's condition of possibility, or in any case the viewpoint which permits one to understand its exercise, even in its more 'peripheral' effects, and which also makes it possible to use its mechanisms as a grid of intelligibility of the social order, must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable (HS 92-3)

One important point of the above statement is clearly regarding the location of power. After Foucault, power is no longer seen to reside at one unified apex overseeing all social relations; power is multiple and dynamic. It does not function only from a top-down model as a macrocosmic panopticon¹⁴ (although this, of course, is one form power

¹⁴ Foucault's social theory of panopticism is a variation on Jeremy Bentham's original idea, and can be found in his text *Discipline and Punish*. The Panopticon is the disciplinary structure of prison surveillance designed by Bentham in the 18th century (although Foucault's discussion of panopticism begins with the use of order and discipline during the plague in the 17th century). The architecture of the prison is circular, each prisoner isolated in his cell and facing the center: "at the periphery an annular building; at the centre, a tower" (200). The tower has large windows facing every direction and the windows of each cell (on the outside of the building) provide "backlighting" for the surveillant to see the prisoner, while remaining unseen himself (200). See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

can assume) or a ready-made master/slave relationship, a one-to-one causal connection between powerful and powerless. Instead, for Butler, the significance of the above definition is: Power is never any one *thing*, but exists as relationships and processes that are perpetually negotiated and either working together as structures or breaking these structures down (even those structures that have been constructed by them) or both simultaneously. In other words, power is decentralized and unstable.

Foucault suggests further that power cannot and does not work as simply as the top-down model implies. The nature of power is multifarious and unable to be wholly rationalized:

“[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And ‘Power,’ insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these¹⁵ mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement. [...] [P]ower is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (HS 93).

Power is not something that we can acquire or possess, although it can be wielded by and through us. Perspectively, it is both fleeting and eternal since it is always an effect produced by negotiations between force relations. Another important point in the above statement is that power is repetitive, that it seeks to reproduce itself. For Butler, then, the key points of Foucaultian power are that it is decentralized (it comes from everywhere), unstable, an effect of force relations, seeks to reproduce itself, and is repetitive. These characteristics will inform Butler’s theories of performativity, the subject, of gender, sexuality, politics, etc.

To explicate Butler’s view of interpellation, then is to also understand how power plays into this view. Butler suggests that the hailing by authority and the turning around of the subject are interrelated in such a way that the subject is already and always dependent on that (power) which would subject her. More than that even, Butler reminds us that Foucault’s “reformulation of subordination” hypothesizes that subordination is “not only pressed on a subject but forms a subject, that is, is pressed on a subject by its formation” (6-7). For Butler, this implies that the “subject is passionately attached to his or her own subordination” (Butler *PLP* 6),¹⁶ meaning that although curious it is not unfair or bizarre to suggest that subjects are in collusion with their own subjugation from the start. She maintains further that “the attachment to subjection is produced through the workings of power, and that part of the operation of power is

¹⁵ “These” refers to the “force relations” noted in Foucault’s prior quote.

¹⁶ “Passionate attachment” in psychoanalytic terms, describes how the subject forms a bond with “those on whom he or she is fundamentally dependent” (Butler *PLP* 7).

made clear in this psychic effect, one of the most insidious of its productions” (6). Finally, Butler notes: “If there is no formation of the subject without a passionate attachment to those by whom she or he is subordinated, then subordination proves central to the becoming of the subject” (7). In other words, through power, the subject is subordinated and willingly submits to the subordination that constitutes her:

The interpellation of the subject through the inaugurative address of state authority presupposes not only that the inculcation of conscience already has taken place, but that conscience, understood as the psychic operation of a regulatory norm, constitutes a specifically psychic and social working of power on which interpellation depends but for which it can give no account (PLP 5).

The hailing and the turning of the individual, then, are simultaneous and display the individual’s infinite reliance on the power that hails her. This scene of interpellation, the call, is “formative” and “performative [sic], precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject” (Butler *BTM* 121). Furthermore, it is also a repetitive scene enacted throughout the subject’s life. For as Butler notes in *Bodies That Matter*, interpellation does not end with that “founding” moment of the hail, “Hey! You there!” by Althusser’s policeman, or her own example of the doctor’s hail, “It’s a girl!” at birth (7).¹⁷ Interpellation, says Butler “is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect” (8).

D. Jacques Derrida: Context / Iterability / Intention

Butler has been enormously influenced by Derrida. His arguments regarding *context*, *iterability*, and *intention* while musing on the speech act theory of J. L. Austin (specifically the performative utterance) appear especially integral to her theory of performativity. I will first summarize Derrida’s terminology and then will illustrate the importance of it to Butler’s thought.

In “Signature, Event, Context,” Derrida begins by deconstructing current presumptions about written *communication*. Using one core element of communication – *context* – he asserts one claim (well, two if one counts his re-phrased and reiterated question following the first). He asserts that: “context is never absolutely determinable”; in fact, “its determination can never be entirely certain or saturated” (3). With these assertions, Derrida sets about unraveling many of our preconceived ideas

¹⁷ In *Excitable Speech*, Butler suggests that “[t]he doctor who receives the child and pronounces – ‘It’s a girl’ – begins that long string of interpellations by which the girl is transitively girl’d; gender is ritualistically repeated, whereby the repetition occasions both the risk of failure and the congealed effect of sedimentation” (49).

about writing and language itself. He suggests that a written sign, or a “mark” as he likes to call it,¹⁸ is “a mark that subsists, one which does not exhaust itself in the moment of its inscription and which can give rise to an iteration in the absence and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject who, in a given context, has emitted or produced it” (9). In essence, he is reiterating the fact that the written sign “carries with it a force that breaks with its context,” and reminds us that this “breaking force [...] is not an accidental predicate but the very structure of the written text” (9). Following this concession of the rupture (breaking force) in the signifying chain, Derrida warns against reading this “break” as an assumption of a “real” context wherein an “original” sign belongs (9). He asserts the *iterability* – a word that suggests both *repetition* and *alterity* – of the written sign and downplays the role of the author of that sign. The sign, he states:

possesses the characteristic of being readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor consciously intended to say at the moment he wrote it, i.e. abandoned it to its essential drift (9).

Derrida now moves into his heaviest territory. He has reiterated (is there anything else but reiteration for Derrida?) the fact that there is no determinable context, that the written sign breaks from its chain of signification in order to be repeatedly read (and hints at the fact that this break is inherent), and that it matters little what the intention of the author might have been at the writing of the sign.

Finally, Derrida turns his attention to the performative as discussed by Austin. Here he will revisit his argument about *intention* and assert that Austin’s unwitting observations about the performative has larger implications. Reading Austin against himself, Derrida explores Austin’s explication of the successes and failures (*infelicities*) of the performative utterance.¹⁹ The success of a performative, Derrida reminds us, points toward the presumption of intention, that the intention of the author of the utterance has been met. However, that the utterance can also fail is what Derrida wants to explore. He notes that the performative is built upon its “contextual surroundings”; it is

¹⁸ In his book *Jacques Derrida*, Nicholas Royle notes that Derrida prefers the term “mark” because it can make us “question and rethink ‘the classical opposition between nature and law, or between animals alleged not to have language and man’” (63). He states further that according to Derrida there is “nothing essentially human about the mark,” and that a mark “need not be ‘linguistic in the conventional sense of that word: it might be, for example, the urine secreted by a mole in its tunnel’” (63).

¹⁹ An infelicity in the performative context, notes Austin, is when something “*goes wrong* and the act – marrying, betting, bequeathing, christening, or what not – is therefore at least to some extent a failure” (14). “The utterance is then, we may say, not indeed false but in general *unhappy*. And for this reason we call the doctrine of *the things that can be and go wrong* on the occasion of such utterances, the doctrine of the *Infelicities*” (14).

ritual. And ritual, notes Derrida, “is not a possible occurrence [...], but rather, as iterability, a structural characteristic of every mark” (15). He goes on to explain that,

Austin does not ponder the consequences issuing from the fact that a possibility – a possible risk – is *always* possible, and is in some sense a necessary possibility. Nor whether – once such a necessary possibility of infelicity is recognized – infelicity still constitutes an accident. What is a success when the possibility of infelicity [...] continues to constitute its structure? (15)

Derrida places failure along with success at the very heart of the performative utterance and assures its necessity to the ways in which the mark negotiates its way in the world. He notes that *intention* has “its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance” (18).²⁰ And, this ability to fail, he suggests, this possibility demonstrates the processes’ ability for something more, something else, something other. For Butler, this will be a hopeful offering. This something else will symbolize possibilities.

Finally, and this is crucial for Butler, Derrida’s argument about writing and speech spills over into the social:

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written [...] in a small or large unit, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring [...]. This citationality, this duplication or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is neither an accident nor an anomaly, it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not even have a function called “normal.” What would a mark be that could not be cited? Or one whose origins would not get lost along the way? (12)

Hopefully by this point one can see how important Derrida is to Butler’s theory of performativity. Butler takes Derrida at his word when she moves the distinguishing features of the performative out of their purely linguistic context and into a social one, for he says in the above passage that “every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic” is citational.²¹ This opens up a space for Butler’s theory of gender, for she asserts that

²⁰ I will note Butler’s reiteration of this idea later in the introduction.

²¹ With his notorious comment “there is nothing outside the text” (“Afterword” 152), Derrida – and Butler has had this same accusation leveled against her – has been indicted for turning everything into language at the expense of the material world. For example, Ben Aggers argues, “In claiming the world for textuality, this textualism loses the world” (203). Habermas is another well-known critic of Derrida’s, especially criticizing this quotation (although many critics argue that Habermas has misinterpreted Derrida on this point). For Habermas’ (mis)interpretation of this quotation and a full discussion of Derrida’s theories, please see his *The*

gender is a sign and must therefore be iterable or citational. Iterability is crucial to Butler's theory of performativity; for within iterability is possibility, that very space of agency Butler finds imperative. What must be repeated will inevitably be changed or transformed in other contexts, infinite contexts. In *Bodies that Matter* Butler states emphatically the importance of this point:

performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance (95).

In the article "Image, Body and Performativity," Gabriele Klein notes that Butler's "conception of performativity" can explain "how speakers in illegitimate social positions [...] obtain a 'voice' – how they become legitimated" (Klein 46). In Butler's vocabulary, she would say that performativity is how those marginalized genders, identities, and sexualities become *intelligible*. For out of all her many concerns, this is of primary importance to Butler: finding agency for the subject through the possibilities of performativity.

3.3 From Repetition to Agency: To Re-Cap

Agency, for Butler, relies on possibility, and possibility can be found in two ways: through the repetitive processes of the performative, and by questioning our axiomatic knowledge. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler states:

To call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it; rather, it is to free it from its metaphysical lodgings in order to understand what political interests were secured in and by that metaphysical placing, and thereby to permit the term to occupy and to serve very different political aims (Butler *BTM* 30).

To problematize certain basic and foundational knowledge associated with identity "may entail a loss of epistemological certainty, but a loss of certainty is not the same as

Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, especially the chapter entitled "Excursus on Leveling the Genre Distinction between Philosophy and Literature."

political nihilism. On the contrary, such a loss may well indicate a significant and promising shift in political thinking” (30). To question and problematize our taken-for-granted notions open possibilities and therefore allows more opportunities for agency.

Repetition, the ways in which identities and subjectivities are performatively created, also allows for agency. Her suggestion that gender is performative, for example, suggests that “what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (Butler *GT* xv). Through this concept, Butler brings to light the repetition involved in the ways in which disciplinary power is lived by and habituated into the individual’s life. By identifying the repetitive and reiterative processes of inscription of social norms in the body, Butler emphasizes the discontinuous nature of identity (Atkins 252).

Revealing the discontinuity of identity is important for Butler because it is this in-between space of the reiterations or repetitious acts that creates “moments of indeterminacy” that have the potential to interrupt or disrupt the signifying succession of coherent identities, and “it is in this indeterminacy that Butler locates the possibility of agency as resistance” for the subject (255). Agency, in her work, was misconstrued early on when readers both sympathetic and skeptical to her theory simplified performativity into simple theatrical performance. More than likely this mistake stemmed from her decision in that pivotal text to hold up drag as an example of performative subversion, unwittingly presenting the illusion that subversion could be handled at will by simple crossdressing. In her subsequent book, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, however, she attempts to refine her position on performativity, explaining that it is not an activity one engages in entirely cognizant of the fact that one is engaging in it. Although performativity offers a sense of agency, Butler reiterates our inability to control performative processes.

3.4 Intelligibility: The Trouble in Being Difficult and Judith

Butler’s Knotty(Naughty) Rapport with Style

Doubtless the reason for charging writing with badness rather than opacity comes from the conviction that obscurity is unnecessary. Its badness, even wickedness – for moral indignation quickly bubbles to the surface here – comes from its refusal to communicate, from its adoption of jargon, abstraction, and complicated syntax that make it inaccessible. (Introduction Just Being Difficult? 2).

One of the underlying questions in Judith Butler's thought is that of intelligibility. Who/what is visible? Understandable? Why? These questions are feminist and political queries embedded within every aspect of her work as she deconstructs reasons for the (un)intelligibility of certain genders, identities, and/or desires.²² Looking back at the decade that thrust Butler into the limelight (1990-1999) one can see the irony of the subsequent attacks against her for being exactly the opposite of intelligible in her writing style. She was one of many theorists chastised for their "bad" or "difficult" writing. Lauded by many, castigated by some, Judith Butler was early on noted for her style. Her knotty(naughty) rapport with style performatively exemplifies her very theory, for her critics scolded her for a style that they could not read, that they could not translate. It, they admonished, was simply unintelligible. This argument can be seen now as an ironic manifestation of the crux of her theory – her concern for the (un)intelligible – and becomes more visible through analyses of the intersections between style and theory. Because Butler, like Jacques Derrida, is often identified as much for her style as for her theory, I will generally trace the battle between her critics and her knotty(naughty) style.

After *Gender Trouble* had been circulating for nine years, Butler released the 1999 edition, with an updated preface. The preface confronted a number of issues Butler wanted to revisit, one of those being that of her "style." For her "style" had become code for her "difficult-ness." By the release of the new edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler had published three other books: *Bodies That Matter* (1993), *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), and *Excitable Speech* (1997). At this point in her career her reputation as a "difficult" writer had become legendary and was noted in various ways: ranging from good-natured mockery in the form of the notorious "Bad Writing" contest by the journal *Philosophy and Literature* (she was the 1999 winner),²³ to the vitriolic attack on her writing and theories ("The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler: The Professor of Parody")²⁴ by Martha C. Nussbaum in that same year.

²² Butler notes how intelligibility works within the frame of the norm: "The norm governs intelligibility, allows for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social. The question of what is to be outside the norm poses a paradox for thinking, for if the norm renders the social field intelligible and normalizes that field for us, then being outside the norm is in some sense being defined still in relation to it" (Butler *UG* 42).

²³ February 5, 1999. The winning sentence, taken from her essay "Further Reflections of Conversations of Our Time" in 1997, is: "The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power."

²⁴ In *The New Republic*

Revisiting the subject, in 2000, Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham interviewed Butler in “Changing the Subject: Judith Butler’s Politics of Radical Resignification.” In this interview they asked expressly about her theoretical “style,” to which Butler answered:

“I think that I probably produce a certain amount of anxiety, or what Foucault calls a politics of discomfort, and I don’t do that just to be annoying. For me, there’s more hope in the world when we can question what is taken for granted, especially about what it is to be a human, which is a really fundamental question.” (Butler qtd in Salih *Reader* 356)

She goes on to explain just how fundamental a question “being a human” really is, and the hopeful repercussions of our ability to question norms:

What qualifies as a human, as a human subject, as human speech, as human desire? How do we circumscribe human speech or desire? At what cost? And at what cost to whom? These are questions that I think are important and that function within everyday grammar, everyday language, as taken-for-granted notions. We feel that we know the answers. [...] And I think that this feeling of certainty leads to a terrible parochialism. [...] and closes us off from the possibility of understanding others and ourselves in a more fundamentally capacious way (356).

Butler’s “politics of discomfort” is “*designed* to estrange and upset. [...] her prose implicitly invites us to question our schemes of intelligibility by extending our [axiomatic] linguistic and epistemological horizons” (Salih *Reader* 325).

In the interview Butler does not buy the argument that the persecution she and other theorists and intellectuals were receiving was entirely self-evident. In other words, she did not believe it was an honest “debate about ‘good writing’” (328). Instead, Butler worried that it was an “upsurge of anti-intellectualism in the academy” and the associated “guilt about being an intellectual” and not knowing “what effects, if any, the intellectual (especially the intellectual in the humanities) can have on the larger social world” (328). Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb in their introduction to *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena* (2003) note that “scientists and even social scientists are not vilified in the public press for bad writing” (2). And Judith Butler herself suggests that the “targets” of the Bad Writing Contest were “restricted to scholars on the left whose work focuses on topics like sexuality, race, nationalism and the workings of capitalism” (Butler “Bites”). In her response to the very public Bad Writing Contest – “A Bad Writer Bites Back,” published as an Op-ed in the *New York Times* in March of 1999 – Butler suggests that rather than having a problem with her style, there were deeper issues at work within this struggle. The “whole exercise hints at a serious question about the relation of language and politics” and that she and those who support and criticize her have an “intellectual disagreement about what kind of world we want to

live in, and what intellectual resources we must preserve as we make our way toward the politically new” (“Bites”).

And, it is the politically new that has always interested Butler. And to think differently or in a new way about gender (or anything else) one must question our very societal foundations. In line with such theorists as Monique Wittig, Butler believes that to think differently about gender, one must “contest [...] the grammar in which gender is given” since “gender itself is naturalized through grammatical norms” (Preface xix). In her essay, “Values of Difficulty,” she strengthens this idea, observing that

“Adorno (and others) have made the argument that one of the most important ways to call into question the status quo is by engaging language in nonconventional ways. He worried, and surely many other worried as well, that language gives us a world, a sense of its meaning and its intelligibility, and that many assumptions about how the world should be are built into language use” (200).

Like those who find her prose suspect and question her motives, she notes that the “demand for lucidity” is not without its own pitfalls (Preface xix). She asks:

Who devises the protocols of ‘clarity’ and whose interests do they serve? What is foreclosed by the insistence on parochial standards of transparency as requisite for all communication? What does ‘transparency’ keep obscure? (xix).

As she is wont to do, even her answer persists in critique. The words “clarity” and “transparency” themselves function as performative examples of her overall point, that there are connotations attached to these words that imply a positive response about which we tend not to think. Therefore, she suggests that before jumping on the bandwagon of clarity, simplicity, and transparency in all of our prose, as if it were a universal, self-evident “good,” or just plain common sense, we must be vigilant in our criticalness of *why* that demand might be desired. Who/what might that demand serve? Her questions reveal her main goal, which is to interrogate axiomatic knowledge because:

If common sense sometimes preserves the social status quo, and that status quo sometimes treats unjust social hierarchies as natural, it makes good sense on such occasions to find ways of challenging common sense. Language that takes up this challenge can help point the way to a more socially just world (Butler “Bites”).

A good example of this idea of common sense is the response to Butler’s winning sentence in the 1999 Bad Writing Contest. After quoting the sentence, editor Denis Dutton comments: “To ask what this means is to miss the point. This sentence beats readers into submission and instructs them that they are in the presence of a great and deep mind. Actual communication has nothing to do with it” (Language). Dutton’s

assumptions here are staggering. He simplifies the process of communicability as if it were as simple as drawing a straight line between two points while implying a nefarious disciplinary power to difficult texts. Butler rejects these hypotheses, questioning the motivations of those who refuse to engage in difficult language. She queries:

What does it say about me when I insist that the only knowledge I will validate is one that appears in a form that is familiar to me, that answers my need for familiarity, that does not make me pass through what is isolating, estranging, difficult, and demanding? (203).

Paraphrasing Adorno, she notes: “The demand that language deliver what is already understandable appears to be a demand to be left alone with what one already knows” (“Values” 203), which for both philosophers means that one is not engaging in reading or thinking critically. “A critical theory” according to Adorno, states Butler, “must use language in ways that call into question its everyday assumptions, precisely because some of the most problematic views about reality have become sedimented in everyday parlance” (201). His concern then, she persists, is that if one continues to only “speak in ways that are already accepted as intelligible,” one speaks precisely “in ways that do not make people think critically, ways that accept the status quo and do not make use of the resource of language to rethink the world radically” (201).

In the book following *Gender Trouble* Butler deals with the repercussions of her knotty(naughty)-ness. For, after *Gender Trouble*, it became clear that many people in many disciplines misread her work, especially her notion of performativity. Therefore, in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), she “take[s] pains to clarify [her] notion of performativity,” noting that she was “surprised that people took performativity to be nothing other than performance when they read *Gender Trouble*” (Butler qtd in Salih Reader 344).

“I’m not opposed to performance,” says Butler, “and in fact performance is a crucial part of performativity, but there’s something else that’s going on: the performance of a gender is also compelled by norms that I do not choose. I work within the norms that constitute me. I do something with them. Those norms are the conditions of my agency, and they also limit my agency; they are that limit *and* that condition at the same time” (345).

By 1993, Butler had accumulated a number of critics whose misreadings of her work (and other theorists in line with her) were far enough off the mark that she responded by “clarifying” her positions. Therefore, *Bodies That Matter* becomes an amplification for Butler’s theoretical views. In it she offers especially, a defense and clarification of her theoretical notion of performativity. In the preface to this text, she states:

This text is offered [...] in part as a rethinking of some parts of *Gender Trouble* that have caused confusion, but also as an effort to think further about the workings of heterosexual hegemony in the crafting of matters sexual and political. [...] And yet, as an attempt to clarify my ‘intentions,’ it appears destined to produce a new set of misapprehensions. I hope that they prove, at least, to be productive ones. (xii)

With this preface, we note the tongue-in-cheek jab at the self-evident, virtuous qualities of clarity and simplicity, not to mention the indifferent embrace of the *infelicities* of intention.²⁵ On the one hand, Butler says she will attempt to “clarify” her work, but on the other, she suggests that clarity through intention is hardly something to be expected... ever. “The language,” she says in a 2003 article, “in which one offers one’s views does not always carry the meanings that one intends,” and furthermore:

That the speech act is not governed by the intention by which it is animated does not mean that there is no intention, only that the intention does not govern. That the intention does not govern does not mean that it does not sometimes orchestrate and effect its intention, only that if it does, it is lucky. Similarly, this does not mean that we cannot fully intend to get across a certain point, but we should probably be aware that even the same words resonate differently, depending on the semantic dimensions of their circulation, and that our intentions will become derailed to some extent in the course of the trajectory of our words” (Butler *Values* 204).

With these points and a snarky comment in the Introduction,²⁶ Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* follows in exactly the same style as *Gender Trouble*.

It is in 2004 when she publishes *Undoing Gender* that Butler implicitly revisits the issues of “style” that have plagued her since *Gender Trouble*, returning to “simplicity” and “clarity,” the old thorns in her side. In the final chapter “Can the ‘Other’ of Philosophy Speak?” Butler notes that the “practice of clarity” that one discipline (in this case, Philosophy) “espouse[s] and enact[s]” can leave scholars in another discipline “quite confused” (241). As she has always maintained, she reiterates that simplicity or clarity is not a universal. This chapter, an autobiographical account of her interest and

²⁵ “Infelicities” here refers to J. L. Austin’s concept of failed performative speech acts discussed earlier in this chapter. Failure, in this context, has everything to do with the author’s intention. Please see Austin, Lecture II in *How To Do Things With Words*.

²⁶ This comment is regarding critics who argue against radical constructivism by turning to the same old argument about language and reality. Butler summarizes it thus: “If [...] sex is a contrived premise, a fiction, then gender does not presume a sex which it acts upon, but rather, gender produces the misnomer of a prediscursive ‘sex,’ and the meaning of construction becomes that of linguistic monism, whereby everything is only and always language. Then, what ensues is an exasperated debate which many of us have tired of hearing” (6).

education in philosophy, is followed by commentary regarding how she and many other philosophers who have become known as “theorists” do not find homes in their discipline of study and have been employed by departments outside of philosophy proper. This chapter is a practical one concerned with people like her, whose naughty(knotty)-ness straddles disciplines and whose writing style does not exactly follow the philosophical tradition. She opens the chapter with this admission:

I write this essay as someone who was once trained in the history of philosophy, and yet I write now more often in interdisciplinary contexts in which that training, such as it was, appears only in refracted form. So for this and surely for other reasons as well what you will receive from me is not a “philosophy paper” or, indeed, a paper in philosophy, though it may be “on” philosophy but from a perspective that may or may not be recognizable as philosophical (232).

The problem of style here is noted as a part of what keeps her and her colleagues from fitting into their own – or perhaps any “one” – discipline.

In the end, the argument between Butler and her critics seems uncannily to play out performatively as a real life example of the very issues in her texts. Her assertion that questioning our taken-for-granted knowledge can open possibilities, especially widening intelligibility can be juxtaposed against the reactionary ways in which her critics reject new and difficult ways of understanding. Culler and Lamb state that ironically the “enemies of theory” anchor their power “not in their command of knowledge, their superior understanding of the texts they would impugn, but precisely in their ignorance, their claim not to understand” (3). It is this willingness even vehement determination to ignore ways of accumulating knowledge *otherwise* that Butler finds troublesome. It demonstrates the strict policing of boundaries between the intelligible and the unintelligible. It remains interesting, however, that for all the Bad Writing Contests and the attacks from all sides throughout the years, including the distinguished academics who just “cannot understand” difficult writing, that clearly many, many academics from varied and various disciplines, and from all over the world have somehow deciphered the indecipherable and read the unreadable. Some academics may be tired of “theory” and its jargon and onerous prose, but the influence of theory has not waned. If Butler truly has penned her ideas in an unreadable and un-understandable fashion, why and how has she been heard? Why in the din of the burgeoning field of critical theory has her difficult voice stood out so remarkably? That more and more students moving into graduate school have already confronted difficult writers and Judith Butler remains one of the most prominent names in that group could suggest that the knotty(naughty)-iness she offers is in exactly the right tone and timbre for many of us. Many more of us, I daresay, can hear the “bad writers” – the writers who write badly – and understand them.

Chapter 4.

Mimesis

Mimesis, a concept first theorized by Plato and Aristotle, has not so much a maligned reputation in contemporary literary criticism as an undertheorized one. This is not without reason, as mimesis in the 18th century underwent a substantial minimization and narrowing into something akin to our modern understanding of *imitation*, which culminated in an adherence to convention set about only in terms of its ends or effects on an audience.¹ In this context, by the end of the 18th century, mimesis supposedly died a not-so-tragic death.² Good riddance. By the 19th century, because mimesis was reduced to such an extent by this point – equated simply with “similarity” – more pejorative adjectives describing the term, such as “fake” or “inauthentic,” cemented themselves analogously into that century’s collective consciousness. However, by the mid 20th century to the present, philosophers, rhetoricians, linguists, and literary critics have shown a renewed interest in the theoretical exposition of the practice, uncovering the

¹ M.H. Abrams notes: “‘Imitation’ continued to be a prominent item in the critical vocabulary for a long time after Aristotle – all the way through the eighteenth century, in fact” (11). Although one must remember that “[t]he concept that art is imitation, then, played an important part in neoclassic aesthetics; but closer inspection shows that it did not, in most theories, play the dominant part. Art, it was commonly said, is an imitation – but an imitation which is only instrumental toward producing effects upon an audience. In fact, the near-unanimity with which post-Renaissance critics lauded and echoed Aristotle’s Poetics is deceptive. The focus of interest had shifted, and [...] this later criticism is primarily oriented, not from work to universe, but from work to audience” (14). See M.H. Abrams. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*.

² Indicative of the static and rather boring conception of mimesis is Edmund Burke’s cursory observations about “imitation” in his 1757 treatise on aesthetics *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Following a brief explanation of its pleasures, he concludes with the comment: “Aristotle has spoken so much and so boldly upon the force of imitation in his Poetics, that it makes any further discourse upon this subject the less necessary” (Part I, Sec. XVI).

potential of more extensive – albeit indelibly more complicated – and multifaceted, paradoxical realms.

The purpose of this section is to offer a concise and not in any way comprehensive history of mimesis. I will begin with a short introduction of the concept and then move to the basic premises of its classical beginnings. I will then skip to its decline and relative demise in the 18th century, filling in important points about the transformation of the concept as I proceed. Finally, I will move to contemporary ideas of the concept, which will incorporate 20th and 21st century theories, with a focus on the particular aspects of mimesis that will be helpful to this project.

In order to get a real grasp of the concept, we must begin literally at the beginning with the argument about *representation* and *reality*.³

4.1 Plato and Aristotle

Plato's rejection of the poets commences the argument surrounding mimesis. In the final book, Book X, of the *Republic*, Plato insists that dramatized narration (*di mimeseos*),⁴ is a low and dangerous form of representation, a third-remove from truth. According to Plato, the painter or poet dwells in the realm of appearances, far from truth, and can have deceptive or evil influences and thus has no place in the State. To understand Plato's ideas of truth, distance, and good, we must understand the dialogue he creates for Socrates and Glaucon regarding a bed or table: An idea such as a bed or table, is from God the maker or creator of the bed/table (the only real truth or reality). The craftsman is also a maker of a bed/table, but his creation can only ever be a semblance of that reality: a second-remove from the truth of the bed/table. The painter is not given the title of "maker" at all, instead, the painter is labeled an "imitator of that which others make" and is placed a third-remove from the truth of the bed (Plato).

Poets, he further argues, are also at a third-remove from truth and are most interested in nurturing the inferior part of the soul, or that part which desires the immoderate display of emotions. And, finally, the poet is especially dangerous because

³ The ideas of *nature* and *truth* can also replace the term *reality* within this argument. And although contested in and of themselves in literary theory, the terms may be used synonymously while discussing Plato, since he makes use of these labels interchangeably.

⁴ Mimesis is diametrically opposed to diegesis (*diégesis*), which is seen by Plato as a "pure" or "simple" way of speaking directly or indirectly in one's own voice (Melberg 16). It is seen as a telling, while mimesis is a "showing," a representation where one speaks in someone else's voice. Diegesis is preferred by both Socrates and Plato, and both viewed their dialogues to have been utilizing diegesis, not mimesis. This is a remarkable way in which mimesis is related to the previous section handling the criticism about Butler's "difficult" language. Theories of mimesis, as one will notice as this section commences, have become increasingly complicated and difficult themselves as the concept of mimesis is more fully critiqued.

his “play” or “sport” is contagious, in that good men may be persuaded to act immoderately as they listen to a tragedy and pity the protagonist. That pity, suggests Plato, is a “break[ing] loose” of the “sympathetic element” and that element should be contained under all circumstances (Plato Book X). The same can be said for comedy, for when a good man does not heed his restraint of reason and laughs at a “jest” made on the stage, but the jest is one that he would be ashamed to make himself in public, the man is caught up in the contagion of mimesis and acting immoderately. A poet, then – and Plato names Homer specifically – is an imitator, a jokester who speaks in others’ voices and whose poetry is not only far from truth, but dangerous to good men.⁵

Downplaying Plato’s concerns, Aristotle takes up the cause of mimesis in his *Poetics*. He “changes the Platonic evaluation of mimesis [...], changes the meaning of the concept, until it ‘ends up meaning almost the exact opposite of what Plato had meant by it’” (Else qtd in Melberg 44). Aristotle is not vexed by the role mimesis plays in poetry, tragedy, or any of the other arts. In fact, Aristotle shifts the discussion by altering the ways we understand the concept. Rather than dismissing altogether artistic mimesis as a morally corrupt, primitive and base practice, as Plato suggests, Aristotle judges it and disciplines it by creating criteria of regulation. He asserts that mimesis is a natural part of human existence, an instinct that brings pleasure because it is instructive (Part IV).⁶ He notes that everyone feels pleasure when learning, and thus bases his entire theory upon the idea that mimesis is educational.

In one fell swoop Aristotle reallocates mimesis into an acceptable mode of artistic expression in whatever form it appears. He creates the categories of Tragedy and Comedy, with his esteem clearly on the side of Tragedy, but allowing Comedy its own merits.⁷ His motivation seems to be to incorporate Plato’s ideas while discarding his most vehement warnings. He mutes the corrupting influence of mimesis by elevating the epic poets who become Tragedians above the lower poets who become writers of Comedy. As a nod to Plato, he concedes that there is a low form of poetry, the satirist,

⁵ It should be noted that this summary of Plato’s interpretation of mimesis is not without controversy. Contemporary theories of mimesis agree that Plato’s philosophy on the subject is never quite so straightforward as to be definitively summarized as has just been done. However, since this is not an historical undertaking of the theories of mimesis, I will suffice it to say that Stephen Halliwell’s opening chapter in *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, has an excellent overview regarding the nuances of Plato’s theory.

⁶ Aristotle states that “the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood,” and that “he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons.” He explains further: “Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, ‘Ah, that is he.’ For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause” (Part IV).

⁷ “But when Tragedy and Comedy came to light, the two classes of poets still followed their natural bent: the lampooners became writer of Comedy, and the Epic poets were succeeded by Tragedians, since the drama was a larger and higher form of art” (Part IV).

but insists that they do not deal with the base or immoral, but only the ugly, which is neither distressing nor damaging to the audience:

Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of character of a lower type – not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain. (Part V)

As Aristotle standardizes the rules of mimesis he attributes it a depth and breadth of a different kind. Plato's mimesis, Arne Melberg asserts in his study *Theories of Mimesis*, is closer to "image, imagination, and imitation," the visual (after all, art imitates the world of appearances, not essences), while "Aristotle's *mimesis* is defined by *mythos* and *praxis*" (44).⁸ Defining mimesis by *mythos* and *praxis*, argues Melberg, adjoins *time* and *action* to the visual characteristics already attributed to mimesis, expanding the concept with a "new function:" temporality (44). In other words, Aristotle

temporalizes *mimesis* by imagining *mythos-praxis* as a whole structured in a sequence of beginning-middle-end, and by imagining the poetical work as an *after* that always has a *before*. This *before* is the *praxis* of action. Perhaps this *praxis* also has a *before*, since *praxis* consists of already organized events. Before and after. The poetical work imitates or re-presents what comes prior in time, but it also has its consequence in the imitating reactions of the reader or spectator (45-6).

Temporality, for Melberg, whose theory of mimesis I find most compelling, is infused into the concept of mimesis as mimesis turns into repetition (1). This will be discussed later, especially when the *after* of mimesis is slandered in the 18th century. For the time being, however, suffice it to say that Aristotle's refashioning of mimesis widens the concept despite its regulatory effects.

4.2 The 18th Century: *Imitatio* and Its Decline

In *The Function of Mimesis and Its Decline*, John D. Boyd states that "The literature of Classical antiquity from Homer onward was centrally concerned with presenting and interpreting human values"; therefore, literature was a kind of mimesis, an "imitation of

⁸ By introducing *mythos* and *praxis* to the concept of mimesis, Aristotle bestows it with time and action. "Mythos," Melberg says, "is a concept of order, which makes it possible to view literary works as structured wholes." "Praxis," he adds, "refers to already structured events or chains of events, which can be perceived as meaningful and answering a purpose" (Melberg 45).

human life” (1). Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Horace speak of an holistic mimesis such as this, suggesting that within mimesis authors/artists had important ethical and didactic goals to meet through their art. But, as the 18th century concluded under the hold of romanticism, literature was less about general moralizing and more about individual creation. Paraphrasing Auerbach’s summation of romantic writers, Frederick Burwick notes that Auerbach suggests romantics were “no longer concerned” with the

representation of reality. Instead, they had become preoccupied with the “fragmentation and limitation of the realistic.” To the extent that they made any attempt at all “seriously to represent objects of contemporary society,” their effort was half veiled in the “fantastic or idyllic” (Auerbach qtd in Burwick 3).

The generation following Rousseau, Burwick continues, “persisted” in a “rejection of society and continued to nourish their own inner fragmentation and isolation. In them representation of reality had given way to individual subjectivism” (3). Therefore, the devaluing of mimesis surged and the concept underwent an extreme reformulation. At this time, mimesis’ temporal aspect of being *after* (as noted in the section above) was emphasized and referred to in terms of “imitation” and “representation” of things that had come *before*, otherwise known as the lowest forms of creation. M. H. Abrams notes in his study *The Mirror and the Lamp* that by the 18th century,

whenever a critic was moved to get down to fundamentals and frame a comprehensive definition of art, the predicate usually included the word ‘imitation,’ or else one of those parallel terms which, whatever differences they might imply, all faced in the same direction: ‘reflection,’ ‘representation,’ ‘counterfeiting,’ ‘feigning,’ ‘copy,’ or ‘image’ (11).

Therefore, “through most of the eighteenth century, the tenet that art is imitation seemed almost too obvious to need iteration or proof” (11). Therefore, “substantial reductions” in the concept not only by today’s standards, but by “earlier interpretations” as well can be attributed to [mimesis]’ decline (Gebauer and Wulf 155). Scholars concede that mimesis began its decline in the late 1700s,⁹ but decline does not

⁹ Gebauer and Wulf condense John D. Boyd’s book *The Function of Mimesis and Its Decline* into a helpful paragraph regarding Boyd’s reasons for the deterioration of the tradition: “Boyd identifies four major developments characterizing the change in the concept of mimesis. The first of these was the attenuation or thinning out of the concept of imitation. This means that form in the cognitive element was thought of as derived from a very superficial level of nature, and hence could hardly be called the probable. The visible and audible aspects of life drew more critical attention as the fit object of poetic imitation. Secondly, as a result, we find attention drawn to formalistic elements rather than to a viable sense of form... A third tendency was to deny that the arts, especially painting and music, were imitative at all; or if they were so only in a superficial way. This, finally, parallels the fourth tendency, that of thinking of the arts as subjectively oriented, as self-expressive,

mean death. Contemporary theories of mimesis suggest there was a renovation of the term rather than its complete abandonment. Rather than “outright rejection,” Stephen Halliwell argues in his study *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, romantic thinking went through a “renegotiation and redefinition” of the concept (358):

The relationship of romanticism, and more generally of eighteenth-century reactions against neoclassicism, to the language and ideas of mimeticism is complex. To simplify it is to risk distorting part of our own intellectual inheritance. The undoubtedly widespread romantic renunciation of mimesis, or equally of ‘the imitation of nature,’ *qua* supposed concern with the mere surface plausibility and verisimilitude of artistic images, became caught up in crosscurrents of aesthetic and critical argument that cannot ultimately be resolved into a clear-cut *pro* and *contra* dichotomy. In this regard, ideas belonging to the mimeticist tradition were consequently subject to reinterpretation and transformation rather than sheer repudiation (360).¹⁰

According to Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf in their book *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society* (1995), two positions in the “great eighteenth-century debates about the imitation of nature” are clear: “mimesis as a concept is restricted to the ‘imitation of nature’; and ‘imitation’ is understood essentially in terms of the ‘similarity’ existing between an artifact and a natural model” (155). The practice foregrounded the intention of the artist and the artist’s representational copy of an original model (a model that is a *before* and a copy that functioned as an *after*). In other words, in an age that valued subjective genius, originality, and creation, ‘imitation’ (*imitatio*) came to “define mimesis in terms of tradition, convention and example” (Potolsky 7). Halliwell, succinctly makes this point:

rather than as imitative, or if still considered imitative, as a kind of transfer of an emotive state from author to audience, rather than as the intelligible structuring of emotion’s meaning.... Part of this stress comes from the influence of Associationism, and part from such reactions to its mechanical barrenness as the Platonist interest in beauty and sublimity of Shaftesbury and the schools of ‘taste’ and ‘common sense.’” Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture – Art – Society* (Chap. 12, footnote 1, pages 155 and 345).

¹⁰ Mihai Spariosu explains the state of mimesis at this time in much the same way: “When romantic ideology gained predominance in our culture, becoming sanctioned in Kant’s theory of the transcendental subject with its highest representative, the artist-genius, mimesis receded into the background, or, rather, went *underground*” (ii).

Where once, in a neoclassical intellectual setting, “imitation” could, in the hands of the most subtle writers, possess a suppleness of meaning and resonance that it “borrowed,” so to speak, from the philosophical weight of tradition that lay behind ancient mimeticism, the standard modern significance of imitation tends almost inevitably to imply, often with pejorative force, a limited exercise in copying, superficial replication, or counterfeiting of an externally “given” model.
(14)

With the use of ‘imitation’ as its only analogy, it is no wonder that many critics assumed mimesis’ demise.¹¹

4.3 Contemporary Mimesis

Imitation, copy, representation, reflection, appearance, resemblance, image, performance, replication, simulacrum, it can be difficult to define definitively what is *mimesis* when literary criticism and theory are riddled with the above terms, which are used as its surrogates. This phenomenon serves to exemplify one of the reasons for this difficulty: mimesis’ multifaceted nature, for it is both simplified and made more complex by the literary critics’ wordplay. For example, that literary critics substitute any of the above terms, many of which have negative connotations obvious to a 21st century audience, simplifies and devalues the concept. However, that they *can* use this array of words, that so many synonyms are at their disposal, illustrates the idea’s variety of nuances. In other words, mimesis, though often seen as simple imitation, manages to stand in for a number of concepts that, together, go far beyond the simple or the imitation. Literary criticism as a whole does not seem much interested in fleshing out the concept of mimesis; in fact, some of those who have used it extensively actually have not expounded much theoretically. Take, for example, the 20th century germinal text on mimesis for literary studies, Eric Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946); the author “scarcely discloses the theme of mimesis” (Gebauer and Wulf 10), and only “barely touche[s] on the *theory* of mimesis” (Halliwell

¹¹ As noted earlier, this chapter is by necessity more concise than a complete discussion of mimesis would warrant. This section, therefore, like the others, should not be taken as a comprehensive summary of the entire 18th century. Such a reading would suggest the treatment of mimesis to have remained consistent and monolithic throughout the century’s entirety. This is obviously not true. The gradations of how and in what ways mimesis was embraced and eschewed, and the many nuances of the 18th century consciousness(es) regarding the concept within that span of time cannot be expressed in the limited space of this project. Therefore, it has been generalized by that which stands out most markedly for this century in mimesis theory. For a more thorough discussion of this time period, please see Halliwell’s history and/or Gebauer and Wulf’s study regarding mimesis in the bibliography.

vii), let alone discusses, explores, or defines it as a concept.¹² He does not include an introduction to his work in order to flesh out the idea by definitional or theoretical exegesis; rather, with nary a preliminary word, he moves directly into the analysis of literary texts. This is not to say that the work is not a brilliant historical account of mimesis in literary analysis. It is. But if one is looking for theoretical analysis of the concept(s) of mimesis itself, it will not be found here.

In his 1984 editor's introduction of *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory*, Mihai Spariosu presents the current status of mimesis. He states: "After almost two hundred years of relative obscurity mimesis finds itself again in the limelight of Western theoretical discourse" (I). He goes on to note that the term, "understood as 'imitation'" in the "Anglo-American tradition [...] regained some prominence" around the start of the century when there was a turn toward Aristotle's *Poetics* (I).¹³ He then quickly illustrates the current movement in the study of mimesis:

More recently, mimesis looms large in the work of Auerbach, Burke and Frye. But it is only in the past decade or so, with the publication in France of the work of Barthes,¹⁴ Derrida,¹⁵ Girard,¹⁶ Genette,¹⁷ and some of their collaborators, that mimesis has again become an object of heated controversy on both sides of the Atlantic (I).

¹² Arne Melberg also has his own criticism of Auerbach's work. "[D]espite my admiration for his scope and reading procedures," Melberg contends, "his view of the very concept in question, *mimesis*, is simplifying in a way that makes him blind to differential movements. From my perspective," he concludes, "Auerbach makes his most interesting observations on the mimetic play of similarity and differences *not* in terms of representation, but in terms of *figura*, of figural style and figural interpretation" (2).

¹³ Here, Spariosu specifically names S. H. Butcher's translation of the *Poetics* and the Chicago School's strong neo-Aristotelian bent. The Chicago School of literary criticism was located at the University of Chicago between the 1930s and the 1950s.

¹⁴ The Structuralist Roland Barthes is known for attempting to disengage narrative entirely from any kind of "representational significance" (Burke 41). His difficulty with disregarding mimesis altogether, however, is revealed through some of his later concepts found in *The Rustle of Language* (1984), as noted by Halliwell: although Barthes "comes to be ever more skeptical, even dismissive, of ideas such as the representation of reality, he nevertheless retains a sense of the ineradicable *appearance* of just that in literature and art [...], and it is this phenomenon that he tries partly to contain in his concept of the 'reality effect' [...] and the related idea of the 'referential illusion.' It is not farfetched to suggest that Barthes' reality effect is, at one level, a sort of redescription and a theoretical readmission of nothing other than the purportedly banished figure of mimesis. In addition, even when he continues to indicate some distance from the notion of mimesis as 'imitation,' Barthes comes to see very clearly the tenacity, indeed the *ineliminability* of a 'representational' posture toward the world" (Halliwell 379).

¹⁵ Derrida "find[s] cracks in the Platonic edifice" to "discern the paradoxical possibility of a copy not bound to a true or singular original" (Potolsky 150). Gebauer and Wulf purport, Derrida's view on mimesis "radicalizes Benjamin's view of the mimetic character of texts and intensifies Adorno's emphasis on mimesis in aesthetics" (294). His intertextual mimesis has what they call a "between-character" (294). Texts always refer to other texts, "non-identifiable other texts, to inheritances for which there are no names or models. Texts repeat

Indeed mimesis has become an important topic of contemporary debate, especially in Western Europe and the UK. And, at the risk of doing the concept a great disservice, I will not engage in paraphrasing all current points of argumentation on mimesis, but will instead, name those points I find particularly important to this specific project and those points that work most compatibly with Judith Butler's theory and my own feminist concerns.

First, contemporary mimetic theories agree that mimesis cannot be reduced to just one thing. If anything, says Halliwell, mimesis is more a "family of concepts" than a single one (6), and there are a number of strains of mimesis that are at work in any given artistic endeavor. Similarly, Gebauer and Wulf assert:

[W]hile modern rational thought refers to the single isolated cognitive subject," they state, "mimesis is always concerned with a relational network of more than one person; the mimetic production of a symbolic world refers to other worlds and to their creators and draws other persons into one's own world (3).

Likewise, Melberg maintains that "*mimesis is never a homogeneous term*" (3). What these three quotes all have in common is part of a retrieved and expanded view of the concept. Mimesis is not just *imitation*, the malignant synonym of the 18th century that is even now so closely aligned with the term, it is a multi-faced, multi-functional phenomenon.¹⁸ Furthermore, it is contradictory and paradoxical. Our comprehension of

prior texts; they are networks of differences without identities of their own" (294). Every text "begins as a double. There is thus no beginning without something having preceded it, with precedence contained in the structure of the double" (295); therefore "[i]t is impossible to identify the origin of or model for a text" (295).

¹⁶ René Girard is also anti-Platonic in his musings on mimesis. Mimesis, for Girard, is a "dynamic social force that lies at the origins of religion and culture" (Potolsky 146). He suggests that "uncontrolled mimesis threatens social stability" and is also the "origin of violence and conflict" (146). He is best known for his concept of mimetic desire, otherwise known as "triangular desire" (in his book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*). Triangular desire is "mediated desire" where the "subject learns what to desire by imitating the desire of another person" (Hale 287). This theory runs counter to the "Romantic myth that regards desire as spontaneous, original and unique to each individual" (Potolsky 146). On a fundamental level, Girard balances the values of "copy" and "original." Mimetic desire is a compulsory part of humanity and therefore is no more a "copy" of anything than any other human behavior.

¹⁷ The narratologist, Gérard Genette, defines mimesis against diegesis (along the Platonic vein). The *diégésis/mimesis* binary, for Genette, relates to *narrative/dialogue* or "narrative mode/dramatic mode" (Genette *Narrative* 45). The difference between Plato and Genette, however, is that Genette concedes that both modes work in tandem, hardly ever unmixed from the other: narrative and discourse "are almost never to be found in their pure state in any text: there is almost always a certain proportion of narrative in discourse, a certain amount of discourse in narrative" (Genette *Figures* 140).

¹⁸ Demonstrating our contemporary (mis)understanding of 'imitation' that leads to the complete misinterpretation of mimesis, Halliwell asserts: "No greater obstacle now stands in the way of a sophisticated understanding of all the varieties of mimeticism, both ancient and modern, than the negative associations that tend to color the still regrettably standard translation of mimesis as 'imitation'" (13). He further contends that "literature on the history of aesthetics" has "largely ignored" the fact that "throughout the neoclassicism

reality and *truth*, those ideas (even now) so attached to the concept of mimesis, has been transformed and rendered unstable within the 20th and 21st centuries; therefore, our thinking about mimesis itself has unavoidably changed and widened. It not only means more than one thing, it differs with itself, runs contrary to itself, and contradicts itself. In other words, contemporary mimesis has turned into an indeterminate concept that is ultimately unpredictable. This *indeterminacy* and the contemporary emphasis on *difference* within the concept are the two points I find most important for this project.¹⁹

My use of mimesis will follow in the footsteps of philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida who began to emphasize *difference* within the idea. I have been influenced tremendously by Arne Melberg's theoretical approach in *Theories of Mimesis*, and his complete dedication to the concept's paradoxical nature. His book is based on an understanding of mimesis as "inherently and always already a *repetition* – meaning that *mimesis* is always the meeting-place of two opposing but connected ways of thinking, acting and making: similarity and difference" (1).

Deliberately, aesthetic and social mimesis in this study will not be clearly demarcated, for as noted by Gebauer and Wulf: "[T]hroughout the whole of its history [mimesis] has always been the simultaneous object of theoretical reflection and aesthetic and social application" (7). To me, this means contiguities and very real overlapping exists, or can exist, between/within theories of socio-politics and aesthetics. For, already our delineations between fiction and reality have been obscured.

of the sixteenth to eighteenth century texts that employ the language of 'imitation' often do so alongside, and interchangeably with a cluster of other terms, above all the language of 'representation.' Such interchangeability, and the cross-fertilization of ideas that went with it, is no longer possible for us [...] except within a self-consciously historicizing idiom, for the simple but inescapable reason that the semantics of 'imitation' have been considerably narrowed and *impoverished* in modern usage" (13-14).

¹⁹ The move from similarity to difference in mimesis directly corresponds to what Fredric Jameson calls the "crisis of representation" in postmodern thought, an exacerbated extension of the modern antimimeticism. In his book, *Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics, Politics*, Jesse S. Cohn explains that "according to Frederic Jameson, Western thought has fallen under the shadow of an all-encompassing 'crisis of representation' that calls into question the relationships between our concepts and the truths they are meant to denote, our images and the realities they are supposed to depict, our institutions and the interests they are supposed to serve. For more on Jameson, please see *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*, edited by Ian Buchanan and Jameson's own *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*.

4.4 The Modernist Context / Anti-Mimesis

If we can postulate a modern tradition, we must add that it is a paradoxically untraditional tradition. Modernism strongly implies some sort of historical discontinuity, either a liberation from inherited patterns or, at another extreme, deprivation and disinheritance. ... Committed to everything in human experience that militates against custom, abstract order, and even reason itself, modern literature has elevated individual existence over social man, unconscious feeling over self-conscious perception, passion and will over intellection and systematic morals, dynamic vision over the static image, dense actuality over practical reality ... Interwoven with the access of knowledge, the experimental verve, and the personal urgency of the modern masters is ... a sense of loss, alienation, and despair (Ellmann and Feidelson qtd in Punter 36).

With the above chronicle of modern characteristics, it is no wonder that modernism has long been described as anti-mimetic. Its desire to break with history, its tendency toward individuality, its aversion to custom, order, and reason, and its propensity for experimentation all seem to direct it away from mimesis. In his book *Modernism*, Peter Childs observes that modernist texts,

focused on the micro- rather than the macrocosm, and hence the individual more than the social. It was concerned with self-referentiality, producing art that was about itself and texts that were self-contained rather than representational (18)²⁰

His most important point is his observation of the modernist aversion to any kind of imitation... which was seen as the tendencies of the realists and the romantics before them.²¹ Childs notes that “Modernism appears retrospectively to have been a wide-

²⁰ Halliwell describes the modernist tendency away from representation as follows: “Modernism, with its abrupt turn away from existing styles of representation in all the arts, certainly delivered an unprecedentedly sharp jolt to the terms of the disputes which had been conducted around mimesis since the Renaissance: ‘all forms of imitation are to be despised,’ as one of the futurist manifestos stridently proclaimed (aiming, it goes without saying, both at the idea of representation and at the emulation of older art)” (369-70).

²¹ As far as I can tell, the differences between romantics, realists, and modernists regarding mimesis are not terribly significant (although this does not disregard the enormous consequences in the theories of aesthetics at the time). The romantics individualized art: the artist-genius brought forth the art from his soul (the truth of his soul), making the work of art original, a presentation rather than a re-presentation. The realist and naturalist artist was assigned the task of bringing forth the truth of the world, especially the minutiae of the quotidian world, by her/his own artistic genius. Yet, on the other side, the opposite extreme, were the aesthetes. As Halliwell says in his history of mimesis: “The degree of divergence between realism and

ranging and far-reaching series of vigorous and persistent attempts to multiply and disturb modes of representation” (19).

Art that emphasizes the microcosm, the individual, and reflects itself back to itself certainly seems like the very recipe for the anti-mimetic. But, I find the very term anti-mimetic (or non-mimetic) deceptive since it seems to rely on the old caricature of the mimetic concept. The very term implies *mimesis* to be determined and determinable, particularly as the outmoded idea of simple *imitation*. The modernists of the 20th century were continuing to react against basic likeness or similarity (copy) that had defined *mimesis* in its 18th century ‘decline.’ But, as noted earlier, this decline was more a transformation. *Mimesis* disappeared as it fulfilled its function as mere likeness, and reappeared in a new form “as similarity [gave] way to difference” (Melbert 1). In other words, as artists and thinkers rejected *mimesis* and the pure similarity it had come to represent, *mimesis* performatively reappeared in its more complex form, emphasizing difference. *Imitation* ceased to be an adequate definition of the term, then, because it could not fully depict the countless gradations of similarity and difference within the idea. Because *mimesis* is both mimetic and non-mimetic in itself, always already similarity *and* difference, labels like “anti-mimetic” or “non-mimetic” make little sense. These sentiments are already encapsulated in the concept.

It is as if by their very animosity toward *likeness* that the modernists performatively represent *mimesis*’ transformation. With the modernist impulse to “make it new,” to see things in a different light, fragmented, alienated, defamiliarized underscored the importance that *difference* began to play in *mimesis*.²²

aestheticism, between a kind of hypermimeticism and a would-be radical antimimeticism, stretches the spectrum of *mimesis* close to the limits” (369).

²² I agree with Fredric Jameson that modernism’s “crisis of representation” has carried forward into postmodernism’s own special strain of that crisis. In his book *Archeologies of the Future*, he notes that the “older movement [modernism] attempted to overcome” its crisis “by way of heroic formal invention and the grandiose prophetic visions of the modernist seers. In postmodernity representation is not conceived as a dilemma but an impossibility, and what can be termed a kind of cynical reason in the realm of art displaces it by way of a multiplicity of images, none of which corresponds to ‘truth’” (212). Although this may sound morbidly nihilistic, Jameson continues with optimism reminiscent of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and how questioning the ‘truthfulness’ of heteronormativity (heteronormative representation) is a positive, and necessary, step. Jameson continues, “I have argued elsewhere that such alleged relativism offers new and productive paths to history and to praxis; and there is no reason to fear that postmodern Utopias will not be as energizing in their new historical context as the older ones were in previous centuries” (212).

Chapter 5.

Ways into the Texts, Redux

Exploring the representations of women in literature is and should be done and re-done, visited and re-visited, for the image of woman is not static, but like subjectivation itself is continually *becoming* through the “shifting valencies of social reinscription” (Kirby 119). Through the transformational capacities of performativity, Butler suggests that the repetition of reinscription, the reading of normative signs within a different context, modifies – and can also pervert and/or subvert – that sign. “[M]eaning and truth” in these contexts, states Kirby, “are always provisional, unstable and in need of repair to re-establish their standing, their authority” (119). Therefore, the meaning and truth of the representations of women are consistently in flux or at least open to re-negotiations, which is a step toward *possibilities*.

5.1 What is Performativity to Mimesis?

Why mimesis and performativity? This question seems perfectly reasonable at this point in the project. My first reason for pairing the two is because of their shared processes. Both work in a circular motion through their repetitive natures: their doing over and over again or *becoming*. Not to mention that their indebtedness to each other, their absolute entanglement with each other causes complications, complexities, and contingencies that allow the potential for simultaneously multiple readings of images in a text. Mimesis and performativity can never be entirely separated; however, since performativity falls under the colossal umbrella of the former. Performativity is in all ways mimetic and mimesis is in some ways performative, and at times the two overlap and function in similar ways. But generally speaking, for this project, I will attempt a

kind of opaque separation: mimesis will relate to narrative discourse while performativity will relate to the discourse of criticism. Therefore we might ask: what kind of female image(s) are mimetically produced through the discourse of the novel, and upon what kind of performative appraisal of that mimesis do I, as the critic, finally rest? For in this project, I, as its author, have embarked upon the exercise of feminist criticism, a repetitive employment of checks and balances that weighs normative aspects of the novels against the non-normative. In this space, the mimetic production of female images in the novels reels against the performative (repetitive) analysis of criticism. For the purposes of clarity, then, mimesis will be relegated (mostly) to the discourse of the novel, the art form, the imagery, metaphor, while performativity will be consigned (mostly) to the act of criticism, the interpretation of that mimesis.

The intersection of Judith Butler's critical (socio-political) theory and the aesthetical concept will not provide clear answers to any theoretical questions regarding either of the concepts, but I anticipate the concepts will afford original readings of female representations that utilize a wider and manifold lens. Therefore, this project aims to scrutinize, sometimes in very creative ways, the intersections of the (in)visible things/images/behaviors that culminate in the images of women on the page. For possibilities in literature, I think, can translate into possibilities outside the covers of the book. Glimpsing and recognizing alternatives to norms, practicing denaturalization within feminist deconstruction has been a first step and continues to provide a next step in seeing the world *otherwise*. As Carol Watts notes:

“[I]t is clear that literature in its many forms is an important cultural site of gender construction, reinforcing and promoting social norms while also providing a forum where social experience can be worked through and to some extent collectively possessed, made manifest and conscious. In this sense the sphere of literature can be seen covertly to secure consent – unconscious ‘choice’ – from its participants in naturalizing social conventions which define gender roles; yet by the same token it can also show such ‘norms’ to be a matter of invention and interpretation, and thus open to alternative choices or possible change” (Watts 83-4).

In the end, it will be obvious that the foundation of this study is hopelessly caught in repetition, and will be seen as a circular business. But, I daresay our very lives, our *becoming* through consistent epistemological and ontological inquiry are a circular business.

Another valid question might be whether the same goal could not have been reached with other theories. I am one who believes that there is not just one road that leads to a single point. There are many and multiples of many. This is in line with Butler's view that there is never just one type of resistance to power or subversion to authority. Often critics, scholars, feminists have been frustrated or disheartened by her refusal to answer

definitively how feminists and dissidents should move forward. But, Butler holds to her conviction that acts of resistance and subversion are never and only just one thing. They must come in all ways, shapes, and sizes. Hence, could other theories be used to explore the texts of this project and come up with similar results? Perhaps. But, like any repetitive act – and subversion and resistance are repetitive acts – none are exactly alike. Difference is built into the cycle of repetition.

5.2 And... Finally

Among other things, Judith Butler and other feminist philosophers, or philosophers who happen also to be feminists, have opened a wider space for the study of the representations of women in literature. Butler's oeuvre can be seen as a perverse urge to "trouble" naturalized knowledge about gender and sexuality that continue to have a hold on the ways we allow images of women to materialize on the page. Although scholars often question the use of applying postmodern or poststructuralist thought to literature of prior historical periods, for this project, that is not one of my concerns. My aim is to recognize *other possibilities* of reading women's representations in literature, and it does not seem incongruous to utilize what is politically valuable (for feminists) at present. For example, my hunch about women's representation is that more women are subversive in literature than are conventional, no matter what era. As much as hegemonic normativity may rigidly define acceptable visages of women, acceptable women's behavior, and acceptable women's activities, more women breach these boundaries within literary texts than remain within them (regardless of the ways we have come to read these women or the outcomes of the plots). Even the most conventional of heroines can be seen as insubordinate to heteronormativity if one explores them in open and diverse ways, if one consistently, repeatedly, explores them *otherwise*.

The interpretations of the following texts will be both recognizable and original; for the analyses are cloaked in the mantle of feminist critics who have come before. My project, I hope, will become yet another repetition in the *becoming* of feminist criticism... and the difference within the repetition. My re-doing and re-presenting feminist criticism through these literary texts will act as a reminder that much feminist thought, though not particularly new, is current and continuous. Opening and widening our views for the future is one way in which feminists continue to make feminism vital. As Vikki Bell notes:

... the repetition that one engages in is a process of involvement in feminism 'becoming historical', and that being alive to how feminist thought sits in relation to past ways of thinking about the phenomena that constitute feminism's concerns is not merely an exercise in thinking about the past, but is simultaneously an indication of a contemporary commitment. It is both 'historical' and futural, for the commitment is to a continuity that operates against time, that battles with the possibility that these commitments may evaporate, and that time will let them be forgotten (6).

5.3 Chapter Précis

There are a number of different directions in which these chapters proceed, for they were envisioned with an extensive flexibility in order to find possibilities for the representations of women in these novels. By questioning preconceived notions brought to the texts, indeterminacies appear within the subjectivities of these characters. What the chapters have in common are that each is an exercise in extreme deconstruction through the influence of Judith Butler's thought and theory (intermingled with feminist, poststructural thought, and mimesis theory). Each chapter analysis questions notions of gender and how those notions play out or have played out and crystallized into ready-made ideas about the protagonists. Because each chapter questions gender, then, each chapter also creates a certain tension with our heteronormative assumptions about these female protagonists. These two things act as the foundations of all chapters, which subsequently spin off into various paths that facilitate these basic explorations.

Chapter 6

“(Be)Longing in *Quicksand*:

Framing Kinship and Desire More Queerly”

Questioning the heretofore unquestioned heteronormative framing of Helga, the chapter re-interprets mimesis of the protagonist throughout the novel, and questions previous assertions about her values and desires. Helga, a continually visible character apart from the crowd, is most often interpreted as an alienated outsider who longs to be a part of a community and a woman who deeply represses her (hetero)sexuality. By re-positioning the frame that makes Helga visible, re-interpreting Helga's values and desire more queerly – especially through Judith Butler's critique of heteronormativity and kinship – we find Helga to be a more subversive character than that for which she has

thus far been credited. There is ample evidence that she generally feels comfortable with her distance from society and does not particularly enjoy heterosexual dalliances. This chapter's focus on Helga's self-crafted familial system, her homoerotic epiphany, and her ongoing demise at the hands of heterosexual reproduction all work together to performatively formulate a new variation on the extant interpretations of this character. By attempting to think differently about Helga's story, by assuming a non-heteronormative reading of the novel, this chapter allows the reader to think differently, to question how fixed is Helga's representation in this novel after all.

Chapter 7

"Undoing an Ideal

Lily Bart, Conventional Visibility, Queer Livability"

In tandem with Larsen's Helga Crane, Wharton's Lily Bart battles a similar fate. Hyper-visible on one hand, ultra-intelligible on the other, and fatally both, she runs the risk of the non-existent, a form of unintelligibility. Using Judith Butler's concepts of a livable life in conjunction with intelligibility, this chapter explicates the life situation of the most conventional of the project's heroines: Lily Bart, Edith Wharton's most famous protagonist found in *The House of Mirth*. Refusing the heteronormative narrative of most criticism on *The House of Mirth*, I argue that Lily's social downfall and death are directly connected to her ultra-intelligibility, which disallows the invisibility necessary for a livable life. Yes, one must be intelligible, but once intelligibility is established, most individuals are allowed to move unimpeded amidst their intimate constellations of society. Lily Bart, however, can never *not* be seen. She is represented as far too unique, too beautiful, too ideal to be allowed out of sight... not to mention that her persistent refusal to seal the heterosexual deal sets her even more apart from others. Therefore, between her constant visibility and her dithering on matters heterosexual, her ultra-intelligibility becomes increasingly unintelligible, leading finally to her tragic demise.

Chapter 8

Interpellating a Slippery Slope:

Framing Hero and Victim in *Ethan Frome*

Ethan Frome is best known for its intricate narration involving a young, city narrator placed in the rural, wintry, New England landscape amidst a twenty-four year old tragedy. In this chapter, I return to a skeptical reading of the narrator, whose narration has been the cause of much discussion and debate since the novel's publication. Using

Judith Butler's interpretation of Althusser's theory of interpellation, the chapter deconstructs the character of Ethan (and the narrator in the process) while constructing a more powerful representation of Zenobia Price. Through misfires of authorial intention, and Butler has much to say about these problems, the nameless narrator unwittingly creates an increasingly commanding character in Zeena, the villain of his narrative, while draining the power of his hero, Ethan. So busy with his purpose – balancing Ethan as hero and victim in his tale – the narrator does not perceive the emerging dimension and influence of his villain, Zeena. In the end, the narrator's performative account of the tale materializes the exact opposite of his intention; Zeena abounds in power and Ethan pays for the narrator's myopia.

Chapter 9

"In the Place of Clare Kendry:

A Gothic Reading of Race and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*."

A gothic reading of Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* opens a new way into this rich text. This novel is an example of how the protagonist, Irene Redfield, psychologically projects her own anxieties about race and desire onto the beautiful Clare Kendry. Clare is represented through Irene as a mysterious, untrustworthy acquaintance diametrically opposed in nature and behavior to Irene. However, it becomes clear to the reader, that Clare is more a double of Irene, more her *self* than an *other*. This extreme similarity of representation creates an uncanniness for Irene; therefore, a gothic reading of the text is fruitful in accentuating that fact, that Irene is frightened by her own hidden anxieties and desires revealed through her double, Clare. Irene's familial security, particularly her ideas of race and sex, are threatened by the mysterious and tempting beauty of her old friend. And Clare has become much too close to Irene and that closeness has left her floating about only precariously attached to her former and precious "security." The representation of Irene is disengaged from its conventional anchor, and questions about previous heteronormative readings about her character are likewise presented.

Chapter 10

The Power of Robin:

Temporal Subjectivity in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*

Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* has been noted for its disconcertingly strange ambiance, characters, and plot. Many attribute this to the loose form of the text, its gothic elements, its plethora of misfits, its sexual candidness and "abnormality." However, this

chapter proposes that one reason for the disconcerting air and plot of the novel is that the characters are held suspended in a space of quasi-subjecthood, while the source of power that would interpellate them... does not. Robin, the spokesperson for power, is the indifferent authority figure with no sense of urgency to fulfill that role. Straddling more than one temporal plane, Robin is never quite in the present as necessary to accomplish these tasks. The various characters in the book believe her to be the source of power that will interpellate them into a past – of which they have no present access – in order to live in the present and materialize a future. All await that call from Robin, some patiently and some less so. However, Robin never does actually make the call. She never hails the individuals into their respective subjectivities. Her own temporal quandaries disable her ability to execute her task. If nothing else, the dangling of individuals somewhere in the middle of their hailing, analysis suggests, at the least adds a peculiar ambiance to the text.

Chapter 6.

(Be)Longing in *Quicksand*: Framing Kinship and Desire More Queerly

... to live in society is to live in heterosexuality.
'it-goes-without-saying'
– Monique Wittig

Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* is infamous for its lingering atmosphere of almost palpable yearning. Helga Crane, the novel's off-putting and conflicted protagonist exhibits a sense of longing that is not easily explained. Most often critics read this longing as a craving to belong, a longing for kinship in the form of a nuclear family and/or an indescribable desire for something else, usually associated with heterosexual sex. Yet, I suggest Helga Crane's longing is perhaps more perverse. Her desire to belong, I think, at least in the conventional sense of belonging attributed to her, is less so than many have suggested; and her desire for heterosexual sex, I suggest, is arguable at best. Therefore, Helga can (and should) be read more queerly, for reading her in line with a conventional heteronormative lens overlooks subversive elements in the text that most palpably make up who she is.

Quicksand, unlike Nella Larsen's later novel, *Passing*, has been critiqued only through an unrelenting vision of heteronormativity.¹ Although Deborah McDowell, in her 1986 introduction to both *Quicksand* and *Passing*, argues a queer reading of *Passing*, *Quicksand*

¹ "Heteronormativity" is a term coined by Michael Warner in his 1991 essay "Fear of a Queer Planet." It is a concept akin to Butler's "heterosexual matrix" and "heterosexual hegemony" in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* respectively. Heteronormativity can be defined as the "institutions, modes of understanding, norms and discourses that treat heterosexuality as natural to humanity" (Lloyd 27).

is left surprisingly unexamined.² It is true, *Passing* has more explicit evidence perhaps for an alternative or “lesbian” reading – although even that evidence has been resisted by some critics³ – but it seems to me that Helga in *Quicksand* is a good candidate for a queerer reading than she has hitherto received.

“Queer,” in the context of this paper, will imply those elements of the novel that do not necessarily buttress heteronormativity. Queerness will not presuppose a queer identity (as in a lesbian identity, for example), but will also not foreclose that possibility. The point of using “queer” in this way is to do one thing: assert inconsistencies with or unpredictability of the character’s (or the text’s) commitment to heteronormativity, thereby destabilizing it as the primary, and only lens, by which to read the text. When evidence for heteronormative beliefs and behaviors appears weak in a text, it seems that it should be at least remarked upon. Ignoring these pieces of evidence, as slight as they may be, implicitly works as an assumption toward a text’s (or character’s) heteronormative goals, and therefore unfairly influences and even prejudices our future readings. If in our criticism we note feeble representations of those elements that feed into heteronormativity, even if they remain unexplored at the time, we can at the least reveal opportunities (for others perhaps) for readings less intent on holding up heteronormative ideals.⁴

To read outside the heteronormative lens is to consistently and with vigilance read against fundamental assumptions about a text. One of those assumptions will always be the apparent given-ness of heterosexual desire, a desire that goes without saying (as noted in the epigraph of this chapter). It is as if any text is always already assumed innocent (heterosexual) until proven guilty (something else). Not to mention that the proof of guilt for many must be no less than some kind of genital sex, otherwise it can be discounted as insignificant or even skewed to maintain a heterosexual bias.⁵ As a

² Jessica G. Rabin, in her 2004 book *Surviving the Crossing*, states: “While Deborah McDowell offers a convincing reading of queer overtones in *Passing*, no one has questioned Helga’s heterosexuality, nor do I intend to do so” (144).

³ This will be commented upon more fully on the following page.

⁴ Deborah E. McDowell’s analysis of Larsen’s sister-novel *Passing*, for example, is an analysis that questions exactly heteronormative ideals and opens up possibilities for new readings of that novel. More will be said about McDowell’s analysis later.

⁵ McDowell’s criticism of *Passing*, mentioned earlier, even now stirs up debate, and it seems to me, her argument has quite enough evidence to support her claims. However, Thadious Davis in 1994 is known to have questioned McDowell’s reading, bringing the argument back to a heterosexual context by insisting that Irene’s fear is not rooted in her attraction to Clare after all, but in the possibility of Clare’s and Brian’s mutual affection. See Thadious Davis, *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, A Woman’s Life Unveiled*. In keeping with this resistance, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, a decade later, states: “While there is a strong, erotic attraction between the two women, I am not convinced that *Passing* can be called a lesbian text” (867). This is rather an irrelevant assertion since McDowell did not declare *Passing* to be a lesbian text. It also displays the resistance to reading outside a heterosexual plot by admitting to the evident “erotic attraction between the

norm, heterosexuality relies on the very taboos it creates, yet insists on its separation from them, its pureness.⁶ The argument here is not to replace a “heterosexual” project with a “homosexual” one, but instead to simply question our axiomatic reactions in reading a text, and to note how far-reaching those reactions can be. If we mechanically read heteronormatively, every aspect of our analysis is affected. For example, if we believe Helga Crane is heterosexual, we will then see a heterosexual plot for Helga in all aspects of her life, no matter what evidence there is to the contrary. As Monique Wittig has said:

“[T]o live in society is to live in heterosexuality.... Heterosexuality is always already there within all mental categories. It has sneaked into dialectical thought (or thought of differences) as its main category” (Wittig qtd in Warner xxi).⁷

We assume that everything about her, all her desires and longings, are implicitly connected to her heterosexuality; her desires in kinship, marriage, reproduction all become interrelated.

This chapter will argue that a less conventional framing of Helga Crane’s wish to belong has the potential to produce new ways of thinking such themes important to *Quicksand* such as kinship and desire. For if we only see Helga’s (be)longing through an heterosexual frame, we cannot think a kinship system that is other than the one Helga so obviously lacks, and we constantly mistake what is desired *of/for* her as a reflection somehow of her own desire. But, kinship and desire are more complicated configurations. Kinship does not have to reflect the taken-for-granted heterosexual structure. Being able to think outside heteronormativity means questioning the kinship system at its very roots, since Helga’s case fundamentally questions how to make one’s way in the world without such a system, or better yet, suggests the creation of new systems. Likewise, we must rethink how desire works in this novel. Because the men in her life desire her should not be reason enough to assume Helga returns their emotion. In fact, the text gives rather strong evidence to the contrary. Helga’s desire seems not to

two women,” on the one hand, yet lending it no significance on the other. In this logic, homoeroticism and same-sex attraction is more apt to imply heterosexuality than lesbianism. Interesting. The ambiguous and transgressive sexualities of the two characters are essentially ‘whitewashed’ and returned to acceptable sexual realms. Later, in the same article, the author notes that “queer readings” of *Passing* only provide “a more nuanced vocabulary” to discuss the two character’s “mutual attraction,” but have no other apparent use (850-1). See her article “‘A Plea for Color’: Nella Larsen’s Iconography of the Mulatta.”

⁶ In *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, Judith Butler reminds us that the “norm cannot exist without perversion, and only through perversion can the norm be established” (76). Of course the problem she finds with acknowledging this point is that it is not enough to simply *know*, for “the perverse remains entombed precisely there, as the essential and negative feature of the norm, and the relation between the two remains static, giving way to no rearticulation of the norm itself” (76).

⁷ Wittig 40, 43

be for men at all. She has stronger feelings about her wardrobe than about the men in her life. And, if her desire is not for men, what does that suggest about her (be)longing?

In her 2009 book, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Judith Butler explores the ways in which pictures – physical pictures, metaphorical pictures of social issues – are edited by framing and therefore the frame “implicitly guides the interpretation” of the picture itself (8). “When a picture is framed,” she notes, “any number of ways of commenting on or extending the picture may be at stake,” which “tends to function [...] as an editorial embellishment of the image” (8). Butler further calls attention to the complex phrase in English “to be framed,” which, outside the picture analogy, alludes to being taken advantage of, “set up,” or having “evidence planted against one” that “establishes guilt” (8). Framing, in other words, is not a neutral or impartial event, and can presume guilt, either on the side of the person framed, or on the side of the person doing the framing. Therefore, I embark on “framing” Helga Crane myself, knowingly setting out to prove her guilty of subverting heteronormativity by suggesting queer alternatives to previous readings of *Quicksand*, especially having to do with kinship and desire.

Helga is already framed in many ways by preceding critics of *Quicksand*; therefore, framing Helga more queerly will interact with these frames.⁸ Previous scholarship has explored the look-at-edness or spectacle of Helga through her image,⁹ her clothing,¹⁰ her color,¹¹ etc. This visibility is an effect of Nella Larsen’s protagonist in *Quicksand* most often attributed to – and necessarily – coupled with kinship and desire¹² since she is set apart from others familially, racially, and through her convoluted and conflicting desire. Helga Crane is visible no matter what her setting. No matter by which “race” she is surrounded, she is seen. This desire as spectacle could be associated with her embarrassment as a child when she “saw herself for an obscene sore” to her family,

⁸ “The aesthetic of the shopwindow,” states Meredith Goldsmith, “dominates *Quicksand* from its first scene, in which Helga Crane frames herself with commodities. The interplay of light and shadow focuses the reader’s attention on Helga” (102). Please see “Shopping to Pass, Passing to Shop: Bodily Self-Fashioning in the Fiction of Nella Larsen.”

⁹ Please see Pamela Barnett, “‘My picture of you is, after all, the true Helga Crane’: Portraiture and Identity in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*”; Terri Francis, “Embodied Fictions, Melancholy Migrations: Josephine Baker’s Cinematic Celebrity”; Jeffrey Gray, “Essence and the Mulatto Traveler: Europe as Embodiment in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*”; Jacquelyn Y. McLendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen*; Cheryl Wall, “Passing for what? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen’s Novels.”

¹⁰ See Ann E. Hostetler, “The Aesthetics of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*,” and Kimberley Roberts, “The Clothes Make the Woman: The Symbolics of Prostitution in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*.”

¹¹ See Cherene Sherrard-Johnson.

¹² “Desire” in *Quicksand* is always multi-layered and associated with Helga’s visibility. It suggests Helga’s desire for materiality – that which makes her visible – countered by the passionate desire others have for Helga, roused by that same visibility. There is a third dimension to “desire” in *Quicksand* as well, which is simply Helga’s desire to desire. In none of these layers resides a clear and indisputable desire espoused by heteronormativity. These unique exhibitions of desire will each be explored throughout the chapter.

something “at all costs to be hidden” (29). By re-creating her kinship system only to love those things related to “gorgeousness” (to be discussed later), Helga’s life becomes a project of maintaining a certain visibility through the fantastic garb and other flamboyant and rich material goods with which she surrounds herself. Her visibility inevitably leads to her consistent separation from society, as her look-at-edness – a kind of untouchableness and separateness – trumps all other modes of human interaction. Thus, Helga designs her own kinship system of things which diminishes any (be)longing she might feel toward human kin.

It has been noted in prior scholarship that Helga is framed as if in a “picture” through the entirety of the text:

Like a portrait painter, Larsen's narrator positions Helga inside frames and strategically places her at the center of the settings in which she appears. The lighting focuses on Helga's features and catches the sheen of the fabrics she wears. The narrator paints Helga's image with meticulous attention to colors, shadows, and shapes. (Barnett 575)

Indeed, the “real Helga Crane” is finally supposed to be found literally in a frame, a picture painted by Axel Olsen, the Danish artist, who paints a seductive look-alike of Helga that satisfies his heterosexual outlook and desire.

Kinship

One way Helga has been framed by critics is through the palpable yearning in the novel to “belong.” And that belonging is usually assumed as traditional familial relations or blood kin. But in Larsen’s text kinship is displayed differently. As George Hutchinson writes in his 2006 biography of Nella Larsen:

In place of the Oedipal drama and the incest taboo [...], Larsen turns to a female-centered drama figuring the abandonment of women, death in childbirth, the enslavement of the body to procreation of racialized subjects alienated from themselves and their mothers by national ideologies of racial and class identity. (Hutchinson 239)

Like the Greek myth of Antigone, Larsen’s story could be a way of imagining kinship otherwise. Judith Butler imagines, in her book *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (2000), what our thoughts about kinship might be if we were to use Antigone¹³

¹³ To be brief, in Sophocles’ play, Antigone, a daughter/sister of Oedipus, buries her dead brother (Polyneices) against the edict of the King, her maternal uncle Creon, thereby committing a crime against the state punishable by death. Polyneices and his brother Eteocles killed each other in battle, and Creon gives a military funeral to Eteocles, but proclaims Polyneices a traitor and in retribution commands he remain unburied.

instead of Oedipus¹⁴ as our model. Antigone is often seen as representative of kinship and/or natural laws of god and family, while Creon is seen as representative of man-made law and the state. But, as Butler points out in her book, Antigone is no role model for heteronormativity. She comes from an incestuous union between her father/brother, Oedipus, and his/their mother, she has an arguably incestuous love for her dead brother Polyneices – whom she places in importance above all other kinship relations – even parents and spouse. She does not marry, and she does not bear children. This is as different a story as one can be from the heteronormative espoused through the Freudian Oedipus myth.

Heterosexual desire, marriage, children, parents, spouse are all integral cogs in the wheel of (heteronormative) kinship, and yet, Helga Crane, like Antigone, perversely engages in or handles all of them. In his 1997 book *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel*, Lawrence Rodgers notes that one of Helga Crane's biggest issues throughout the novel *Quicksand*, is her "absence of a usable past" (90). He proposes that because she has "neither real nor surrogate family to sustain and guide her, she is unable to imbed herself within a stabilizing, unified, progressive community" (90). It is

Antigone defies the power of the state by burying her brother and insists to Creon (when she is caught) that her familial right and duty trumps the state's interest. Creon is unyielding and sentences Antigone to death, imprisoning her alive within a cave. In "much literary theory and philosophical discourse," Butler notes, Antigone comes to "represent kinship and its dissolution, and Creon comes to represent an emergent ethical order and state authority based on principles of universality" (Butler AC 2). This interpretation can be attributed to Hegel who further separates the two as representative of the "household gods" and the "law of the state" respectively (4). Further, he "insists that the conflict between them is one in which kinship must give way to state authority as the final arbiter of justice" (4-5). But Butler complicates the story by revealing the presupposed suppositions within this simple binary comparison: "Opposing Antigone to Creon as the encounter between the forces of kinship and those of state power," suggests Butler, "fails to take into account the ways in which Antigone has already departed from kinship, herself the daughter of an incestuous bond, herself devoted to an impossible and death-bent incestuous love of her brother, how her actions compel others to regard her as 'manly' and thus cast doubt on the way that kinship might underwrite gender, how her language, paradoxically, most closely approximates Creon himself assumes his sovereignty only by virtue of the kinship line that enables that succession, how he becomes, as it were, unmanned by Antigone's defiance, and finally by his own actions, at once abrogating the norms that secure his place in kinship and in sovereignty" (5-6).

¹⁴ As is used in Freudian psychoanalysis, the Oedipus complex is a "vital stage in psycho-sexual development" in which the handling of desires will determine "not only the subject's future sexual orientation but also how its ego and superego (conscience) develop" (Lloyd 82). At bottom, it configures kinship arrangements. It is built on the basic plot of the myth of Oedipus, who is fated to kill his father and marry his mother. The Oedipus stage is one in which the child "experiences unconscious desires for its mother," while simultaneously experiencing "resentment of and hostility towards its father, even desiring his death" (82). The complex is finally resolved when, under fear of castration – the story differs for girls – the child yields to the father's authority, renounces its incestuous desires for the mother (tacitly accepting the incest taboo) and identifies with one of its parents (82). For a concise explanation of Freud's complex and Butler's use of it, please see Moya Lloyd, *Judith Butler*.

true enough that Helga's lack of kin has a negative bearing on her life. She is clearly ashamed of the fact, since upper class black society requires one to account for oneself through familial connections, and because her story consists of miscegenation, the questionable marital status of her parents, and her painful rejection by stepfather and stepsiblings. In fact, perhaps it is best said by the narrator focalized through Helga at the opening of the novel:

No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga, it accounted for everything, her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville. It even accounted for her engagement to James. Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong.' You could be queer, or even attractive, or bad, or brilliant, or even love beauty and such nonsense if you were a Rankin, or a Leslie, or a Scoville; in other words, if you had a family. But if you were just plain Helga Crane, of whom nobody had ever heard, it was presumptuous of you to be anything but inconspicuous and conformable. (8)

But, to assume we know that it is the equivalent of a conventional family that Helga wants is to simplify this often incongruous character. Is it the family she wants, or is it something else? It appears Helga desires something more than just family. She wants what one gets *with* family, and a socialite family at that. The commencement of the quote above suggests that she longs to "belong," but as one reads further, the implications of "belonging" encompass something more and something different. Akin to her later comment about money, she claims it is not the money itself, but what can be gotten from money that she wants: "[a]lways she had wanted, not money, but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things" (67). Likewise, she does not aspire necessarily to belong to the black aristocracy; what Helga wants are the things that a high status family can secure, like freedom to be an individual, to be different.¹⁵ Always Helga, as noted by her uncanny visibility within the novel's own frame, is separated from the crowd.

The "things" Helga desires balance along the tangible and intangible. The tangible articles are easily identified, namely fine clothing and luxurious surroundings. She desires these things for the attention they evoke, for the conspicuousness they allow. These "things" are frequently used as a framing device for Helga Crane, from the "oriental"¹⁶ portrait of her in the opening scene of *Quicksand*,¹⁷ to the *décolleté* dress she

¹⁵ Indeed Helga even employs the more conventional use of the term "queer" in the earlier quotation to demonstrate her desire for difference, to be discernible from the masses.

¹⁶ "Larsen relies on Orientalist representations of African American women to distinguish Helga from the race women at Naxos and in Harlem" (Sherrard-Johnson 842).

wears at the Harlem club (56), to the afternoon luxuriating in her boudoir in Denmark (67). When surrounded by expensive, beautiful materiality, Helga feels the intangible effects of what this kinship induces, the sensations of independence and freedom. She appreciates, adores, even loves the finer things in life to such an extent that she relies on them as one would rely on any kinship system, to support and validate her. Her “things” surround her like proxies of a high class family. They literally materialize her – make her visible – and set her apart; their exquisite quality raises her in social standing.

Throughout *Quicksand*, Helga does not spend an immense amount of time thinking about or discussing her “family” situation. In fact, it is only to the influential Mrs. Hayes-Rore that Helga displays any emotion regarding it. To her employer’s question regarding her “people,” Helga curtly notes that she has no ancestral connections (Larsen 38). When the woman presses her on the subject, Helga exasperatedly wonders if she is “to be forever explaining her people – or lack of them?” (38). Irritated, she does explain and by the end of her monologue, “[p]assionately, tearfully, incoherently, the final words tumbled from her quivering petulant lips” (39). It is not surprising that Helga shows such strong emotion since her entire being is a pent-up, condensed package of it, but it is surprising to see her frustration and pain displayed in tears. She is, after all, proud of her ability to control her passions.

Yet kinship, or more accurately, Helga’s lack of human kinship has been a most defining characteristic of her identity. It is an irritating and a painful one, to be sure, but in spite of this Helga has moved forward to find satisfaction within a relational context. Her own “family” materializes through the tangible “things” that make her visible and their intangible values that set her apart. The ties that bind for Helga are the ties forged through the connections between self and the “things” that accumulate to form the general portrait of Helga Crane. “With no ready-made familial or racial identity she must essentially create herself” (120), states Allison Berg in her book *Mothering the Race*. Create herself indeed, and while she is at it, she fashions a stand-in family as well. With these new bonds, Helga experiences a sense of belonging that no family has ever evoked, as demonstrated by the description of Helga settling into the material comfort provided her in Denmark: “She took to luxury as the proverbial duck to water. And she took to admiration and attention even more eagerly” (Larsen 67). It is important to note that it is not these distant relations, Aunt Katrina and Uncle Poul, who provide a sense of belonging, but the material extravagance (luxury) and the subsequent attention (admiration) she receives that make her feel at home: “This, then, was where she

¹⁷ “Helga Crane sat alone in her room, which at that hour, eight in the evening, was in soft gloom. Only a single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade, made a pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet, on the bright covers of the books which she had taken down from their long shelves, on the white pages of the opened one selected, on the shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums beside her on the low table and on the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet” (Larsen QS 1).

belonged. This was her proper setting” (67). In this framing of Helga Crane, it is the setting and not the people that make it “proper,” that make it a good fit. Ironically, however, this kinship is also that which separates her from others. In Denmark, she “makes an impression,” she “inflamm[e]s attention and admiration,” she is “seen, gaped at, desired” (74). In Harlem, her clothing “attracted attention” and she “accept[ed] admiration as her due” (98). In Naxos,

“[c]lothes had been one of her difficulties.... Helga Crane loved clothes, elaborate ones. Nevertheless, she had tried not to offend. But with small success, for, although she had affected the deceptively simple variety, the hawk eyes of dean and matrons had detected the subtle difference from their own irreproachably conventional garments. Too, they felt that the colors were queer; dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds, in soft, luxurious woolens, or heavy, clinging silks. And the trimmings – when Helga used them at all – seemed to them odd. Old laces, strange embroideries, dim brocades. Her faultless, slim shoes made them uncomfortable and her small plain hats seemed to them positively indecent” (18).

The protagonist of *Quicksand* by necessity assumes an alternative ontology through a nonhuman circle of kinship. Her search for belonging is in an entirely unique sphere, for she remains aloof in human circles (34). In fact, throughout the novel, Helga walks a fine line between belonging to the world of “things” or people, object or subject.¹⁸ So important are her things, for example, that even when destitute in Chicago, she prefers to sacrifice food in order to collect a “tapestry purse” (32). Helga holds a deep loyalty to this “kin,” even assuming a truly inherent, biological connection for which she will fight... or flee. In Naxos, for instance, the setting for her first stand – and flight – is instigated by the direct insult to her “kin” by the dean. In a speech, this “great ‘race’ woman” raves against color, arguing that “[b]lack, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming for colored people,” and the more vivid colors are “vulgar” (17-18). Helga finds herself incensed by this speech, for bright colors are directly connected to her “things.” Her belief is that “dark-complexioned people *should* wear yellow, green, and red,” not to mention orange (18). And, how does she know this? It is “intuitive,” we find; some “unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness” tells her so (18).

So, now we have a word for it, for Helga’s “things.” They fall under the realm of “gorgeousness,” both the materiality of gorgeousness and its affects. Of course other

¹⁸ Ann E. Hostetler suggests that Helga attempts to “create herself through a careful arrangement and selection of artifacts” (36); Kimberly Roberts’ 1997 article also notes: “According to certain formulations, she [Helga] is seen as only an object/victim, not an agent/subject” (108). Finally, in Claudia Tate’s book *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, the chapter on *Quicksand* is titled: “Helga Crane: Desiring Subject or Desired Object” (119).

critics have commented on Helga's aesthetic acumen. Ann Hostetler, for example, specifically suggests that color, for Helga, must be seen as "fruitful multiplicity" rather than "division" (35). "Through her love of color Helga attempts to create a spectrum rather than an opposition, a palette that will unify her life rather than leave it divided" (35). Allison Berg sees Helga Crane's keen aesthetic pleasure as artistic.¹⁹ But, returning to the text itself, perhaps what is most interesting about the narrator's comment regarding this love for color is the use of "racial" to describe how deeply rooted this impulse is in the protagonist. For, "racial" denotes something remarkable, especially having just come after a description of Helga as a "despised mulatto" (Larsen 18).²⁰ To which "race" would she then be referring? Is it from her "colored" blood? If so, why does the dean, or anyone else Helga encounters, not share this "need"? Is it from her white blood? Not likely, since it explicitly must be associated with a dark complexion (that of the "mulatto" being assumed to have a part in this group). Although the term "race" itself implies a kind of kinship, Helga's specific "racial" need is one that is not shared by others, an important fact in pinning down her desire to shun the conventional family model for one fashioned, quite literally, by herself.

Visibility and... Separateness

Of course Helga's movement in the novel has been attributed to a longing to belong in one community, in one kinship system or another. Naxos, Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen, and the unnamed rural Alabama town are all places she attempts. "Helga Crane moves five times in the novel, each time looking for a setting in which she'll 'fit in,'" Pamela Barnett observes in her article (575). Yet, as previously discussed, we cannot assume "fitting in" or "belonging" in their conventional ways. Most critics of *Quicksand* have presumed that these terms really do mean blending in or merging into the various communities in which she engages. However, Helga gives us every reason to believe that this is not her wish at all. She never exhibits any desire to merge into the crowd. Her wish, instead, is that she remain visible, apart, and she uses her colorful and spectacular kinship as a catalyst for it.²¹ In Naxos, for example, although she states that

¹⁹ Helga "defines freedom in aesthetic terms; her self-presentations make what she calls a 'plea for color,' an unapologetic assertion of a new black aesthetic that might remove the stigma of her 'racial markings'" (Berg 105).

²⁰ The full text reads as follows: "The dean was a woman from one of the 'first families' – a great 'race' woman; she, Helga Crane, a despised mulatto, but something intuitive, some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colours *were* fitting and that dark-complexioned people *should* wear yellow, green, and red. Black, brown, and gray were ruinous to them, actually destroyed the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins" (Larsen QS 18).

²¹ About Helga's belonging, Meredith Goldsmith says there is a "tension between individuality and the establishment" in *Quicksand*, and that Helga has a "simultaneous desire to fit in and to stand out" (145).

she had initially attempted to become a part of the Naxos community, upon reflection she admits that she could not conform: “Always she had considered it a lack of understanding on the part of the community, but in her present new revolt she realized that the fault had been partly hers. A lack of acquiescence. She hadn’t really wanted to be made over” (7).

Her commitment to “gorgeousness” disallows the drab makeover Naxos would have provided. Instead of assimilating, like James Vayle, she holds herself visibly apart by remaining an enigma. Her colleague Margaret comments on Helga’s outsider status: “You never tell anybody anything about yourself” (13). Furthermore, she is “a little afraid of Helga,” followed by the fact that “[n]early everyone was” (13). Her reticence and rather frightening demeanor illustrate Helga’s disinterest in becoming a part of the community in Naxos. But, this is not her only way of remaining detached; Margaret’s final comment reiterates this: “It’s nice having you here, Helga. We all think so.” “We need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives” (14). Not only does Margaret testify that Helga is set apart from the community, mostly because of her visibility, but she unconsciously (and correctly) associates Helga – as a “decoration” – more closely with “things,” with her non-human kin, than with her colleagues and community.

In Chicago, the narrator notes that Helga feels like she is “home,” an obvious allusion to a sense of belonging, but then belies that sensation by following it up immediately with the assurance that regardless of the feeling, Helga is and will remain homeless: “And, oddly enough, she felt, too, that she had come home. She, Helga Crane, who had no home” (30). She has no home in the conventional sense, but clings to her own kinship of gorgeousness that includes a “self-sufficient uninterested manner adopted instinctively as a protective measure for her acute sensitiveness” (34). This manner separates her from the community with a “faint hint of offishness which hung about her and repelled advances, an arrogance that stirred in people a peculiar irritation. They noticed her, admired her clothes, but that was all” (34). Further, Helga overtly insists on her separateness. Unequivocally the text states:

“She didn’t, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn’t merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin” (55).

There is no answer from Helga about what makes folks kin, but her assertion that it is “something broader [and] deeper” than race echoes her passion about rich and deep colors, the colors of things, and thereby about an alternative kinship, one that is collective and collectible, one that is innate (as her gorgeousness is after all), yet not born within but sought from without, shopped for.

In Harlem, she feels again that “magic sense of having come home” (43), that Harlem has “welcomed her and lulled her into something that was, she was certain, peace and contentment” (43). Yet, just as in the previous example, the text betrays ambivalence

about this idea of home and belonging. The simple phrase, “she was certain” ironically evokes the exact opposite sentiment. By professing her to be certain, it contradicts her certainty. Tongue in cheek, the narrator plays on Helga’s inability to understand such emotions, as she has admitted earlier in a focalized moment at the beginning of the novel about “happiness”:

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

Her belonging to conventional communities such as the ones in Chicago or Harlem, then, has as much to do with her ability to set herself apart as it does to fit in. It is true, in Harlem she does “attempt to emerge from that inherent aloneness which was part of her very being” (63). But, again, as noted in the language, it is an attempt that implies failure from the start and shores up the power of her greater desire to be alone, to be different, to be apart. Attempting to be a part of a human community and step outside of her “aloneness” brings with it only “dullness and a great aversion” (63), and we see in the end Helga’s yearning to recuperate as slowly as possible in Alabama, for in bed is the only space she can return to her “aloneness” again (130).

Finally, in Denmark, Helga dismisses the façade of belonging to a community at all and sets herself squarely into a place of difference, into the lush materiality, the gorgeousness of her surrogate “family.”²² Before the surrounding backdrop of whiteness, she is unmistakably visible and unmistakably apart.²³ Of course, this is not to say that her decisions about clothing and the fact of her visibility are always comfortable for Helga. They are not. Her feelings about them are especially ambivalent because she is not in full control of them; Aunt Katrina takes full responsibility for her wardrobe. We are given ample evidence of this in Denmark when Helga attempts to understand the significance of being paraded around in the clothing and jewelry chosen by her aunt and uncle. She feels like a “veritable savage,” a “queer dark creature,” a “new and strange species of pet dog” (69-70). At the beginning of her Danish adventure Aunt Katrina stresses Helga’s difference and foreignness (68), and Helga attempts to

²² I am arguing directly against such critics as George Hutchinson in his 2006 biography of Larsen. He claims that Helga goes to Denmark hoping to find “her people,” and that it is only after the vaudeville act that she “realizes that their interest in her is predicated on her not being ‘one of them’ (234). “This recognition,” he goes on to say, “precipitates an intense feeling of alienation from those around her” (234).

²³ As has been noted by so many critics, Helga is exoticized by the Danes, by her Aunt and Uncle, by her would-be suitor, Axel Olsen. Please see Barnett 578; Kimberley Roberts, “The Clothes Make the Woman: The Symbolics of Prostitution in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*”; Claude McKay’s “Home to Harlem,” and “Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*: Untangling the Web of Exoticism” by Debra B. Silverman.

translate what that will mean to her. “Did it mean that the difference should be stressed, accented? Helga wasn’t so sure that she liked that. *Hitherto all her efforts had been toward similarity to those about her*” [emphasis mine] (72). This observation seems disingenuous at best. As has been demonstrated up to this point, Helga revels in her separateness. In every location she has escaped, she has striven to hold herself apart from that community. Most often this has been achieved through her need to relate to “gorgeousness” or her material kin, and it seems that Denmark will be no different, except that the difference is more pronounced and not entirely within her control. However, in the end her need for the kinship of clothing outweighs her anxiety of disapproval: “Gradually Helga’s perturbation subsided in the unusual pleasure of having so many new and expensive clothes at one time” (74).

A final note on Helga Crane’s views of kinship is to point out that rather than secure a conventional family or kinship through marriage with any of her numerous suitors, she chooses to remain alone (until her final and calamitous decision). Even as she stands on the brink of matrimony into the Vayle family, she breaks off her engagement and commits what she herself terms “social suicide” (Larsen 8). This foreshadows her later quasi suicide at the hands of Pastor Green and her disastrous attempt at a conventional “family” in Alabama, a direct consequence of her deliberate turn away from material kinship.

We return again to Helga’s non-material longing, that part of “gorgeousness” that she cannot name and therefore is merged and convoluted from the start with her need for material goods. In an early self investigative moment of the novel, Helga asks herself what it is that she truly wants: “But just what did she want? Barring a desire for material security, gracious ways of living, a profusion of lovely clothes, and a goodly share of envious admiration, Helga Crane didn’t know, couldn’t tell.” (11) Because of the overwhelming evidence of her materialism, a tangible kinship that assigns her value and support, we forget that Helga’s ambivalent search is also for something more than the material things she is so pampered with in Denmark and luxuriates in at Anne’s home in New York. Yet, these desires are incomprehensible to Helga and therefore remain formless and indistinct to the reader. One desire of Helga’s is happiness, as previously noted. But, we never get a clear idea of what happiness means to her simply because she cannot materialize it for herself, let alone for us.

Perhaps this is why critics assume Helga is looking for happiness through (hetero)sexual desire. It is true that evidence of desire can be found throughout the novel; in fact, there is an underlying throbbing of desire pervasive in the text. But, I would suggest that although much of that desire manifests itself as sexual, it does not follow necessarily that it is heterosexual. In her 1995 article on *Quicksand*, Claudia Tate discusses the novel’s plot:

Because of the traditional sexual expectations that govern a woman's life, each scenario has a romantic plot, as social convention attempts to stage Helga's marriage. At almost every turn in the plot, then, there is the possibility for what Helga's associates would regard as a successful marriage for her. (243)

This rather exemplifies my point. By revealing the deliberate and uncontested framing of the text (by critics) through conventional romantic plots, the chance for a more profound scrutiny of the text is foregone. Tate further notes that the “matrimonial possibilities form a series of perverse romances that reflect [Helga’s] repressed desire” (244). I would agree that the romances are perverse, but not because of Helga’s repressed (heterosexual) desire. Rather, it is her lack of desire for heterosexual romantic plots at all and our resistance to reading outside of those plots that make them perverse.

As has been discussed previously, Helga’s longing is most often for the kinship that “gorgeousness” offers, the distinctness of her aesthetic community rather than the community in general, and the men in her life in particular. However, if one is to discuss heterosexual desire in *Quicksand*, I suggest that Helga’s feelings of repulsion toward the men in her life far outweigh her desire. Simply put, Helga is indeed “overtly disgusted by sex” (Barnett 596), but I would add the word “heterosexual” to this comment as it is clear that the sex in question here is of that nature. In the article “Essence and the Mulatto Traveler: Europe as Embodiment in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*,” Jeffrey Gray states that Helga is “tormented by a disgust for the physical (264). Human bodies, “especially the bodies of her close male contacts [...] arouse revulsion in Helga” (264). These observations are difficult to refute, as will be shown subsequently in the parsing out of the evidence related to each male associate. The literary critics’ framing of Helga’s heterosexual desire in *Quicksand* has become so taken for granted that it is never questioned, even though the proof of that desire is quite weak.

Queering Heterosexual Desire

The first man connected to Helga is James Vayle, her colleague at the school in Naxos. She is engaged to him almost as soon as she begins teaching, yet when she thinks later of James in a sexual context, she feels a “curious sensation of repugnance” (24). As she continues to think about him, she realizes that even if she had stayed in Naxos, she would never have married him. The text goes on to describe her feelings more strongly:

[a]cute nausea rose in her as she recalled the slight quivering of his lips sometimes when her hands had unexpectedly touched his; the throbbing vein in his forehead on a gay day when they had wandered off alone across the low hills and she had allowed him frequent kisses under the shelter of some low-hanging willows.” (24).

It seems fairly obvious that Helga is sexually repulsed by James Vayle, yet critics rather than seeing this as a rejection of heterosexual sex, only read her repulsion as sexual repression (this is with good reason, of course, since black women authors had to negotiate a fine line if they were to deal with sexuality at all).²⁴ We take her attraction to James as a given, and her repulsion is dismissed as an anomalous reaction caused by her inability to express herself sexually. Is it too outlandish to acknowledge the possibility that Helga is actually repulsed not just by the man of the moment, but by the idea of heterosexual sex at all?

An excerpt from the text often used to explain Helga's sexual repression regarding James Vayle is the following: "The idea that she was in but one nameless way necessary to him filled her with a sensation amounting almost to shame" (8). Again, critics have looked at this statement as evidence of Helga's repressed sexuality, that her shame is in response to her own desire.²⁵ However, Helga is no prude. Yes, of course Helga is sexually repressed, as discussed previously, but at this point in the text it seems more plausible that she is embarrassed by James' overt sexual desire, and more importantly by his inability to control that sexuality. The shame is for him, and by extension, for herself because of him, this man who is unable to restrain himself in her presence, this man who noticeably cannot control himself.²⁶ Yet, even if she does feel shame because

²⁴ Deborah E. McDowell, in her introduction to *Quicksand* and *Passing*, suggests that the sexual repression Helga exhibits is due to the slippery slope black women authors had to negotiate regarding sexuality: "Since the very beginning of their history running over roughly 130 years, black women novelists have treated sexuality with caution and reticence, a pattern clearly linked to the network of social and literary myths perpetuated throughout history about black women's libidinousness" (xii). She discusses the delicate balance Larsen would have had to maneuver, namely "[h]ow to give a black female character the right to healthy sexual expression and pleasure without offending the proprieties established by the spokespersons of the black middle class?" She suggests "[t]he answer to these questions for Larsen lay in attempting to hold these two virtually contradictory impulses in the same novel" (xvi). She goes on to note that "[w]e might say that Larsen wanted to tell the story of the black woman with sexual desires, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle-class terms. The latter desire committed her to exploring black female sexuality obliquely and, inevitably, to permitting it only within the context of marriage, despite the strangling effects of that choice both on her characters and on her narratives" (xvi). Allison Berg also notes the treacherousness of this particular theme in *Quicksand*: "Given the persistent stereotypes of black women's sexuality, Helga – a single and sensual black woman who scorns marriage and middle-class respectability – makes a particularly dangerous subject" (104).

²⁵ McDowell, for example, reads this passage literally, as evidence of Helga's shame about her own sexuality (xxi).

²⁶ Helga is indeed proud of and values a person's ability for control. For example, she is proud when she remains "silent, ostensibly unaware" at Olsen's less than chivalrous insinuation (Larsen QS 84). She is pleased by her ability control her personality and mannerisms in order to elicit specific responses from others: In Copenhagen, for example, she "retain[s] that air of remoteness" she had always possessed, and in that setting simply enhanced her mystery and "added another clinging wisp of charm" to her person (74). At the club, she prides herself in getting out of the "jungle" by "cloak[ing] herself in faint disgust" and reinforcing her "determination to get away" (59).

of her position as sexual object for James, does it automatically follow that Helga is struggling with a real desire for him, for sex with him? On another, perhaps more queer note, the excerpt can also assume her shame to erupt from a recognition that she is flouting heteronormativity. She is ashamed that she is disgusted by heterosexual sex.

Axel Olsen

Helga's next male suitor is Axel Olsen, the well-known artist and eccentric. Again, when Helga is faced with a possible sexual encounter, even marriage, a "curious feeling of repugnance" washes over her (85).

"She was too amazed to discover suddenly how intensely she disliked him, disliked the shape of his head, the mop of his hair, the line of his nose, the tones of his voice, the nervous grace of his long fingers; disliked even the very look of his irreproachable clothes" (85).

And later, just before her rejection of his proposal, Helga's "ironic gaze" critiques his "leonine head, his broad nose [...] his bushy eyebrows, surmounting thick, drooping lids" and "sullen blue eyes" (87). Here is an opportunity for heterosexual relations, and again, instead of feeling desire at the prospect, Helga becomes disgusted, "fragment[ing] the object of her gaze" to a point that "mutilates him in some way" by severing "parts away from the whole" (Barnett 590). She begins to truly despise the man who would be lover. At one point she asks herself in astonishment, "Was it possible? Was it really this man that she had thought, even wished, she could marry?" (Larsen QS 85). It is not new to point out that her attraction to Axel was tepid from the start, her intentions more closely aligned with her concern about status and gorgeousness, influenced by a wish to appease her aunt and uncle. What is new is to entertain the possibility that Helga is thus trying to persuade herself to adopt a heteronormative life.

Any passion for Axel is manifested through the strength of Helga's feelings of repulsion. After his theatrical matrimonial tender, Helga retreats from his ensuing embrace with "something suddenly wild in her face and manner" (87). It is clearly not erotic passion that runs wild in Helga, and although we do not know exactly what it is, it seems more apt to be a wildness born of her freedom to remain outside the conjugal bonds.

Robert Anderson

Of course next to Robert Anderson, the other men Helga encounters are rather easily explained away. For no one else carries any such significance throughout the majority of the text. She has a "mystifying yearning" upon her first meeting with Robert, but the yearning that "sang and throbbed in her" is a yearning for service (20). Granted it is

service for him, for “his work, his plans, his hopes,” but we never quite understand what that might mean (20). It could certainly be that she feels sexual desire for him: Larsen’s sexualized language could be one hint, but at this point in the plot it seems a bit too early to say definitively. Likewise, when she sees Robert again in New York at a Harlem uplift activity, the text is again coquettish about her feelings. The “vague yearning” while riding in the taxi following the activity is “strange” and “ill-defined,” a decidedly indefinite emotion, bordering precariously on skepticism. It is not wholly different from her first sighting of him at the lecture (50). She feels a “sudden thrill” when she sees Robert, but the “quiver” down her spine is then described as “peculiar” and “not wholly disagreeable” (49). Again, it seems the narrator is playing along with the paradox of Helga’s character. The double negative does make a positive, but a timid one. Rhetorically, the double negative lessens the strength of the emotion, leaving room for doubt. Compare this to those moments in the text when there is a definitive understanding of Helga’s emotional state, and we find a much different rhetorical strategy, a straightforward sentence such as “She was happy again (72),” or “And she was not happy” (51), or “All interest had gone out of living” (47), or “Suddenly she hated them all” (3). The certainty in these moments is stated decisively, demonstrating that Helga is, after all, capable of unambiguous sentiment around which the narrator does not dialogically tiptoe. But, it is as if the narrator herself were in on Helga’s joke. One moment she seems truly attracted to Robert, and the next, she is simply smitten by the feelings of desire themselves. For example, even after the earth shattering kiss with the man, her response is to think “not so much of the man whose arms had held her as of the ecstasy which had flooded her” (105). She is curious not about pinning down what the kiss means in conjunction with Robert, but about the new emotions evoked by the encounter, the possibility that this heady emotion will be the answer to her intangible desire all along.

And, it is at this point that she decides to explore “to the end that unfamiliar path into which she had strayed” since the kiss (106). With a sense of “fatalism” she prepares for the “coming consummation,” to satisfy her “insistent desire” (107), her “irrepressible longing” (106). Although the extent of her desire seems apparent for Robert, it also seems that Helga desires the newness of her sexual path just as fervently. Therefore, is it Robert, heterosexual sex, or simply desire for desire’s sake that Helga desires?

Reverend Pleasant Green

Possibly the most disturbing aspect of the novel is Helga’s literal – and seemingly deliberate – tailspin into quicksand, beginning with her concession to an evening with the ever-unpleasant, ironically named, Reverend Green. After the rendezvous with Robert Anderson goes horribly wrong and the desire that had “burned in her flesh with

uncontrollable violence" (109) remains unsatisfied, Helga finds herself hungover, despondent, and newly "born-again." In this state, she satiates her curiosity about that bothersome "desire" with the sleazy minister from Alabama. And, if that were not bad enough, she subsequently marries him.

Yet what does this tell us about Helga's desire? It would seem that Helga throws away her entire life for heterosexual sex. Yet, Larsen's text is never so forthcoming as to make such an assertion. It remains ambivalent to the end. As often happens in this novel, the emotions conveyed by the text are undercut by a subtext. If one is to speak of Helga's sexual desire in marriage, one cannot overlook the fact that she has just as much distaste for it married as she did single. Although some critics have assumed Helga's sexuality is validated and her issues with sex cease at marriage,²⁷ a closer reading of the text will find she holds similar sentiments before and after matrimony. As Pamela Barnett points out, Helga's "articulation of passion is undermined by some of the rhetoric" of the text itself" (598): "And night came at the end of every day. Emotional, palpitating, amorous, all that was living in her sprang like rank weeds at the tingling thought of night, with a vitality so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason" (Larsen 122). Rank weeds? Barnett reminds us then that "this is no blooming rose" (598).

Like with Anderson before him, Helga is conscious more of her desire than she is of the man she supposedly desires: Beyond a "feeling of gratitude," the text tells us, she "thought of him not at all." She "shut[s] him out from her mind" early on in their marriage (121). It is true that in the beginning of their lives together at "night's approach Helga [is] bewildered by a disturbing medley of feelings. Challenge. Anticipation." Yet, it is also associated with "a small fear" as well (120), be it for the risk of pregnancy, or, I suggest, the simple fear of the precarious balance that might be disturbed, allowing her repulsion to overcome her desire. After Helga bears her fourth child, this balance is finally toppled and Reverend Green becomes increasingly revolting. He is "distinctly disagreeable" and she feels an "unconquerable aversion" to his touch and countenance (129). Later, revulsion comes upon her and she realizes she "hate[s] this man" (129). Finally, even the thought of him "rouse[s] in her a deep and contemptuous hatred," and "[a]t his every approach" she has to "forcibly [...] subdue a furious inclination to scream out in protest" (134).

If Helga ever did feel heterosexual desire, it is transformed from a naïve curiosity to knowing disgust. As she had "grinned a little" (12) at the thought of sex early in the

²⁷ McDowell xxi: "The only condition under which sexuality is not shameless [sic] is if it finds sanction in marriage. Further, because she is born out of wedlock, Helga is preoccupied with the issue of 'legitimacy.' Marriage to a preacher is, then, legitimacy redoubled." Pamela Barnett argues against this opinion. She notes that "the conventional marriage resolution is mocked when Helga plans to trap her man with devilish calculation." Furthermore, Barnett concludes: "There is nothing especially romantic about this union; they tie the knot in 'the confusion of seductive repentance'" (598).

novel, mocking Miss MacGooden and exhibiting her own deprecation, and had “screwed up her face into a little grin” (117) wryly disgusted with the Reverend’s sexual weakness on the fateful night of her conversion, these grins of sardonic humor turn to profound disgust by the end. At the Reverend’s desiring gaze after childbirth, there is no grinning, no perceptive smile, only the sickened curl of a “petulant lip” (129).

Once Helga moves on to Reverend Pleasant Green, we can more easily assume her desire is for desire’s sake, as we uncover her consistent and perhaps increasing distaste for men. Men continue to disgust Helga, but through a queer and perverse mixture of faith and willful ignorance, she makes her last and wildest leap, into the inescapable quagmire of marriage. As McDowell notices,

“*Quicksand* likens marriage to death for women. Larsen dismantles the myth that marriage elevates women in the social scale; she suggests that for them the way up is, ironically and paradoxically, the way down” (xxi).

And this, the novel’s end, is where Larsen’s struggle against heteronormativity becomes most striking. The closing of *Quicksand*, from Helga’s religious conversion onward, is not just unsettling to audiences, but disturbing as well. Larsen forcibly transports Helga, this vibrant, independent woman, into what is presented as the conventional, suffocating space of marriage.

But it takes a deus ex machina plot device to get Helga to this point. God steps in with a puzzling solution to Helga’s “irresolvable ambivalence” and her “conflict between psychological drives and moral imperatives” (Hutchinson 232). Ironically, it is as if Larsen is intentionally giving her heterosexually-minded audience what it wants, romance (sex) and marriage, yet the audience itself – which has unconsciously assumed the romantic heterosexual plot as the characters themselves have pushed Helga toward it – is not satisfied. George Hutchinson reiterates what has been said before about the novel, that *Quicksand*’s conclusion has “disappointed so many readers and critics” (238). He explains further:

What dismays many readers of *Quicksand* is Helga Crane’s sudden break from one mode of life to a completely different one at the end of the novel. Critics charge that Larsen does not provide sufficient narrative preparation for Helga’s sudden conversion to Christianity and marriage to a Southern Preacher. (224)

Be that as it may, Helga’s ambivalent nature does not rule out erratic behaviors. Her other such moves are made in similar fits of emotion, such as anger, anxiety, hatred, ennui, etc. Critics have noted the reason for Helga’s slow and fatal descent is her endeavor to finally reconnect with her father, through her blackness. Perhaps. I suggest, however, that it is the result of Helga’s attempt to abide by the status quo, to try to fit in as other critics have assumed she has wanted, to surrender to the pressures of

heteronormativity manifesting itself in foreboding oppression and intangible desires she cannot name or describe. She has an

uneasy sense of being engaged with some formidable antagonist, nameless and ununderstood, [and] [t]here was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her, had always frustrated her, kept her from getting the things she had wanted. Still wanted. (10-11)

Helga finally eschews her materially constructed familial connections to try on human kinship, with disastrous consequences. Yet, moving her into this space takes an actual act of God, an almost literal setting down of a god in her midst. Of course the most distressing element in this religious stunt, a move that implies heterosexual sex, submission, and reproduction as its integral parts, is that Helga never quite takes it seriously. She jumps into it; she ruins her life, to be sure, but she never fully buys into it. Larsen is brutal in allowing Helga full consciousness and responsibility in her decisions (her night with Reverend Green notwithstanding). She does nothing unwittingly; her leaps are always with her eyes wide open.

Further Queering

Critics have noted that Helga throws herself away in marriage because Robert Anderson rejects her as a lover. This could be true, since in fact we understand that Helga has made her decision about marriage with the thought that what she did mattered little to anyone else: "After all, there was nothing to hold her back. Nobody to care" (116). Perhaps, however, it is not just the thought of Robert, and the impossibility of ever being with him that is the impetus for Helga's irrational move. I think an argument can be made that she is also thinking of Anne Gray. After all, she does think about Anne when she reflects on her rejection of Axel Olsen: "Why hadn't she married him? Anne was married – she would not say Anderson – Why not she? It would serve Anne right if she married a white man" (97). This is a distinctly curious comment. One understands the "white man" remark, knowing Anne's intense hatred for whites, but why this comparison of marital status? And, why would anything Helga does have any effect on Anne? Why would it "serve her right"?

Also, when she has returned from Denmark after Anne and Robert are married, she muses upon their union, diminishing the idea of marriage by making offhanded comments about each of them. About Anne she states: "I suppose [...] it's because she's married again. As if anybody couldn't get married. Anybody. That is, if mere marriage is all one wants" (98). About Robert, she notes: "And anyway [...] he's nobody much to have married. Anybody could have married him. Anybody. If a person wanted only to be married" (98-99). The sentiments startlingly resemble each other, suggesting that Helga

holds a similar emotion for both parties, be it love, friendship, jealousy, or disappointment.

To further muddy the waters, perhaps we can look before her marriage to find the impetus of Helga's seduction of Reverend Green, for that too has been implied to have been the projection of Helga's lengthy repression of desire for Robert onto another. To frame this picture of desire more queerly, we need look at two things: Audrey Denney and the spectacular church service. Helga never actually meets Audrey Denney, yet if one assumes she has desire for the men in the novel, one must also then come to terms with her penchant for voyeurism when it comes to Audrey. Take for example the night at the club. The narrative focalizes Audrey through Helga's eyes, describing her mood, her body, her movements:

Languidly [Audrey] followed his movement, a faint smile parting her sorrowful lips at some remark he made. Her long, slender body swayed with an eager pulsing pleasure, her legs, her hips, her back, all swaying gently, swung by that wild music from the heart of the jungle. (62)

As she is watching Denney – and she has been for quite sometime by this point – Helga feels “envious admiration,” yet when she turns her attention to Robert “that feeling” becomes “augmented by another, a more primitive emotion” (62). This could be read as a desire for Robert, but to frame it more queerly, the other emotion comes over her at seeing a couple: “two figures, closely clinging” (62). Therefore, it can also be Audrey Denney who causes her heart to throb (62).

She almost meets Audrey by specifically requesting the hostess of a party to introduce her: “Do you know, Helen,” Helga confided, “I’ve never met Miss Denney. I wish you’d introduce me. Not this minute. Later, when you can manage it. Not so – er – apparently by request, you know” (99). This is the only person in the entirety of the novel that Helga has ever gone out of her way to meet. No other person, woman or man, has provoked such interest from the detached protagonist. And, she also makes the list at the end of the novel when the people of any consequence in her life glide through Helga's thoughts.²⁸

To make things even more queer, we must also discuss Larsen's blatant sexual framing of Helga within a religious context. Because this novel is ruled by a heteronormative gaze and the Christian religion in the American context feeds precisely into heteronormativity, it is important to point out the scene that suggests the most explicit display of desire in the novel, and one that is most problematic in terms of convention and heteronormativity: Helga's conversion scene. As previously noted in

²⁸ The list in order is Robert Anderson, Anne Gray, Axel Olsen, Audrey Denney, James Vayle, Mrs. Hayes-Rore, and the Dahls (128-9).

research, the scene at the church is the most overtly sexual one of the novel. As first observed by McDowell in her 1986 introduction to *Quicksand*:

The sexual desires, pent-up throughout the novel, finally explode in Helga's primitive, passionate, religious conversion, the description of which unambiguously simulates sexual excitement and orgasmic release" (xix-xx).

It is this event, a kind of doubling (and satiation) of the incident that began in "the jungle" at the club.²⁹ For it is this moment where Helga lets go completely the control she has worked so hard to maintain. Unlike the secular club scene, which is sexy, wild, but generally portrayed positively, the religious ceremony is hellish and menacing in its description. To add insult to heteronormative injury, the scene is also specifically woman-focused, which, regardless of its hellishness, is its only attraction to Helga. Although fascinated and terrified," Helga becomes particularly "interested in the writhings and weepings of the feminine portion" of the mass of people, "which seemed to predominate" (113). Once the service takes a more frantic turn because Helga is mistaken for a "Jezebel," the narrative focuses on the women of the congregation. And it is in the midst of these women that Helga becomes engaged in a simulation of sex, an orgiastic ritual. The women surround her in "Bacchic vehemence," "frenzied women gesticulated, screamed, wept" to the "cadenced chant" of the preacher (113). As religion and sexuality commingle in an erotic fervor, Helga approaches the precipice – the point of no return – of doing the one thing that she has never done: giving up her aloneness, becoming a part of something rather than staying safely apart. Helga gives herself up sexually and spiritually to be "lost – or saved"; her fear of uniting with people, of kinship through sex/religion is illustrated by an "indistinct horror of an unknown world," a feeling that she is witnessing the "rites of a remote obscure origin" (113).

For the first time in her life, she 'belongs' in that odd way that she has never quite been able to manage. She is blended into a community of people, and this blending is terrifying... and impossible to escape:

²⁹ This scene can be found in chapter eleven. It is while dancing to jazz that Helga first feels herself lose control sexually: "They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms. For a while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature" (Larsen QS 59).

But the horror held her. She remained motionless, watching, as if she lacked the strength to leave the place – foul, vile, and terrible, with its mixture of breaths, its contact of bodies, its concerted convulsions, all in wild appeal for a single soul. Her soul. (113)

Yet, just as we think her immersion into the reeking and thrashing mass of bodies – her baptism by fire – will be as quicksilver meeting itself, Helga’s queer ability to keep herself separate is emphasized. It is her “single” soul, *her* soul, in which the mob is interested. It is Helga’s feeling of a perfect balance between being a part and being apart that pushes her over the edge into the arms of the congregation.

Helga finds herself and the surrounding women engaged in a “weird orgy” (113). She is “penetrated” by these women’s “curious influence,” she begins to feel “possessed by the same madness,” the same “brutal desire to shout and to sling herself about” (113). After her final and failed attempt to escape, she finds herself against the railing and the people en masse press themselves forward, “closing her in on all sides” (113). It is at this moment, with Helga pinned to the barrier and the congregation pressing in on her, that the scene works toward its climax. “Grasping at the railing,” Helga loses complete control, yelling “like one insane” (113). Arms surround her with “savage frenzy” and the women drag themselves “upon their knees,” or crawl “over the floor like reptiles, sobbing and pulling their hair and tearing off their clothing” (114). Frenetically, the women coax Helga toward her goal – their goal – leaning into her, encouraging her, “dropping hot tears and beads of sweat upon her bare arms and neck” (114). And suddenly... Helga is overtaken by a “miraculous calm”; an “easy” feeling expands within her. And, as she basks on her knees in the afterglow of this convergent, “simple happiness,” the other participants grow quiet, “inert,” and “spent” (114). It is a most vivid sexual scene, yes, but emphatically queer as well. The frame of desire is unquestionably homoerotic, and paradoxically religious and sexual, horrifying and ecstatic.

Conclusion

Ironically, it is Helga’s leap into heteronormativity through heterosexuality and “family” that finally ruins her. Helga’s life begins its deterministic spiral downward when she rejects her previous kinship system, her need for visibility to remain apart, and succumbs to the pressures of a conventional family, complete with religion, children, husband, and sex.³⁰ All are illustrated as destructive elements that devastate her, leaving behind a wreckage unable (or unwilling) to be salvaged.

³⁰ Ann Hostetler observes: “In her shattered state Helga gives in, not to passion, but finally to this construction of herself as scarlet woman, in order to be at ‘home,’ immersed in a sense of belonging that is an utter betrayal

Like Antigone, who chooses a cave death, Helga prefers the “kind darkness into which her bruised spirit had retreated,” over her new “family” (128). And like Antigone’s story demonstrating alternative possibilities in kinship, Helga’s is a scathing critique of heteronormativity:³¹ she perverts the ways of the norm by first denying its standard-bearers, kinship and desire, and then by accepting them both via God, heterosexual sex, matrimony, and children, but only in a state of delusion. Once the “luster of religion [has] vanished,” the true horror of her predicament comes to light: “With the obscuring curtain of religion rent, she was able to look about her and see with shocked eyes this thing that she had done to herself” (129, 130). Consequently, in her is “born angry bitterness and an enormous disgust” (130). “Only scorn, resentment, and hate remained” notes the narrator, “and ridicule” (130).

Framing Helga more queerly is easier when one takes into account her perverse kinship ties, her visible gorgeousness that sets her apart, and her desires that point in directions other than heterosexuality; she is clearly not a stable representative of heteronormativity. We know that if Helga could only return to her beloved kinship of gorgeousness, she could pull herself out of her quagmire:

It was so easy and so pleasant to think about freedom and cities, about clothes and books, about the sweet mingled smell of Houbigant and cigarettes in softly lighted rooms filled with inconsequential chatter and laughter and sophisticated tuneless music. (135)

But we also know that she will not. For as we hope that she might rest and regain her strength in order to make her move, to leave her husband, she begins to have her fifth child (135). And, she has already stated that she cannot endure remaining in the “bog into which she had strayed” (134). Remaining, she notes matter-of-factly, would mean that “she would have to die” (134). Her suffering is “[n]ot to be borne. Again.” (134). With these words, Helga denounces her earlier religious conversion – being born again – and implies her inability to mend her kinship with gorgeousness, to be born again within her own fashioned and fashionable community.

of her personality” (43-4). I concur that Helga betrays herself because of the delusion of religion and her attempt to “try on” another kind of clothing. Therefore, she enfolds herself in the heteronormative pressures of kinship and desire that have been weighing on her throughout the novel.

³¹ As noted by Kimberly Monda, “Larsen’s bitter, satiric vision of Helga’s entrapment in a terrifyingly literal portrait of wifely and motherly self-sacrifice condemns the racist and sexist society that allows a woman to be murdered by her domestic role even as it highlights Helga’s own contribution to this oppression: her failure to learn from her past and thus to grant herself the recognition she does not receive from the men in her life” (24). See her article, “Self-delusion and Self-sacrifice in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*.”

Chapter 7.

Undoing an Ideal: Lily Bart, Conventional Visibility, Queer Livability

Livability, by the end of Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth*, is finally all that matters. As readers, we watch with increasing dismay as the narrow sphere of Lily Bart's existence slowly and surely shrinks to the slightest of spaces. Lily's lifelong work, which consists solely of honing her womanly graces i.e. her visibility as the ideal image of impeccable gender performance, finally becomes her ruin. This, as well as our traditional reading of Lily in a heteronormative context are two factors that fundamentally allow her survival, but in the end are also her undoing.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler explores "livable" and "unlivable" lives. She discusses bodies that, in fact, do matter and those that do not; it is a poignant theoretical exploration of how cultures value and devalue bodies and attribute humanity (or not) to such bodies. She suggests that many lives are livable in that those lives' bodies become recognizable to society (intelligible)¹ and are then permitted full participation in that capacity, but conversely many lives are unlivable in that their bodies are unrecognizable (unintelligible), and for them specific opportunities are foreclosed, that foreclosure at times coming in various forms of violence.

If Butler explores one end of intelligibility, I explore the other; for she is concerned with theorizing those bodies that cannot be understood thus cannot be seen. I, however, will explore the other extreme of the spectrum, the phenomenon of the body so seen, so accepted, so visible, that it is ultra-intelligible: the body of the ideal woman. I will suggest that Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* is so ultra-intelligible that

¹ These bodies become recognizable to society through normative sexual and gender performances. The naturalization of images and behaviors materialize the visible body.

she has become the phantasmagoric incarnation of the ideal image – against which all other images of women are placed – and because of her ideal status Lily has found her life unlivable through exactly that which should make her life the most livable of any body. I will explore how even the life that is “highly protected” and sanctified, indeed that life that is held so sacred that in her name a society might “mobilize the forces of war,” in the end, that same sanctity may be that very life’s undoing (Butler *UG* 24). For, if that life is seen as an impossibility her ultra-intelligibility paradoxically reverts into another form of unintelligibility, and the foreclosures executed in the processes of societal comprehension will be used against her as well in a violent collusion of ostensibly incongruous classifications. There is no decisive physical violence, no final blow to the head that takes the life of Lily Bart, there are only the incrementally measured exclusions from society, the collective, brutal indifference of others that in the end diminish Lily’s slight livability, and with it snuff out the life of that ideal body.

Each person in *The House of Mirth* is confronted with the flawless visage of Lily Bart, just as the public at the time was being inundated with images of the unattainable spectral corporeality of the ideal woman in mass produced public notices. In her article “Engendering Naturalism: Narrative Form and Commodity Spectacle in U.S. Naturalist Fiction,” Lori Merish notes that by the turn of the century the “pretty girl picture” was a pervasive presence in American advertising (321). The “Sozodont Girl,” the “Gibson Girl,” and the “bathing beauty” were “images which became [...] a ‘popular means of attracting attention’ to an advertisement” (Presbrey and Landauer qtd in Merish 321). In other words, images of the ideal woman were being distributed and exhibited on a massive scale. Every woman could, through magazines, department store windows, advertisements for domestic goods, now compare herself to ever-ready visual images of whom she was supposed to aspire to be, and conversely, whom she was not. The unattainable image of femininity began its haunting of the female population. Therefore, a person like Lily, who encapsulates so completely that ideal is confusing and unreal. Her visibility is so obviously overwhelming, that her presence cannot be ignored. But, outside of her presence, she is something of a legend, a myth, which requires no concern by others for her physical needs, for those are needs of human beings, not of ideals.

Lily Bart is an amazing spectacle of accomplishment, specifically in her gender performance or citations of naturalized gender prescriptions. As an ideal image Lily Bart embodies what Judith Butler would call the “original” gender. In her groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble*, and in a number of her subsequent books on gender, Butler argues that the belief in an “original” gender is one way society polices gender and enforces the continuous link between sex and gender. It is how we count or discount certain gender performances for certain bodies. The idea of an original is used to explain the connection between sexed bodies and gender; our performance of gender is supposedly a natural manifestation of that sexed body. For example, if a body does not perform

gender expressions that are recognizably sanctioned for that body, its gender is discounted as “false or derivative”; it is a copy of an original that only rightly exists somewhere in the correct body (viii). In other words, femininity belongs to the bodies of women by nature, and if another body other than that accepted as a woman, performs femininity, it is only copying the “natural” femininity of the woman body.²

Just as the ideal image does not exist nor has it ever existed, the myth of an “original” gender is itself an ideal, a construct that is unstable and has no continuous or historical connection to a particular type of body. Indeed, Butler states: “To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate” (*BTM* 231). This is true of people in general and their never-ending struggle for the incarnation of the ideal. But *The House of Mirth* is not a story of people in general; this is the story of the incomparable Lily Bart. Lily is an exception to the rule. Actually, Lily Bart is the rule. Therefore, Lily *queers* the workings of the ideal by embodying it so thoroughly.³ She personifies a myth, which renders her unrecognizable to her peers as a “real” person.

Lily Bart is the epitome of femininity. From pouring tea in a “lurching train” with “careless ease” to her scandalous part in the *tableaux vivants* where “there isn’t a break in the lines anywhere,” Miss Bart is not only seen as an exceptional presentation of femininity but an effortless one (Wharton *HOM* 21, 143). Regrettably, however, the effortlessness with which her feminine façade is created is her final undoing, for it is this ease that in the end triggers her society’s collective refusal to comprehend her. The facility with which she incorporates herself into the overall illusion of an archetypal femininity, not to mention her stunningly exquisite beauty, compel those around her to not only see her, but recognize her as a vision of an ideal. It could be said that Lily, in her role as an ideal becomes ultra-intelligible in that she is the visible embodiment of the quintessential idea of a woman. Yet the quintessential woman is implicitly understood to be an impossibility; therefore, Lily is ultra-intelligible, fitting perfectly into the stuff of legend and myth, but in the realm of the human she falls more closely

² Of course Butler also points out that even those bodies who are said to “own” a specific gender (women owning femininity, for example) remain always under threat of punishment when/if their gender is not performed “correctly.”

³ This is akin to the sentiment in Oscar Wilde’s essay regarding mimesis, and especially literary realism. In “The Decay of Lying,” Vivian states: “There is such a thing as robbing a story of its reality by trying to make it too true.” The implication of this is that something that is “too true,” Lily Bart in this case is what we could call a representation of woman that is “too true,” does not make a good representation of reality. My intention here is not to squabble over “reality” per se, nor argue about what makes something real or not, but to note that representations of “reality” (a particular kind of mimesis), if too similar to the “real” (which means not accounting for the difference in mimetic repetition), it can be disconcerting. I will specifically handle this argument in an equally unusual way in my gothic reading of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* in Chapter 8.

in line with those Judith Butler has described as unintelligible. Her ultra-intelligibility illogically makes her unintelligible. In other words, Lily Bart does and does not exist, is a part of humanity and apart from humanity.⁴

Privileges of Being Less than Ideal

Like Helga Crane, Lily Bart is singled out from the start. In the opening scene we see this played out as Lawrence Selden, the center of consciousness in the novel, notices her at Grand Central Station and is “refreshed” simply by her appearance (5). Selden notes that she physically stands “apart from the crowd” suggesting how distinct she is from others no matter what the backdrop: “Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room” (5). And, at least “[o]ne or two persons,” in rushing past Selden and Lily, “lingered to look; for Miss Bart was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveler rushing to his last train” (5). As Selden escorts her toward a hansom, he himself admits that Lily Bart’s image is a superior one. Revealing his collective disdain for women, he asks himself at one point “Was it possible that she belonged to the same race?” and at another he reflects on the “qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex.” Ultimately, he comes to the conclusion that “she must have cost a great deal to make” and that “a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her” (7).

On the one hand, Selden is dissatisfied to argue for Lily’s superiority on the foundation of her exquisite beauty alone, for surely, the “vulgar clay” Selden ascribes to women in general does not apply to her (7). In a generous moment he suggests that there must be something more to Lily than her exterior, for “a coarse texture will not take a high finish (7).” There is even a moment of uncommon perspicaciousness for Selden, as he questions the possibility that “the material was fine but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape” (7). In short, misogyny notwithstanding, Selden fleetingly desires to distinguish Miss Bart from other women through her intellect rather than her physical magnificence. Conversely, however, Selden finds it too difficult to step out of the boundaries that define “woman” for him. He wishes for a uniqueness in Lily, yet believes it an impossibility altogether for any women to be intellectually unique. Therefore, like everyone else in her life, he remains a part of the crowd holding her apart from the crowd because of the very thing he wishes he valued least: her beauty.

These flashes of insight about Lily that contradict his more steady sentiments, sporadically unsettle Selden and represent the tenuousness of Lily’s intelligibility. She is visually intelligible as an ideal image, but as a person, as a human, she is not. For even

⁴ Visibility in conjunction with being a part of humanity while being apart from humanity has already been discussed rather completely in the previous chapter on Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*.

Selden, who attempts the occasional exercise of moving beyond her physicality, is nonetheless imprisoned by it. He prefers the way in which society sees her rather than the instability in attempting to think of her differently. He is able to crystallize his thoughts about her when he does not see her. For, when he sees her, he thinks she might have other possibilities. The above ruminations about Lily's depth of person, what may or may not be *inside* Lily Bart is done entirely while Selden visually consumes Lily. For, he abruptly quits his musings altogether when Lily lifts her parasol and "cut[s] off his enjoyment" (7). Later, when Lily is being misused and abused by Bertha Dorset, Selden thinks "he could trust himself to return gradually to a reasonable view of Miss Bart if only he did not see her" (198). Of course the "reasonable view" being that which reflected society's view, and not a view of his own. His own views are what get him in trouble with Lily. A safer route is to follow the course set by group.

Privileges of the Invisible

Intelligibility, as stated previously, requires visibility. But, I suggest that intelligibility also implies a privilege of intermittent invisibility as well. Within the processes of intelligibility – a process of recognition or mimesis – there is a kind of involuntary progression of recognition through which an individual passes. This process is a kind of exercise in human classification. The individual is seen by the eyes of another, is categorized into an acceptable human group and/or labeled as an acceptable human type, and the intelligible person is then permitted to move out of the line of vision and into a relatively anonymous space in which she can go about social business. Paradoxically, then, intelligibility depends awkwardly on being seen and subsequently ignored, disregarded from the gaze, given the gift of invisibility in order to move about her business unmolested. This privilege is offered with the understanding that that individual will remain consistent in her label and category, and will therefore always be readily identifiable. It is a gift to the intelligible for participating correctly in normativity; a collusive privilege to fortify acceptable images and gender performances.

However, this is not so for the unintelligible. The unintelligible individual, because of the inability to categorize or label her to begin with cannot be seen in the first place and remains invisible, never going through the processes of categorization and labeling at all. Lily Bart, however, is a special case. She is ultra-intelligible, which creates a different problem altogether. She is an ideal, an original, a feminine icon of culture, which catches her in a separate space that translates into hyper-visibility. She is so intelligible, so known for what her image represents that she is curiously caught in the stage of categories and labels. She is never afforded the privilege of invisibility. Instead, she is relentlessly seen, persistently in front of the eye. Her destiny is to remain always apart from the crowd, always ocular.

Lily's visibility doubles back on itself into a hyper-visibility that keeps her seen, but not in the category of a person. Butler notes of this catch twenty-two: "To find that one is fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find one to be an impossibility) is to find that one has not yet achieved access to the human" (*UG* 218). Within her tight-knit culture, the laws are clear. She is obviously an impossibility. She can be seen as an ideal image, a picture, but she is in no way a person. Even Lily seems to know this as she takes very seriously the picture she perpetually presents. She admits early on that crying does not become her,⁵ she takes special notice of settings, light, and other variables that make a pleasurable picture... with consideration of herself as the focal point.⁶

Lily's acumen in displaying herself is all well and good, but as in all forms of expression and identity, she cannot always be in control of the meaning of her image, how she is seen and made meaningful by others. As Judith Butler suggests, gender is an "assignment," an "assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation" (*BTM* 231). Lily's ability to fulfill her gender assignment far surpasses most, but the expectations that come with it are no more fulfilled for Lily than for anyone else. For she has assumed that her visible ideality will protect her from any punishments her set should mete out to the more ordinary citizen of the upper crust. For example, she believes that a woman less beautiful and capable in all ways feminine would be more inclined to be punished by not attaining marriage, for example.⁷ Combining Judith Butler's gender theory with ideas of the mimetic, Vikki Bell suggests:

⁵ Lily explains to Gerty Farish at one point: "I'm not of the tearful order. I discovered early that crying makes my nose red and the knowledge has helped me through several painful episodes" (Wharton *HOM* 233).

⁶ Outside of the clearly theatrical *tableau vivant*, Lily is forever vigilant for those moments or those scenes at any time of day that will be to her benefit. One example is at Bellomont as she observes Mr. Gryce with Carrie Fisher. She knows that her tranquility compared to Fisher's "fiery" and "dramatic" gestures is making herself just that much more appealing to Mr. Gryce. At the plea for assistance in Gryce's "agonized glances," Miss Bart responds by sinking "into an attitude of more graceful abstraction." For, she "had learned the value of contrast in throwing her charms into relief and was fully aware of the extent to which Mrs. Fisher's volubility was enhancing her own repose" (51).

⁷ This is rather contradictory since Lily would clearly consider it a punishment for marriage to be withheld from a "marriageable" woman (obviously there are women who are not marriageable in the least; see Wharton *HOM* 9). Yet for herself, she remains ambivalent at best as to whether or not she desires matrimony at all.

More than merely indicative of a sense of the power relations within which mimesis occurs, these terms,⁸ taken together with the argument that gender is oftentimes a matter of cultural survival within a 'situation of duress', imply that mimesis is a strategic mode of 'going on' with a specific socio-cultural context, in which other corporeal styles are abjected, foreclosed or simply too risky (*Mimesis* 151).

Lily has indeed found herself in a situation of duress. Orphaned and penniless by her early twenties, she is taken in by Mrs. Peniston, Lily's father's widowed sister. But, wealthy New York society is expensive for an unmarried woman with no means, even with the monetary gifts bestowed on her occasionally by her aunt. The question of cultural survival, for Lily then, is a higher bar. For, Lily is not looking only to exist, Lily, with all her materialism and expensive tastes, makes a strong ethical argument for living, not just existing, but attaining a "livable" life. This is what bothered (and probably continues to bother) readers of *The House of Mirth*. For, as Butler notes: "In the same way that a life for which no categories of recognition exist is not a livable life, so a life for which those categories constitute unlivable constraint is not an acceptable option" (UG 8). Lily, more than any other character, embodies the paradoxical nature of cultural survival, for Lily is an ideal, she is ultra-intelligible, an accepted part of her society, yet, she is constrained by her visibility, her ideal beauty and femininity, and consequently the belief that she is not entirely human.

Like her scorn of dinginess, defiantly, Lily detests the requirement of marriage in her society. Over and over, the novel explains how Lily could be saved from herself and her bleak future, if she would only marry one of the many men hovering about the pages of the novel. However, this requirement, this constraint, is not only unpalatable, but impossible for Lily. As will be explained later, marriage is a death knell for Lily, something she cannot envision in any positive light.⁹ What Lily wants is not a man to possess and control her, but significance as a human being and finally financial

⁸ The "terms" of which Bell speaks are "hegemony" and "interpellation." Both terms are important to Butler, as discussed in the *Introduction* to this project.

⁹ For example, the sight of the "grey dress" she had laid out for church with a "borrowed prayer book" flashes a "long light down the years" of successive tedium of marriage Percy Gryce (Wharton *HOM* 61). Her further description is no more positive: "She would have to go to church with Percy Gryce every Sunday. They would have a front pew in the most expensive church in New York, and his name would figure handsomely in the list of parish charities. In a few years, when he grew stouter, he would be made a warden. Once in the winter the rector would come to dine, and her husband would beg her to go over the list and see that no *divorcées* were included, except those who had showed signs of penitence by being remarried to the very wealthy. There was nothing especially arduous in this round of religious obligations, but it stood for a fraction of that great bulk of boredom which loomed across her path" (61-2). Lily also notes the "odious" and "hated" possibility that if she does not marry the likes of Percy Gryce, "the day might come when she would have to be civil to such men" as Sim Rosedale (the nouveau riche Jew muscling his way into New York's old money) (61).

independence. Rather than the untouchable ideal, Lily wants someone to know her, to care about what happens to her, to be significant in and of herself *beyond* her image. In other words she wants to be valuable outside the market of exchange. For example, at one point the novel suggests that Lily longs to be to Selden “something more than a piece of sentient prettiness, a passing diversion to his eye and brain” (100). Although some readers may see this as Lily’s desire for (heterosexual) romantic love, I read this as her desperate plea for value as a person, not an idol, for this is a part of what would make her life livable.

Questioning Heterosexual Desire

A remarkable thing about Lily Bart, and something that has only been touched on by a few critics is Lily’s queerness. For it seems although Lily performs the perfect femininity, one should at least comment on her refusal to act in all ways a “woman”; she refuses the bartering of her body, heterosexual mistressing, and finally marriage in the end.¹⁰ She steps outside the bounds of compulsory heterosexuality (Butler’s “heterosexual matrix”) and stays there. In order to be intelligible within the heterosexual matrix, Butler insists, one must “maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (GT 23). It is obvious, then, that Lily has broken the chain that might lead to a kind of intelligibility through marriage. As Wai Chee Dimock notes in her well-known essay, Lily’s “repeated and sometimes intentional failure to find a buyer, her ultimate refusal to realize her ‘asset’ – as her mother designates her beauty – makes her something of a rebel” (783). So instead of congratulatory well-wishes on any engagement, she is rather confronted with confused comments like the following from her friend Judy Trenor after Lily deliberately devastates her chances with Percy Gryce: “All I can say is, Lily, that I can’t make you out!” (Wharton *HOM* 80).¹¹ Lily clearly rejects a normative connection of her

¹⁰ Judith Fetterley suggests marriage in Lily’s eyes as something that goes from bad to worse. “Lily’s distaste for marriage is clear,” she suggests, “for while she bends all her talents and energies towards the goal of getting married, she equally exhibits a resistance to this fate” (205). Fetterley indicates that it is actually dangerous to Lily, “deadly.” Furthermore, “[m]arriage” to Lily “is imagined not as a delightful opportunity but rather as a grim necessity analogous to suicide” (205).

¹¹ Judy Trenor is not the only one. Lily cannot seem to make herself out at times. For when she finds out about Percy Gryce’s engagement to Evie Van Osburgh, Lily is flabbergasted. Stunned, she envies how the “dumpiest, dullest of the four dull and dumpy daughters” of Mrs. Van Osburgh, the youngest had been “placed” as her sisters before her into “enviable niches of existence” by a mother who knew how to “contrive opportunities without conceding favours, how to take advantage of propinquity without allowing appetite to be dulled by habit” (96). Gryce’s sudden engagement to a woman far less aesthetically pleasing and intelligent than Lily is beyond her understanding. That anyone could want such a woman is preposterous. The irony, of course, is that the situation has little to do with Evie Van Osburgh’s attractiveness or not, it is that Lily has no interest whatsoever in Gryce. She had planned on revisiting the bachelor later only because of her feelings of guilt at

gender performance to her sexual practice and desire. She refuses every man who courts her, and looks at marriage as always and only a business arrangement. Lily's sentiment regarding marriage is a thinly veiled abhorrence, and at one point this sentiment is captured drily in Lily's own description of Lily's time with the eligible (and filthy rich) bachelor and collector of Americana at Bellomont:

She had been bored all the afternoon by Percy Gryce – the mere thought seemed to waken an echo of his droning voice – but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life (29).

According to the narrative above, marriage and men generally are not seen particularly well by Lily. In fact, according to Judith Fetterley, the text itself tends toward something unsavory about the male species, especially as seen through the eyes of Lily:

“*The House of Mirth* is pervaded by a sense of male flesh as repulsive and by a vision of men as gross dull beasts. There is a beefy Gus Trenor [...] George Dorset with his sallow gaunted dyspeptic look [...] there is glossy, greasy Rosedale with a ‘pink fold of skin above his collar,’ [...] and there is Percy Gryce whose [...] dullness stretches out a bulk as vast as that of Trenor’s beef and equally repulsive” (204).

Lily's aversion to all men in the novel, save Lawrence Selden (whom we will discuss presently), compromises a heteronormative reading of the plot, lending credence to a queerer interpretation. Lori Merish is one of the few critics to take on Lily's queerness.¹² In her article, “Engendering Naturalism: Narrative Form and Commodity Spectacle in U.S. Naturalist Fiction,” she states that not only are Lily's and Selden's ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ respectively, “tenuous constructions,” but their “heterosexual ‘passion’ is ambiguously presented in the text” (324). Lily and Selden flirt and cajole, they even esteem each other, but neither of the two feels a real fervor for the other.

not having gone through with her womanly role of securing his promise of matrimony in the first place (93). However, with our knowledge of Lily, the reader could assume that if she had indeed been allowed to revisit Gryce she would have done exactly as she had in the first instance.

¹² A relatively recent article (2006) comparing the novel with Terence Davies' film adaptation of *The House of Mirth* (2000) also discusses Lily's queerness. Please see “Temporality and Queer Consciousness in *The House of Mirth*” by Jim Ellis.

For his part, Selden's general skittishness in love and his emotional vacillations regarding Lily – criticized as moral spinelessness by Wharton's feminist readers, as by Wharton herself – bespeak a certain sexual ambiguity, as does his characterization as a bachelor – professional – a type whose historical relationship to the emergence of gay identities Eve Sedgwick has examined at length.¹³ But under the disciplinary gaze of the naturalist text, these erotic ambiguities give way to the gender binary of heterosexual romance – thus narrativizing gender as sexual difference and reinforcing 'the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality.' (325)

Selden is a milque toast lover – if a lover at all – and Lily an uncooperative object of desire. Selden never risks Lily having to take seriously his reluctant attempts at romance, and Lily is not interested in Selden making love to her in earnest. It is no wonder the pages of *The House of Mirth* are not aflame with passion and desire. Neither of the would-be lovers is interested in fulfilling her/his role in a heteronormative plot.¹⁴ In their most intimate moments, for example, it is not clear how the two feel about each other. Lawrence seems to understand that Lily does not love him, nor does she plan on loving him. He notes early on in the novel when he joins her at Bellomont: "From whatever angle he viewed their dawning intimacy, he could not see it as part of her scheme of life" (Wharton *HOM* 73). We also are told that Selden is entertained by Lily; when fortunate enough to come across Miss Bart he makes a habit of observing her. He avows that his only reason for going to Bellomont on this occasion was to see Lily because she is such a "wonderful spectacle" (70-1). During their agreeable afternoon together Selden teasingly suggests a marital alliance... if he were to have anything in the way of financial resources.

Perhaps many critics have read this scene romantically, as a modest proposal from a proud man in love just shy enough of rejection to feign lightheartedness while being deadly serious. However, this is not how I read this scene. To me, this scene looks like intersections of desires between two characters in which the two characters' desires are nary close to each other nor do they reflect each other. Selden takes advantage of his bachelor status, his freedom from financial need, to criticize exactly that which makes someone like Lily possible.¹⁵ He offers lip service to an ideology called the "republic of

¹³ See especially "The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic" in *Epistemology of the Closet* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

¹⁴ This reading is in direct conflict with other critics, such as Gwendolyn Audrey Foster who suggests it is "painfully obvious" that Lily is "physically attracted" to Selden (97); however, there is more in Foster's work that I can agree with, especially her reading of Lily Bart as a subversive character, which is in line with my own view of Lily as an unconventional heroine.

¹⁵ As a reminder, I provide here an excerpt of their conversation:

the spirit” a way of life in which he knows quite well he only dabbles – finding his place flush in the middle of society much more amusing¹⁶ – while chastising Lily in a roundabout manner for clinging to society and not seizing for herself this “republic” (although knowing it is impossible for her to do so). His criticism of Lily’s aspirations in society, that society that he mocks but finds essential for himself, is followed up by a ridiculous quasi-proposal of marriage. Lawrence paints a picture for Lily, portraying a “miserable future” for her that is “darker” than even she has ever envisioned (76). All of this topped with a proposal of marriage that is neither sincere nor possible, to this critic, is not just selfish, but downright mean.

After all of this, Lily asks in earnest if Selden does in fact want to marry her, to which he responds with a laugh: “No, I don’t want to – but perhaps I should if you did!” (77). Lily recognizes this for what it is, one more opportunity for her friend to “observe” her in action, or in reaction, as it were. She chides him for this, suggesting that he already knows her answer to this question and therefore risks nothing to ask it: “you’re so sure of me that you can amuse yourself with experiments” (77). Of course, he parries this thrust by pretending it is for himself rather than for her that he experiments:

I am not making experiments,” he returned. “Or if I am, it is not on you but on myself. I don’t know what effect they are going to have on me, but if marrying you is one of them, I will take the risk. (77)

But, her chiding also reveals her knowledge of his own lack of desire for her. He might marry her if she wants him to? He would settle for the “effect” of marriage to her?

“She had turned to gaze on him gravely. “But isn’t it possible that if I had the opportunities of these people, I might make a better use of them? Money stands for all kinds of things; its purchasing quality isn’t limited to diamonds and motor cars.”

“Not in the least; you might expiate your enjoyment of them by founding a hospital.”

“But if you think they are what I should really enjoy, you must think my ambitions are good enough for me.”

Selden met this appeal with a laugh. “Ah, my dear Miss Bart, I am not Divine Providence, to guarantee your enjoying the things you are trying to get!”

“Then the best you can say for me is that after struggling to get them, I probably shan’t like them?” She drew a deep breath. “What a miserable future you foresee for me!”

“Well, have you never foreseen it for yourself?”

The slow colour rose to her cheek, not a blush of excitement but drawn from the deep wells of feeling: it was as if the effort of her spirit had produced it.

“Often and often,” she said. “But it looks so much darker when you show it to me!” (76).

¹⁶ Claire Hughes notes the hypocritical nature of Selden’s mythic “republic”: “His invitation to Lily to join his ‘republic of the spirit’ requires her – like the Biblical lilies of the field – to be flawlessly but ‘naturally’ beautiful, to have a moral aspect to her beauty, free of all material concerns. But Selden’s ‘republic’ is a fantasy, to which he does not in truth subscribe” (393-4). In truth, Claire asserts, Selden holds an “untroubled acceptance of the status quo” (391).

These are not passionate attachments on either end, nor is their rapport the giddy flirtations of lovers. It is witty repartee between two characters in which the reader has no idea which is more the coquette. The narrator also aids in the ambiguous emotions revealed in this tête à tête. At one point the narrator suggests that Selden is sure that Lily's heart is beating "rather with the stress of a long flight than the thrill of new distances" (78). And earlier, the narrator explains that the "inner start" Selden feels only turns out to be "the last quiver of his egoism" (77). Even as they stand in their most intimate pose, silent and smiling at each other while the "world at their feet was veiling itself in dimness, and across the valley a clear moon rose in the denser blue," the narrator describes them as "adventurous children who have climbed to a forbidden height" (78). The simile comparing Lily and Selden to children is perhaps one that intimates a sense of freedom, something of which Lily is in desperate need, but this image also counteracts any adult romantic notions about the two. If a helpful image at all, it seems slightly less appropriate for lovers than friends.

At the end of this afternoon scene, as the excitement of their freedom wanes, Lily gaily asks Selden if he was serious about his earlier proposal. Without her shared gaiety, Selden retorts: "Why not?"; "You see, I took no risks in being so." (79). Like a petulant child, he responds to Lily with a verbal slap as they begin the descent down the hill to their own realities. A romantic might brush this aside as simply a display of his disappointment at not securing an engagement to Lily, but it seems more than likely that he is angry about his uncontrolled response to the woman he finds beautiful but silly. He feels ridiculous that the more practical (the one who *must* be more practical) Lily, even uninhibited is more controlled than he, and the first of the two to break their illusory moment and insist on returning to the house.

If anything, it seems that what Lily desires from Selden is simply a real friend, a resting place from the demands of society for such a woman as she. As an ideal, a bloodless, humanless ideal, to others she is void of need. Her presence is meant to give, to offer, to *be*, not to take... for what could she possibly need? Lily is insightful enough to recognize this selfish sentiment in people relating to her,¹⁷ and wishes at least one person who will treat her not as an ideal, but as a person, someone who will *invest* in her, in the *invisible* part of her. Lily actually asks Selden to be that friend near the beginning of the novel during their mildly inappropriate tea at The Benedick:

¹⁷ During this conversation, Lily acknowledges to Selden that her best friends of the women in society, are in reality quite indifferent: "And the other women – my best friends – well, they use me or abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me" (11).

“Don’t you see,” she continued, “that there are men enough to say pleasant things to me and that what I want is a friend who won’t be afraid to say disagreeable ones when I need them? Sometimes I have fancied you might be that friend – I don’t know why, except that you are neither a prig nor a bounder and that I shouldn’t have to pretend with you or be on my guard against you.” (11)

She ends by confessing desperately that Selden has no idea how much she is in need of “such a friend” (11). In the end it is unfortunate that Lily did *not* keep up her guard against Selden, for it turns out that Selden was not Lily’s friend at all. It is true that Selden takes it upon himself to say many disagreeable and even cruel things to Lily, taking up literally what she mentions a friend should say, but the things he does – or more accurately, does not do, for one of the most damning traits about Selden is that he does nothing at all, ever – never has Lily’s best interest in mind. Indeed, Claire Hughes notes that Selden “is always wrong about Lily, and his behavior usually in bad faith: he feeds her illusions, while doing nothing to help” (402). With friends like Selden, who needs enemies?

Queering Effects, Queering Exchange

“Lily Bart’s passion for men is much less convincingly rendered than her passion for things,” states Lori Merish in her article (324). In fact, Lily’s passion for her effects, and effects in general, has been much noted by most critics, some with sexist (and rather prudish) horror. For example, R.W.B. Lewis “once pathologized Wharton’s heroine as a ‘nymphomaniac of material comfort’” after being “obviously disturbed by Lily’s (hetero)sexual ‘coldness,’ which he contrasts with her intense desire for commodities” (Merish 324-5). Once again, like Helga Crane, Lily is much more interested in luxury and material comfort than heterosexual romance, and to both society within the text, and critics without, this fact is disconcerting because Lily is so visibly a woman, but refusing in many ways to act like one.

One particular scene in *The House of Mirth* is echoed later in *Quicksand*. In *Quicksand*, Helga has just arrived in Denmark and awakes from a nap in the luxurious comfort of her Aunt Katrina’s home with “lavish contentment and well-being”; she feels satisfied, “pleasant,” “exalted,” “consoled” (Larsen 67). The material sumptuousness for Helga, as for Lily, is something that makes up their very beings. In it they find solace, entitlement, their rightful surroundings for the pictures they present. In Lily’s scene, she has just moved from her modest hotel into an opulent one at the behest of the notorious Mrs. Norma Hatch:

When Lily woke on the morning after her translation to the Emporium Hotel, her first feeling was one of purely physical satisfaction. The force of contrast gave an added keenness to the luxury of lying once more in a soft-pillowed bed and looking across a spacious sunlit room at a breakfast-table set invitingly near the fire. Analysis and introspection might come later, but for the moment she was not even troubled by the excesses of the upholstery or the restless convolutions of the furniture. The sense of being once more lapped and folded in ease, as in some dense, mild medium impenetrable to discomfort, effectually stilled the faintest note of criticism. (Wharton 282)

Lily's desire for luxury, and her preoccupation with her own beauty is off-putting for those who want to place this subtly subversive character into a conventional narrative. This is why criticism such as Lewis' above is so obviously anxious and angry; Lewis is bamboozled by Lily's image and cannot reconcile her ideal image with her somewhat deviant behavior. But some critics do see Lily's unconventional side. Some see it even more than many of us, like Gwendolyn Audrey Foster who explains Lily's desire as reflecting back onto herself. She states:

"The tableaux vivant scene, in which Lily makes a spectacle of herself, can be read as an almost masturbatory fantasy of self-wedding. [...] Wharton indicts a society in which female self-love is not only taboo but a dangerous trope in opposition to male surveillance, discipline, and objectification of women in performance" (Foster 97).

The sexual appetite that reflects Lily's desire upon herself lies "outside of reproductionary function," is "self-defined" and therefore is threatening in a woman (98).¹⁸ If indeed, one can read Lily through desire of things and self more so than her desire for heterosexual coupling, she can be placed further outside the heteronormative tradition than she has been given credit.

But, that is not all that Lily Bart queers. In Wai-Chee Dimock's article "Debasing Exchange," a subversiveness is suggested regarding Lily's refusal in the game of exchange to play by the rules by playing so precisely by the rules. In her unfortunate investment with Gus Trenor, Lily attempts to overlook the fact that Gus is making money for her, not with her own money, but in essence "keeping" her. Once this fact is made perfectly clear on the evening that Trenor demands payment in the empty house he has lured Lily to under false pretenses, Lily is determined to repay him as soon as possible. Dimock notes that:

¹⁸ Although I find it useful to use Foster's argument about transgressive sexuality in Lily Bart, I take issue with her general reading of Lily and Selden's romance. Please see bibliography for full citation.

Lily's dutiful payments are altogether in keeping with the principle of exchange. She is merely doing what the system requires of her, what she is supposed to. And yet – such is the irony of exchange – it is precisely this strict compliance that marks her as a deviant” (787).

If Lily had followed the cues of the social norm in her transaction with Gus Trenor, she would have put up her body as collateral for her meager investments.¹⁹ However, Lily refuses to play the “woman” in the role between herself and her rich friend. Rather, she acts as any other of his business acquaintances when she finds – admits – she owes him a debt. But, as noted by Dimock: “What appears as a gesture of submission turns out to be a gesture of defiance, for by adhering literally to the terms of exchange Lily turns the system on its head” (787). She queers heterosexual exchange by adhering so literally to the rules of that system, just as she has turned intelligibility on its head by embodying the ideal so impeccably. The ideal image is an image Miss Bart will die to project... and does. Gender proscriptions that dictate the rules of that image are fiercely followed and raised to an art form by her natural beauty and considerable talents in that arena. She is the visible ideal of femininity because of a lifetime of meticulous work to make it so.

She follows rules to the letter, yet at times her following is conventional and at times it is not. For example, outside of the rules of exchange in the likes of businessmen like Gus, there are also rules of exchange among the society women in the novel. These exchanges run rather like a bartering system: Lily, as the dazzling and popular bachelorette, is consistently asked to accompany the richest in society in order to round out their parties, be an elegant and stunning addition to the décor, demonstrate that the hostess and host can gather the most admired people, function as a pleasant conversationalist, and act as a agreeable distraction if necessary.²⁰ Remunerations for her lengthy stays at rich friends' houses and overseas excursions are paid in full through Lily's use in whatever capacity the hostess might require. For example, she may be asked to transcribe “notes and dinner-cards,” or “hunt up” addresses, and other “social drudgery,” as she does for Judy Trenor at Bellomont (Wharton *HOM* 43). This social drudgery offered, agreed, and paid for in a swap of roughly equivalent services is

¹⁹ Gus makes perfectly clear the expectations of their society in this situation: “Of course I know now what you wanted – it wasn't my beautiful eyes you were after – but I tell you what, Miss Lily, you've got to pay up for making me think so” (Wharton *HOM* 153).

²⁰ Lily's value in these capacities can be found smattered throughout Wharton's novel. Even proximity to Lily at a party is enough to make a person more valuable themselves. For example, Sim Rosedale, the up-and-coming businessman the old monied group of New York cannot keep from infiltrating their community, literally struts through the group when given the opportunity to walk beside Lily (102). One will also remember Lily's distinct purpose on the cruise of the Mediterranean sponsored by the Dorsets. Bertha Dorset's affair with Ned Silverton is “at the acute stage” as described by the straight-shooting Carrie Fisher, and Bertha's husband George is in need of continuous distraction (196). Judy Trenor also, to an extent, is happy for Lily to occupy her husband when necessary, as is the case at Bellomont at the opening of the novel (84).

adhered to closely by Lily, but this system's bar is not always set, there can be flux and alterations in the rate of exchange. Therefore Lily finds herself often in murky and dangerous waters, on the right side of the rule but the wrong side of convention or vice versa.²¹ She is a single woman and an ideal, two things that leave her at a disadvantage and vulnerable to the shifting grounds on which she stands, for she has no man to vouch for her integrity and not one person thinks to assist her.²²

When someone is perfection, there is little room left for empathy. For what would be the point? In the end, the most plausible reason for anyone to believe Bertha Dorset's malignant gossip is the fact that Lily Bart is an ideal, a walking illusion; she could never be who she is. In other words, everyone knows ideals do not exist... and yet there she is, in the midst of them. It is the final nail in her coffin, this belief that she stands outside the folds of humanity. Even Selden, the person most readers like to believe is in love with Lily, refuses to come to her aid and defense.²³

Cheque Please

When the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself," states Judith Butler, "it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, *when the "I" seeks to give an account of itself, an account which must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist.* The reason is that the "I" has no story of its own that is not at once the story of a relation – or set of relations to – a set of norms (8).

Furthermore, this self only comes "into being as a reflexive subject in the context of establishing a narrative account of myself when I am spoken to by someone and prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me" (15). That Lily Bart becomes her own social theorist is apparent as she attempts to explain what options are and are

²¹ At times, readers seem not to acknowledge the ambivalence with which Lily Bart struggles throughout the novel. The reason for this, as Benjamin Carson notes, is that "Lily is both complicit with the ideology of the leisured class and in rebellion against that ideology" (707).

²² As one might recall, the novel explains the difference between married women and single women. Bertha Dorset, for example, was able to carry on extramarital affairs as long as her husband did not reject her behavior. Although perhaps even the entire of society knows of such indiscretions, Bertha is not held to account if not accused by her husband. This will obviously become more clear, what unequal footing Lily and Bertha are on, when Bertha in all seriousness takes her stand against Lily, and although everyone knows the falsity of the accusations, Lily is ostracized because of Bertha's husband and their collective wealth.

²³ The only persons who truly come to Lily's aid are the impotent Gerty Farish and Carrie Fisher. Both women breach the boundaries of New York's upper crust, know the same people, occasionally attend the same events, but are not entirely under the control of that society. They only can see through the ideal to the facticity of Lily's flesh and blood.

not open to a woman of her social position.²⁴ She discusses her social theories with Selden on at least two occasions, but his musings and advice are first, idealistic, and second hypocritical, leaving Lily on her own to attempt to understand her situation.²⁵ These are the few moments in which Lily attempts anything that might be a reckoning with herself and her society. She does not quite understand everything about it, but she believes she has a sympathetic ear with Selden and attempts serious theoretical explorations of it and its relationship to her.

As Lily finds herself progressively desperate in high society, she believes interrogating that society might be fruitful. Lily's livability is precarious in *The House of Mirth* from start to finish, and therefore is held up for scrutiny by Lily herself... although no one else will join her in this endeavor. On this front, Lily is participating in an exercise that Judith Butler suggests is obligatory to the question of a livable life. Using the philosopher Theodor Adorno, she states: "Adorno insists that an ethical norm that fails to offer a way to live or that turns out, within existing social conditions, to be impossible to appropriate has to become subject to critical revision (Butler 5-6). Although Lily appropriates every gender norm, she is confronted with impossibilities at every turn. She attempts to remedy her increasingly hopeless situation by presenting Selden with evidence of the invisible manacles that seize and hold her to her fate.

It is unfortunate that Selden struggles and finally decides against his initial judgments about Lily. For he notes at the novel's beginning that "a coarse texture will not take a high finish," and asks himself "was it not possible that the material was fine but the circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape" (7). Both instincts tacitly argue against judging Lily merely by her appearance, something Lily struggles with throughout the novel. Because of her ultra-intelligibility as an ideal woman, she is kept hyper-visible, consequently disallowing her anything outside that appearance (more accurately, she is only an *outside*), in essence denying her personhood... and humanity. As we recall, Selden fancies he sees the "real Lily Bart" in her minimal *tableau vivant* (142). But, as explained by the narrator, "*Tableaux Vivants* depend for their effect not

²⁴ Parallel to this idea, Nancy Von Rosk remarks in her 2001 article that, "Lily spends much time in ontological speculation, contemplating the science of her own being and subjectivity in relation to the reality of her circumstances and her changing physical appearance" (77).

²⁵ A good example of Selden's dismissal of the seriousness of Lily's state is after she has plead for his friendship and explained how she is ensnared by a society that does not really care about her nor does it offer real insight into its workings. Hopelessly, she states what everyone exhorts her to do: to get married... something she detests, and shows quite readily. To all of this, Selden simply asks: "Well, why don't you?" "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?" (Wharton *HOM* 11). This is said matter-of-factly by Selden without the least bit of irony that just a moment prior he had mused: "She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (9). Add to this his complete detachment from self-incrimination (and hypocrisy) by assuming himself separate from the "civilization" he criticizes. Even Lily observes and comments to Selden: "you spend a good deal of your time in the element you disapprove of" (74).

only on the happy disposal of light and the delusive interposition of layers of gauze, but on a corresponding adjustment of the mental vision" (140). Benjamin D. Carson notes the irony in Selden's (and Gerty's) belief that they see the "real" through the punctiliously fabricated:

"What Selden and Gerty see as real, through "the delusive interposition of layers of gauze" and a "corresponding adjustment of the mental vision," is but an imaginary relation to the real accepted as real. Selden and Gerty see in Lily a representation of Woman, her body, accordingly, 'a primary site of sexuality and visual pleasure' (de Lauretis 13). That both Gerty and Selden, a woman and a man, construct Lily through their gaze as such is important in that it reveals the complicity of both men and women in the reproduction of the real (though imaginary) Woman" (703-4).

It is easier to assume the uncomplicated, strictly aesthetically pleasing woman on stage is all that the ideal woman should be. Rather than allow his loftier suspicions to guide Selden through the complexities of dealing with a real human being, he prefers in the end his initial observation, that the only thing separating Lily from other women is something "external, as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay" (7).²⁶ Lily's original gender performance trumps any hope for others to see and recognize her in any other way.

Interestingly, Lily's heteronormative deviance is overlooked in and outside the novel by critics and characters alike. This is due to her hyper-visibility as the "woman" ideal. Her beauty and femininity are so overwhelming that she is not often marked as an unconventional protagonist. But, she has successfully broken links between her sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. And, as Judith Butler reminds us, "normative sexuality fortifies normative gender," in other words, "one is a woman, according to this framework, to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame" (*GT* Preface xi). Other female characters might be assumed rebellious if they were to thwart every chance at heterosexual coupling,²⁷ or that they were more moved

²⁶ Indeed, as Nancy Von Rosk highlights, "Selden is jarred out of his aesthetic contemplation of Lily to feel, '[i]n the long moment before the curtain fell... the whole tragedy of her life'" (80). However, he also notes that "[d]espite this lapse into apparent moral indignation," Selden "ultimately relies on his aesthetic sense and specular processes to appraise Lily. The 'tragedy of her life' that is impressed upon him before the curtain falls is more a consequence of his visual sense than his moral standards" (80). These quotations notwithstanding, I must note that I disagree with Von Rosk's argument that Lily "seems to require an interpretive frame that is inherently impossible for her to occupy," and that she is "forced to exist in a society that forever misreads her" (80). My argument is that Lily, although perhaps requiring an "interpretive frame," it is certainly not impossible for her to occupy it. If anything, she occupies it too well.

²⁷ Indeed, at one point Carrie Fisher explains to Selden: "That's Lily all over, you know: she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed, but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest, she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic" (Wharton *HOM* 196). And, as noted throughout the novel, even with a history of

by their own appearances and attire than any man, but Lily's intelligibility keeps her beyond suspicion, and also keeps her beyond humanness. The "woman" created through Lily Bart, the woman Lily Bart creates for the outside world is one that is a recognizable ideal. Her image evokes a recognizability that at once exists and does not. Lily is an ideal, yet as an ideal she is already a copy... a copy of herself, the ideal. She is both the archetype and the duplicate. She is the before and the after... the always. Kept in this space, Lily Bart finds it impossible to escape. She is at once recognizable and unrecognizable and her life is both livable and unlivable. As a body, she is valuable, valueless, and wretchedly vulnerable on every front.

sabotaging her own chances at marriage, not one person believes Lily does not want to be married. Even Selden believes that that is what she desires, and certainly all she can accomplish.

Segue

The House of Mirth & Quicksand

Outside is Inside, the True and the Real

*"I think that my picture of you is, after all, the true Helga Crane."*¹

*It's expression was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart....*²

Questions regarding "reality" and "truth" are ancient ones that have whirled around the concept of mimesis since its inception. And, there have been different and differing opinions on mimesis' role in reality- and truth-making since that time. The two novels in this study that touch on these themes most strongly are Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, for as the excerpts of each novel provided above suggest, apparently there is a "true" Helga Crane and a "real" Lily Bart.

Edith Wharton is often placed in the camp of Realist writers³ or at best noted as a transitional figure between Realism and Modernism (often seen as a Naturalist as well).⁴

¹ Please see Larsen's *Quicksand*, 88.

² Please see Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, 142.

³ For example, see Amy Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism*, and Candace Waid's *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld*.

But, as this analysis will argue, although their two works are twenty-three years apart, Wharton and Larsen must grapple with the residue of the romantic view of mimesis' and its link with "truth" and "reality," especially in their depiction of their female protagonists. Both authors quarrel with the idea that the outside – what is seen on the outside – reflects what is inside. Visibility, then, what is seen or not of these characters, is an important feature focused on throughout the novels.

With the internalization of mimesis in the 18th century, mimesis becomes a "mirror of the inner self" (Potolsky 82), and this has carried through in one form or another since. It was not uncommon to judge a character by her/his image; what is inside, the kind of person you are supposedly manifests itself on the outside, the visage of what other people see.⁵ Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* near the end of the century (1890), for example, plays on this fact as Gray's portrait, instead of his face, takes on the horrendous physical characteristics that apparently mirror his festering, immoral soul. Art work depicting Helga Crane and Lily Bart demonstrate this same theme, for their true selves supposedly appear through art. The "real" Lily Bart is evidently seen only when she dons the dress and likeness of the portrait of Mrs. Reynolds in her scandalous *tableau vivant*, and Helga Crane's "true" self is supposedly made visible only through the sensuous portrait painted by a famed artist. In both pieces, the work of art is supposed to represent the "real" or "true" woman. This true woman is supposed to have been captured and held up to the viewer (voyeur?), Selden and Olsen respectively, as more true than the corporeal facticity of the persons with whom they actually come in contact. In both cases, it is an artistic rendering of them that is seen as more "real" than their actual presence.

This is one way of thinking about mimesis, assuming that its goal is to find the real. But, the problem with thinking mimesis in terms of levels of realism, is the term *real* itself, a word with "almost diametrically opposed" nuances (Potolsky 94):

On the one hand, we often use real in opposition to the false or imaginary. The real is concrete and knowable to the senses. On the other hand, we also use real in opposition to appearances or to self-deceptive convictions. In this case, the real points to underlying or overlooked facts, to truths not apparent in everyday life. The real here is precisely what we cannot know by the senses or through material objects in the world (94).

⁴ In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, for example, Millicent Bell locates Wharton generally in the realist and naturalist traditions (15).

⁵ Gebauer and Wulf note "The reference made by ideas to the external world is understood in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a relation of similarity, so that individualization, intensification, and subjectivization are considered the results of a process by which the internal and external become similar. Internal to the writer is a mental mirror of external things, and his or her descriptions of the world are an expression of what is internal" (157).

We can see these questions of reality floating throughout the two novels as other characters try to make sense of the protagonists. As a critic, I am not looking for a “real” Helga Crane or Lily Bart, but I am attempting to find how the representations of the “real” are depicted. This is done by not just questioning the action of the novel and its meaning, but questioning the assumptions on which critics have and continue to build their criticisms.

Using Judith Butler’s trope of intelligibility, which contains undercurrents of visibility (and reality; what can be seen and understood), I explore how visibility plays out on the female subject in each of these novels. Since intelligibility is only afforded those who are naturalized into heteronormative patterns of behaviors and therefore able to be seen as subjects in those contexts, it makes one wonder how to see these protagonists differently, when they have already been so wholly seen and analyzed by critics. Focusing on questions of truth/real and visibility and their interrelations with intelligibility, I attempted to critique the representations of these protagonists in new ways.

Breaking the Heteronormative Frame

The hyper-feminine, hyper-attractive characters of Lily Bart and Helga Crane who are forever surrounded by male suitors and wedding proposals immediately thrust the reader into an unconscious heterosexual mindset. In this context, it is as if reading the novel were like playing an old vinyl record on a turntable. One places the needle on the outer edge of the record, the needle finds its way into the groove and plays the song from start to finish exactly as it has the time before... and the time before... and.... Different readings of the novels can (performatively) materialize, however, if we rid ourselves of at least some of our preconceived notions about what the images of women are supposed to be and do in these texts.

The goal of heterosexual marriage and reproduction has been an archetypal narrative into which female characters have been positioned and that female readers have had to endure since the novel’s beginnings. And, both *Quicksand* and *The House of Mirth* have been repeatedly critiqued without any question regarding that narrative. This is in spite of neither text actually having enough evidence to continue reading them with such assumptions. Lily, throughout the novel seems to be consistently on the prowl for a suitable mate; however, if one looks at Lily’s demise and the decisions she has made regarding every available male with whom she could have coupled, one must re-visit the supposition that Lily is in any way interested in heterosexual intimacy. By the same token, Helga Crane in *Quicksand* is just as questionable a representation of heteronormativity as Lily in *The House of Mirth*. In the preceding chapters, heterosexual desire is taken to task regarding Helga. The chapter breaks down Helga’s relationships with the “opposite sex,” revealing evidence of her distaste for men being much more

vibrant than her attraction. In fact, possibly the most sexually explicit scene in the entire novel is the scene in which Helga – amidst a group of church women – is brought slowly to an uncontrollable, orgasmic release. And, although no one has ever gone so far as to describe Helga Crane as lesbian, she, as Lily before her, fall into a space that we must admit is less than cooperative with heterosexual norms.

It might be more productive, in fact, to read both Lily and Helga more queerly. Yet, their queerness is of a subtle type. Their kind of queer, although of course always having to do in some way or be in association with sexual norms, is not to argue that either character would particularly identify as homosexual. Instead, this kind of queer is that of which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick speaks when in her book *Tendencies* she suggests, “‘Queer’ seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation” (8). This queer is related to those invisible aspects of heterosexuality that seem detached from that realm altogether. To reconnect them would be a process of historicizing heterosexuality, materializing its legions from every corner of society and identifying them as props of the heterosexual scaffold. But, as Sedgwick (following Foucault) has noted, “there are stubborn barriers to making [heterosexuality] accountable” or “visible”:

The making historically visible of heterosexuality is difficult because, under its institutional pseudonyms such as Inheritance, Marriage, Dynasty, Family, Domesticity, and Population, heterosexuality has been permitted to masquerade so fully as History itself” (10).

As noted in the previous chapter on *Quicksand*, a more inclusive term for this phenomenon, the ways in which heterosexuality indiscernibly pervades all aspects of culture, is heteronormativity. So, whether or not one can argue with my readings of Lily’s and Helga’s sexuality, one cannot argue against the resistance of both protagonists to clearly prop up heteronormativity.

If one continues to frame all texts toward heterosexual romance or desire, the representations of gender within the texts continue to be seen conventionally. However, if the heterosexual framing is questioned, possibilities and unconventionalities manifest themselves. As has been pointed out in various criticism, the mimetic process of the heterosexual narrative ruins them both in the end, a clear marker against that same narrative. And by allowing these characters a different kind of performative manifestation of subjectivity, a different angle within the mimetic vision of the plotline, an alterity that jolts the mind to see otherwise, these protagonists can be seen outside the heteronormative contract. Judith Butler reminds us that,

The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender – indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another” (Butler *GT* 172-3).

It is obvious that these links are arbitrary, but unfortunately they continue to persist. Often in literature if one characteristic of the three seems intelligible enough to label, links to the other two are automatically assumed; therefore no justification for the correlations are necessary, or offered.

My intention in these readings is not to read every text as either a heterosexual or homosexual one, nor is my intention to assume all women characters lesbian. My intention is to open up possibilities by suggesting that there are other sexualities, genders, desires that do not carry the same assumptions that heterosexuality does... which means as critics we would not be so quick to judge Lily or Helga in such conventional ways nor as such conventional women.

Chapter 8.

The Slippery Slope of Interpellation: Framing Hero and Victim in *Ethan Frome*

One only has to look at the rather impassioned response by Michael McGiffert¹ to Elizabeth Ammons' 2008 article "The Myth of Imperiled Whiteness and *Ethan Frome*,"² to see that Wharton's *Ethan Frome* continues to evoke distinct and disparate interpretations. We would like to extend ourselves carefully into the disparateness of this discussion, but not into the overt subject matter of both McGiffert's letter and Ammons' article. Although interesting and valuable, we will not join the discussion about whiteness or race in the novel. Instead, we would like to return the argument to something remarkable in both the article and the letter that hearken back to a foundational debate critics have had about *Ethan Frome* almost since its publication: the role of the narrator. The narrator of *Ethan Frome* has been problematic from the start because of his part in the much maligned "construction" of the novel (to be discussed later). In his letter, McGiffert comes plainly from the camp that finds no complications with the narrator. The story of *Ethan Frome* is a simple truth. The construction is no real issue; the narrator is an objective observer who simply tells Ethan's story exactly as it was.³ Ammons, on the other hand, belongs to the camp that sees the narrator as a

¹ In a 2008 Letter to the Editor, Michael McGiffert argued against an article by Elizabeth Ammons. Please see bibliography for full citation.

² Please see bibliography for full citation.

³ Lionel Trilling's famous analysis of the story "The Morality of Inertia," for example, is of this camp. He is not concerned with the telling of the story at all, but rather with the "moral" of the story. For Trilling, there is no question about this being Ethan's story. McGiffert proves himself to be under much the same mind when he states with conviction: "Elizabeth Ammons knows, of course, that the heart of *Ethan Frome*, where everything happens and all meanings lie, is revealed to us as, and only as, Ethan lives it, does it, feels it, sees it, is given to

subjective tale-teller, whose conflation with Ethan challenges his reliability as the narrator.⁴ Seeing these different perspectives almost a century after the novel's publication surely indicates that the construction of the text is something to be reckoned with even now. Therefore, we believe it is necessary for a rigorous exploration of the narrator... again. We will investigate motives for the narrator's representation of the characters, especially Zeena and Ethan. We will assert that the narrator, as the law of the frame story, attempts to interpellate⁵ Zeena and Ethan into subjects of his own choosing. But, we will also assert that his careful manipulation of the characters is inherently fraught with unexpected possibilities that may work against his intention, and indeed in the end, they do.

The Narrator as the Law

Ethan Frome has been recognized and criticized for its "construction," which is as challenging now as it ever was.⁶ The challenge arises through Wharton's decision to

understand it. The book is effectively his autobiography" (514). This clearly indicates his belief that the frame story is an autobiographical narrative told if not by Ethan himself, exactly as Ethan would have told it by the narrator.

⁴ In her article, "Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and the Question of Meaning, Ammons notes the narrator's participatory role in the novel. It is he who "singles Ethan out from 'the stockier foreign breed.' He crafts the descriptors of Zeena that mark her as foreign, threatening, and associated with death. It is no accident, in other words, that Wharton tells her story through an educated, white (every)man – he has no name – who participates in, not just witnesses, the conditions that destroy Ethan's life" (29). In an early article (1961), Joseph Brennan notes the difficulty in critiquing the frame story: "In spite of the obvious formal distinction between the framework and the narrator's 'vision,' the two parts are nevertheless complexly interrelated; the account of Ethan's tragic love, in fact, is so thoroughly informed by the sensibility and imagination of its narrator that the story can be adequately analyzed only in terms of that relationship. Since the narrator has had to imagine almost the whole of Ethan's history and the most important traits of his character as well, in many respects, inevitably, the sensibilities of the two are indistinguishable" (348).

⁵ Interpellation is Louis Althusser's term for the process by which ideology makes subjects of individuals. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." This will be defined and discussed in detail later. Suffice it to say at this time that although the theory is Althusser's we will be following more closely Judith Butler's interpretation of the theory.

⁶ The term "construction" here specifically relates to the temporal lapse between the story and the storytelling, which results in doubts about the narrator's reliability. Wharton herself notes that the "scheme of construction" for *Ethan Frome* i.e., the dealing with a "subject of which the dramatic climax, or rather the anticlimax, occurs a generation later than the first acts of the tragedy," was one that "met with the immediate and unqualified disapproval of the few friends to whom I tentatively outlined it" (Introduction xix-xxi). She again admits to criticism about the construction later in her autobiography: "When *Ethan Frome* first appeared I was severely criticized by the reviewers for what was considered the clumsy structure of the tale. I had pondered long on this structure, had felt its peculiar difficulties, and possible awkwardness, but could think of no alternative which would serve as well in the given case; and though I am far from thinking *Ethan Frome* my best novel, and am bored and even exasperated when I am told that it is, I am still sure that its structure is not its weak point" (Wharton, *Backward* 209).

employ one narrator to relate both the main story as well as the frame story, which takes place twenty-four years prior. In itself, this narrative strategy is not an issue until certain facts become clear: the narrator is an outsider to the small village where the story takes place; the story he wants to tell is one he does not know himself and therefore must rely on the local townsfolk to provide the information; and finally, the locals are unusually tight-lipped about the story the narrator wants to tell. Consequently, as one can imagine, the tale ends up a constructed entanglement of the narrator's imagination and a few sparse threads of hearsay. With the above challenges, then, it is no wonder the narrator of the novel has been a subject of such passionate critique.

Building on Cynthia Griffin Wolff's superb analysis of *Ethan Frome* structured under the fairytale archetype,⁷ we will also analyze the narrator's motivation for his specific interpretation of Ethan's life, but this analysis will have less to do with his fear of Zeena and more to do with his deep-seated fear of and attraction for his favored character, his beloved Ethan. Through a Butlerian lens, we will argue that the narrator acts as the controlling voice, indeed, the voice of the law⁸ intent on interpellating Ethan as an heroic subject in the world he creates. The repetitive and performative nature of interpellation, however, leads the narrator's own story to contradict itself as details about Ethan and Ethan's own behaviors, framed carefully by the narrator, collide with the narrator's overall "vision." These contradictions begin a chain reaction in the narrative that unwittingly depletes Ethan's power and masculinity as the would-be hero, and strengthens Zeena's power and masculinity as the would-be villain. The narrator's story is creative and resourceful, but in the end it is no more than a fabricated picture framed to defend a manufactured hero, told by a narrator who is at once too invested *and* removed from the protagonist, and too much of a naïve outsider to comprehend the nuances of small-town life.

Perhaps the most problematic part about the narrator's account, inside and outside the frame, is his desire to romanticize Ethan.⁹ In the harsh, sterile, and wintry landscape of Starkfield, the narrator searches for a symbolic tale, something that will explain and give meaning to the event that has caused Ethan's erratic gait, the "bent" shape of his shoulders, his "shortened and warped" right side, and the "red gash" across his forehead (3-5). But, rather than a parable or an allegory of Ethan's experience, the

⁷ Among others, the critic Cynthia Griffin Wolff engages in this very type of analysis brilliantly in her book *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*. In the end, her analysis is a careful parsing of plausible rationales for the narrator's bias toward Ethan in telling his story.

⁸ The law in this case will refer to the authoritative voice heard by the individual in Althusser's theory of interpellation.

⁹ It has been noted that the narrator has the "propensity to romanticize" and "aggrandize" Ethan (Rose 427).

narrator instead resolves to write a romance.¹⁰ His intention is not necessarily to get down to the facts and uncover the real story of Ethan Frome, but through the story he formulates, to evoke a “vitality” that he finds lacking in the “sluggish pulse of Starkfield,” and specifically in its citizens (7).

And this narrator is determined.¹¹ He interprets Ethan’s character with a brilliantly imprecise insight. He sees Ethan as “the most striking figure in Starkfield” (3); he is partial to his “careless powerful look” (3), he imagines Ethan’s “lean brown head” which must have sat “gallantly” on his “strong shoulders” in his youth (5). These images begin framing the “vision” the narrator has of Ethan Frome before the vision has even begun. Of course, each of the narrator’s notions is tempered by the reality of Ethan’s physical appearance that encroaches upon the narrator’s fanciful thoughts.¹² For, these realities begrudgingly appear at the end of each romanticized depiction: the “most striking figure in Starkfield,” for example, within the same sentence is also noted as “the ruin of a man”; Ethan’s “careless powerful look” is mitigated by his “lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain” (3); the gallantry of Ethan’s “lean brown head,” sitting atop “strong shoulders” is lessened by the narrator’s note that this is how it must have been “before they were bent out of shape” (5). The narrator has not been entirely truthful with his audience when he tells us directly that he could have been satisfied with the few details he had already been given about Ethan,¹³ for he has already begun his “vision” of Ethan on the first page, long before the notorious ellipses that set off the frame story.

The fact that the narrator has already begun idealizing Ethan before the “vision” begins may also be a key to his motivations. It seems it is the present, broken body of Ethan that unsettles the narrator, challenging him to make sense of this man’s life. Indeed, the plight of the old can seem unfair, unnecessary, and at times intolerable to the young. Consequently it is challenging for him to sympathize with Ethan. Instead, he attempts to empathize with him, hypothetically placing himself into Ethan’s shoes and

¹⁰ Elizabeth Ammons’ article “Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* and the Question of Meaning” is a notable one, making the argument that the narrator’s story is built into the structure of a fairy tale.

¹¹ Cynthia Griffin Wolff highlights the narrator’s resolve in telling his own story about Ethan: “It is *his* story, ultimately his “vision” of Ethan Frome, that we will get.” But she also suggests the narrator’s rather lack of authorial honesty about this endeavor through his flippant attitude toward what it means to tell one’s own version of this story: “His vision is as good as any other (so he glibly assures us at the beginning – for ‘each time it was a different story’), and therefore his story has as much claim to truth as any other” (*Narrator’s* 131).

¹² The narrator’s oxymoronic description is also noted by Cynthia Griffin Wolff. She notes that many “remarks about Ethan have a double thrust, carrying the strong implication that he is (or seems) one way, but that he might be (or might at one time have had the option of being) quite dramatically different” (Wolff, *Narrator’s* 133).

¹³ “I might have contented myself with the story pieced together from these hints [from townspeople Ruth Hale and Harmon Gow] had it not been for the provocation of Mrs. Hale’s silence, and – a little later – for the accident of personal contact with the man” (Wharton, *EF* 9).

thereby projecting onto Ethan his own anxieties and terror about the older man's body and existence.¹⁴ This is why the narrator responds with such agitated vehemence when he is told by Harmon Gow that the fifty-two year old Ethan would likely live to be one hundred: "*That man touch a hundred? He looks as if he was dead and in hell now!*" (5).

Gow tempers the narrator's incredulous outburst by simply cutting a "slab of tobacco" and saying matter-of-factly "Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters" (5). His observation and body language implies an epistemology unlike the narrator's; his unhurried movements and sardonic remark illustrate what separates a country attitude from a city one: an underlying acceptance that life is presumed to be hard, and accepting that some lives are considerably harder than others. If we recall, by the time this narrator appears, Ethan has been living with his injuries for some twenty-four years and after this brief encounter, will continue to live his life like other citizens of his small town, picking up his daily mail and presumably doing what work he can. Surely, Ethan's own assessment would be closer to Gow's unemotional insight into the harsh reality of rural living, than that of the narrator's.

But the narrator is clearly convinced he has the ability to understand Ethan more so than anyone else. He applies his unique powers of discernment when he attempts to decipher Ethan's body language and tone during their few interactions together. During one exchange, the narrator imagines "resentment" in his voice when Ethan admits to being ignorant about the articles in *Popular Science* (12). Another time, the narrator believes himself astute enough to read the "inflection" of Ethan's tone and understand the intentions behind "his sharp relapse into silence" after the older man notes he had been in Florida at some point and used to be able to "call up the sight of it" sometimes during the Starkfield winters (12). These insightful moments all take place before the vision proper even begins, which suggests that the present Ethan's dire condition – as interpreted by the narrator – is the impetus behind the narrator's need for an idealized one later (or earlier, as it is the younger Ethan that the narrator constructs). It is obvious that Ethan's accident and subsequent life rankle the narrator; Ethan's physical difficulties are in contradiction with the narrator's idealized masculine hero from the beginning.

Defending a Hero and... Victim

The narrator yearns to illustrate Ethan as the "bronze image of a hero" that he has conjured up in his head within the first pages of the novel in order to combat the unfair reality of his would-be protagonist (11). The problem becomes, of course, that he has no

¹⁴ Elizabeth Ammons states that the narrator serves as a "surprising double" for Ethan ("Edith" 135). Cynthia Griffin Wolff also maintains that Ethan is the "shadow self" of the narrator, the "man he might become" ("Narrator's" 136). And, Judith Fryer asserts that "the narrator is Ethan Frome's counterpart" (85).

real evidence of Ethan's heroism – at least heroism that he might recognize. For example, Harmon Gow offers information about Ethan that could easily be seen as heroic: the fact that Ethan never got out of Starkfield because "Somebody had to stay and care for the folks" (5). But this information goes unnoticed by the narrator because it does not correspond with his particular brand of heroism, which is entangled with a particular idea of masculinity. Romantic heroism does not include staying in the countryside taking care of one's sick parents and wife. The romantic hero is independent to the point of egocentrism, and should not be distracted by the concerns of others.¹⁵ Therefore, despite the narrator's wish to have real life evidence of Ethan's heroism and the specific masculinity inherent in that heroism, the exact opposite seems more readily available: the tabula rasa of Ethan's last twenty-four years.

The narrator's current evaluation of Ethan and his subsequent "vision" is a defensive one. He mounts a preemptive defense against anticipated attacks on Ethan's character, as provoked by his lame body or his present (and past) economic condition. Yet the only attacks the reader can deduce are imagined attacks thought up by the narrator himself. It is the narrator who thinks Ethan looks like he is "dead and in hell now," implying both the regret of a useless life and the despair of a defeated man.¹⁶ It is the narrator who is consistently checked by the reality of poverty and physical disability that challenge his romanticization of Ethan. It is the narrator who questions the value of Ethan's life, assuming that the look in Ethan's eyes is the consequence of frustrated wrestling caused by unattained aspirations. Since the narrator has chosen Ethan as his protagonist and has empathetically placed himself into his shoes, it is the narrator who dreads finding out what he fears most: that Ethan's poverty and physical appearance translate into Ethan's own failure as a man. The townspeople's unwillingness to speak of Ethan, or Zeena and Mattie, out of deference to their fantastic suffering is too tempting for the narrator. To reconcile his affinity with the man and his repulsion of the idea of his being a failure, he must make the Ethan he will never know, the Ethan of twenty-four years prior, an ideal. Ethan's story becomes the stuff of romance.

How then does the narrator depict Ethan as a hero when he also covertly assumes he is a failure? The idea of Ethan as a failure would certainly strain the narrator's attempt to hold him up as a hero, since failure is decidedly un-heroic and by extension, un-

¹⁵ Please see Lillian R. Furst's "The Romantic Hero, or is He an Anti-Hero" (57).

¹⁶ Ruth Hale does note that she visits the Frome residence usually twice a year and chooses times when Ethan will more than likely be away from the house: "It's bad enough to see the two women sitting there – but his face, when he looks round that bare place, just kills me... You see, I can look back and call it up in his mother's day, before their troubles" (Wharton, *EF* 130). If one were looking for evidence to back up the narrator's conviction that Ethan was "in hell," this would be ambiguous evidence at best since the reference focuses on the condition of the dilapidated house, which could spur any number of memories or emotions in Ethan. Ruth Hale's comment does not suggest Ethan is dead, nor in hell.

masculine (and as noted before, the two are inextricably linked). The narrator must find good reasons to explain what he believes to be Ethan's failings. He must clarify why Ethan has not attained his goals – the assumed scientific, social, and love interests the narrator has projected onto him. And most importantly, he must absolve Ethan of responsibility for his plight. In other words, blame must be leveled repeatedly at someone else; another person must be held accountable for Ethan's disappointments. The narrator must generate a villain, someone who victimizes the ideal Ethan, keeping him from attaining his goals and fulfilling his life. In essence, the narrator must argue two parallel premises simultaneously: that Ethan is a hero and a victim. He is a symbol of "Manhood brought low," but remains faultless himself (Wolff *Narrator's Vision* 133).

Creating a hero/victim for his tale is a tricky business since so much of what makes up this urbanite's idea of a hero resides within a mythic masculinity; therefore, also defending Ethan as a victim rather butts up against that masculinity. And, if heroism has its roots in the masculine then anything outside that realm can be read as something else. What that something else might be could lie along a spectrum of interpretations, but whatever the interpretation, it seems to elicit apprehensiveness from the narrator about Ethan's masculinity. Therefore, as the narrator attempts to argue both that Ethan is a hero and a victim, he puts Ethan's masculinity – the very stuff of heroes – into question. This line of reasoning is a slippery slope for the narrator, one that echos Ethan's own calamitous ride down a slippery slope. And, it makes one wonder how far the narrator is willing to go for his "vision," how far his liberties might take him, and us, with Ethan's story.

Maintaining a balance between the two arguments leads to a certain challenge in the "vision" narrative. Since the narrator must argue for Ethan's victimization in order to argue his heroism, his strategy ends up working against itself. A victim must be under a villain's control. He must be overpowered, and this can be seen as anti-masculine. In other words, romanticizing Ethan, masculinizing him, unwittingly leads to emasculating him as well. The more he villainizes the villain – Zeena in this case – the more Ethan's masculinity is undermined. The narrator's interpellation of Ethan, and by extension Zeena, becomes unmanageable; the subjecthood he attempts to construct falls short, or as Judith Butler might say, it fails. For, as we know through Butler's exploration of these processes of normalization, the so-called product (in this case the narrator's Ethan) is a "sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice" (in this case the narrator's continuous and particular framing of Ethan), but because of its reiterative nature:

gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm (Butler *Bodies* 10).

In other words, the process of interpellation does not always produce what it intends. The narrator's meticulous framing cannot contain its picture, and boundaries blur as

the elements of one character seep into the other. Surprisingly, with all the narrator's careful consideration, it is Zeena, not Ethan, who becomes the most powerful and by extension the most masculine figure in the book.

"Hey, you there! Ethan!"

To be interpellated is to be hailed into subjectivity by an authority figure or symbol of the law. In Althusser's example, it is the policeman who yells "Hey, you there!" At this hailing the individual turns around, recognizing the address is meant for her, symbolizing her subjection to the terms by which she is hailed.¹⁷ Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter*, draws on the process of interpellation to exemplify her theory of gender performativity, for performativity interpellates and interpellation is performative. She notes that it is not some moment with a police officer when the "founding interpellation" takes place, but a much earlier moment (7). An infant is born into this "matrix of gender relations" as "it" becomes "she," and is performatively constituted by the exclamation "It's a girl!" And "in that naming, the girl is 'girled'" (7). Not only is the infant always already gendered, but through Butler's understanding of interpellation, it is a repetitive act:¹⁸ interpellation – as subject and/or in gender – is not a one-time moment of recognition. It is both repetitive and performative,¹⁹ the becoming of a subject by the name by which it is called time and again.

The narrator, as he moves into his "vision" of Ethan Frome interpellates the titular character, repeatedly enacting his authoritative power in steadfastly creating a "hero," out of Ethan. The reticent Ethan of Starkfield is, therefore, at the mercy of this symbol of authority determined to make him into a masculine, romantic figure. But, interpellation is not always certain because its performative dimensions cannot be wholly maneuvered, anticipated, or contained:

The effects of performatives, understood as discursive productions, do not conclude at the terminus of a given statement or utterance [...]. The reach of their signifiability cannot be controlled by the one who utters or writes, since such productions are not owned by the one who utters them. They continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors' most precious intentions" (Butler *Bodies* 241).

¹⁷ Althusser, "Ideology" 301.

¹⁸ The "...founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm" (Butler, *BTM* 8).

¹⁹ A "performative" is an utterance that in the saying, does what it says (Butler *GT*, 173).

It is the performative aspect of interpellation, then, that makes the narrator's vision a tenuous one. As the narrator hails into being a "hero," he attempts to control (or frame) the performative dimensions of his hailing and gender dimensions of his hero. His utterances about Ethan, and indirectly about Zeena, are repetitively let loose in attempts to bolster a particular vision of Ethan, but as noted above, these utterances are not under his control, which explains how the conflicting signals of gender and power emerge.

Why the narrator chooses Ethan is anyone's guess, perhaps he is goaded by "Mrs. Hale's silence" after all, or by finally meeting Ethan himself (9). Either way, the narrator's dogged determination is his own worst enemy, for he insists on his own interpretation of events. He is not looking for the truth of Ethan Frome per se, but to fill in the "gaps" of Ethan's story, which reads more like explanations for his fanciful assumptions about the man (6).²⁰ Regardless of any notion to the contrary, he insists there is a "look in [Ethan's] face which... neither poverty nor physical suffering could have put there," and his unique discernment, his story, is the only way to uncover an explanation for it (9). He then sets out on a crusade to explain again and again Ethan's valiant suffering. But in the process he is deeply perplexed by the fact of Ethan having never gotten out of Starkfield like "most of the smart ones" before him (7), for he has marked Ethan not as simply one of them, but the best of them, a hero. His Ethan is so special, he wonders "how could any combination of obstacles have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome?" (7).

As noted earlier, we do not know why Ethan is the chosen hero; perhaps it is accidental, but perhaps it is opportunistic. For surely, what makes Ethan the hero to this eager young narrator in the first place? What is masculine and/or heroic about the maimed figure – the man, not the vision – the narrator comes upon at the post office in his short time in Starkfield? Is it not his very lack of palpable manhood, of masculinity, that makes Ethan irresistible to the narrator? As critic Candace Waid asserts about Ethan's masculinity: "in becoming a mutilated and crippled man, he also seems to become the barren and infertile woman" (75).²¹ Is it not the narrator's own anxiety about Ethan's masculinity in the first place that compels his desire for a more robust, romantic archetypal masculinity for the hero of his country yarn? That the narrator has chosen a man of mystery, a man whose story remains unknown to him, leaves the narrator full liberty in not only crafting the action of the story, but crafting the

²⁰ As noted previously, Cynthia Griffin Wolff remarks that the narrator's smug assurance with his own interpretation of events. According to her, the narrator believes "his vision is as good as any other... and therefore [...] has as much claim to truth as any other" (Wolf, "Narrator's" 131).

²¹ Lev Raphael also comments on Ethan's masculinity claiming that Ethan feels an acute sense of shame over "his deep inadequacies as a man." However, this is an interpretation of the story told by the narrator and not the view of Ethan before the vision; therefore, this view must be noted with caution (284).

characteristics of the players as well. If the narrator's utterings are empathetic but also enacted upon a nearly blank-slate of a man with a character outlined only by whispered and fragmented gossip from various sources, it is not surprising that he would attempt to interpellate Ethan into his own ideal of masculinity or his imagined ideal of masculinity for that rugged territory; for it is well-established that Ethan functions as a kind of double for the narrator.²²

Ethan's major failure, according to the storyteller is that he never actually gets out of Starkfield; therefore, the narrator sets out to explain the extraordinary circumstances behind that failure, not knowing that his vindication of Ethan will lead to his own interests – his interpellative interests – to fail. In Ethan's defense, the narrator must reveal an obstacle so powerful that Ethan has no choice but to remain in the small town, since apparently the “smash up” – one of the few factual events the narrator knows about Ethan's life – is not ample cause for his having remained in Starkfield.²³ The obstacle materializes in the form of Zeena, Ethan's ailing wife. She will become the villain of the story, the thing that threatens the narrator's perception of Ethan's nature and aspirations. But, like the image of Zeena the narrator spectrally positions in front of Ethan as he rushes toward the elm (124), the narrator's vision is soon overcome by Zeena as well. The more he attempts to masculinize, to enlarge the figure of Ethan, the greater the image of Zeena looms over him. The narrator cannot see Ethan but through Zeena, and she becomes the most powerful force in the story.

Frame Story Frome

“‘To be framed’ is a complex phrase in English,” says Judith Butler in her book *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*

²² The name “double” here is used in a general sense and should not be confused with Freud's specific use of the term. There is neither time nor space in this study to investigate the significance of the various names employed by critics to denote the nature of the relationship between the narrator and Ethan, but it is surely fertile territory for further development.

²³ It is remarkable that the narrator, when reflecting later on Harmon Gow's words: “Most of the smart ones get away,” does not at least consider the “smash-up” as a component of, if not the mitigating factor in, Ethan's lingering in Starkfield (Wharton EF 7). This is further evidence of the narrator's indefatigable proclivity for romance. The sledding accident is not just a senseless tragedy, but one made sense by its use in the narrator's mind as a cataclysmic event borne by ill-fated love.

[A] picture is framed, but so too is a criminal (by the police), or an innocent person (by someone nefarious, often the police), so that to be framed is to be set up, or to have evidence planted against one that ultimately ‘proves’ one’s guilt. When a picture is framed, any number of ways of commenting on or extending the picture may be at stake. But the frame tends to function, even in a minimalist form, as an editorial embellishment of the image, if not a self-commentary on the history of the frame itself. This sense that the frame implicitly guides the interpretation has some resonance with the idea of the frame as a false accusation.

The frame story in *Ethan Frome* pivots around the narrator’s use of language, around speaking and silence, around what language does and does not do, can and cannot do. The reader has already witnessed interesting linguistic happenings before the frame story, ways in which the narrator is ‘setting up’ a certain perspective of the main character. For example, the narrator is already fixing the story of Ethan, even though this story can only be acquired through bits of gossip and the “gaps” or silences (which are more frequent than the gossip) in between. This suggests that his relaying or telling of Ethan’s story is already suspect. Like a frame, it is not simply and passively displaying a picture, but takes part in the picture itself or even the creation of the picture. The reader has also seen the legendary lines of ellipses.

Within the alphabetical symbols of a text, these dotted lines are provocative and indicate, among other things, silence (the stoppage of language or speech), anticipation of something further to be said, and movement into another narrative sphere.²⁴ And, once the narrator begins to frame the frame story, the way language works becomes even more intriguing.

The narrator speaks the young Ethan into being in a language quite remote from his country subject.²⁵ This strategy seems an attempt by the narrator to maintain a separateness from Ethan (not wholly successfully, as discussed earlier regarding the doubling of the narrator and Ethan). He assumes the authoritarian persona of the educated anthropologist whose eloquence and civilized language stand out starkly against the subject’s. It is this distinction between civilized city-narrator and mythical,

²⁴ In speaking of the *Ethan Frome* ellipses, in 1979 Elizabeth Ammons states: “Short ellipses often appear in Wharton’s fiction, usually to suggest a drift off into reverie or speculation, or to make a preceeding passage reverberate. This ellipsis, however, is excessive, and it exists to help establish genre. The trailing dots (which critics have ignored) emphasize that, while Ethan’s sotry will appear real and the tragedy did happen, the version here is a fabrication. It is an imagined reconstruction of events organized in part out of shared oral material and shaped into one of many possible narratives” (Ammons, *Edith* 128).

²⁵ In his 1961 article, Joseph Brennan remarks on the narrator’s language. The full sentence is duplicated here: “In short, the narrator who presents himself as an engineer in the realistic framework of the novel is actually a writer in disguise with the technical skill of a professional novelist and the sensibility of a poet; and his imaginative reconstruction of Ethan Frome’s story, in view of what little he had to go by, is really no more than a brilliant fiction” (348).

backward country-subject that he hopes will assist in making the latter sympathetic to the reader in his melodrama. It is just such uncultured traits as reticence and inarticulateness that make Ethan's story in need of telling by such a narrator. Even Wharton herself, in the "Author's Introduction" to *Ethan Frome* notes that Ethan and company are "simple" and "rudimentary," while the narrator is "sophisticated," able to "see all around them" (xxi).²⁶ But while the narrator is congratulating himself on being there and lending his sophisticated voice at just this moment when the story needs telling, his uncultivated Ethan pays the price.

The benevolent father of this tale, the sophisticated invisible hand maneuvering its action, creates an awkward fellow of Ethan, a fellow who is incapable of expressing his own story, understanding his own situation, and is rather stunted in his capacity for observation. Yet Zeena, who is endowed with both Ethan's reticence and inarticulateness, seems able to express herself when she chooses, quite understands her situation, and exhibits an acute sense of observation. Unlike Ethan, her rural characteristics make her a stronger character, a more solid force in the Frome household and in the frame. It is between these two characters, one being sympathetically courted as the hero and one being formed into the villain, that the argument develops between the narrator... and the narrator.

Ethan's cousin Zeena is brought into the vision as the caretaker of Ethan's mother. She comes over from the next valley to nurse the ailing Frome matriarch. Upon her arrival, she is exponentially the domestic that Ethan had been, demonstrating her capability in this realm. With Zeena's appearance, the narrator suggests that Ethan's "shaken balance" is "restored" by "obeying [Zeena's] orders," which leaves him "free to go about his business again and talk with other men" (52). There are two important things going on here. First, the fact that Ethan "obeys" Zeena draws attention to her power far more than his relief of being free from caretaking, which is a blow to the masculinity the narrator is attempting to shore up. And second, the narrator implies the importance of socializing with other men by assuring us that Ethan would have missed this particular ritual. However, the word choice in the paragraph is surprising and seems to work against Ethan's masculinity. That he is longing to "talk with other men" seems a weak conjecture, as there is no evidence to suggest he is or ever has been a talker, to men or otherwise. Even the narrator's concoction of Ethan's studying at

²⁶ Wharton's passage is important enough to be duplicated in full here: "It appears to me, indeed, that, while an air of artificiality is lent to a tale of complex and sophisticated people which the novelist causes to be guessed at and interpreted by any mere looker-on, there need to be no such drawback if the looker-on is sophisticated, and the people he interprets are simple. If he is capable of seeing all around them, no violence is done to probability in allowing him to exercise this faculty; it is natural enough that he should act as the sympathizing intermediary between his rudimentary characters and the more complicated minds to whom he is trying to present them" (Wharton, Introduction xxi).

Worcester display him as a college student who kept to himself and was not “much of a hand at a good time” (51). And although the narrator assures us Ethan “secretly gloried in being clapped on the back and hailed as ‘Old Ette’ or ‘Old Stiff,’” he also assures us unwittingly that these kinds of interactions, even if they had existed in Worcester, are unavailable in Starkfield.²⁷ Therefore, it is implausible that Ethan would want to loaf about with other men when it is clear that it is not something he does at all in Starkfield. In “Cold Ethan and Hot Ethan,” it is noted that Ethan does not interact with the rest of the townspeople, that he is “withdrawn” from his society, maintaining “at best a satellite relationship” to the social events of the town (237-8). Therefore, his relief at talking to other men seems simply a way to bolster Ethan’s masculine persona. The “convivial loiterings” in which the narrator would like to think Ethan participates seem more a conflicting depiction that destabilizes Ethan’s interpellation (Wharton 51). It simply does not fit what we have already been told – by the narrator – about Ethan’s character in Starkfield inside or outside the frame.

Unlike the imagined manly dawdling, reticence is one stable and ongoing characteristic of Ethan, as well as a masculine marker. Before the vision, Ethan is not much of a talker for he is noted by the narrator to have only stopped briefly and on “rare” occasions to engage in conversation with one or another of the older men of the town (4). And, even when he stops to speak to these men it is as if he remains silent after all since he answers in “so low a tone” that his words never reach the narrator’s ears (5). Riding with Ethan over the winter landscape to Corbury Flats does not give the narrator any signs other than those already assumed about Ethan’s proclivity for talk.

On the other hand, when Ruth Hale compares the women at the Frome farm with the women in the Frome graveyard, she notes that one distinction between the two is that the women in the graveyard “have got to hold their tongues” (133). This is an overt allusion to an assumption that women are more talkative than men, and the narrator plays on this idea throughout the story: Ruth Hale herself has a mind with a “storehouse of anecdote[s],” and “any question about her acquaintances brought forth a volume of detail,” and according to the narrator Ethan’s mother “had been a talker in her day” (8, 51). Even the narrator’s Zeena had a certain “volubility” when she first appears at the Frome farm (52). But, if we assume Ethan’s aversion to the spoken word is being framed as a masculine aide by the narrator, what would we then say of Zeena after that first year? Zeena displays the characteristic as much if not more so than the protagonist, for even the taciturn Ethan notes it (53). Mattie notes it equally, comparing the two when, frightened that Zeena is unhappy with her, she complains to Ethan that Zeena “hardly ever says anything,”; therefore, it is difficult to know how to please her. But, she follows this up with the same grievance about him: “... sometimes I can see she ain’t suited, and

²⁷ The “cessation of such familiarities had increased the chill of his return to Starkfield” (Wharton *EF* 51).

yet I don't know why.' She turned on him with a sudden flash of indignation. 'You'd ought to tell me, Ethan Frome – you'd out to!'" (37). Mattie's reaction illustrates Ethan's own penchant for reticence – comparing him to Zeena almost simultaneously – but it also illustrates her distaste for it in general. Yet her distaste is only reflecting Ethan's own distaste for the very trait in Zeena that he himself possesses. Reticence is especially not appreciated in women. When his mother's voice is no longer heard regularly, Ethan suffers a sense of desperation and loneliness (51). But when Zeena "too [falls] silent," he does not suffer loneliness; instead he feels resentment (53).²⁸

"It's a... Girl?" "Hey, you there! Zeena!"

Speaking into being a hero in this case means also speaking into being a villain. It is Zeena, who will assist in masculinizing Ethan, making his battle between her and him an heroic one between good and evil, victim and villain. But, as Zeena's villain congeals with every page, she becomes more powerful perhaps than the narrator has anticipated. Interpellation has become slippery stuff. Attempts at masculinizing Ethan unwittingly demonstrates his powerlessness, and rather surprisingly demonstrates Zeena's more powerful, perhaps more "masculine" disposition. With the arrival of Mattie on the scene, the narrator frames a romantic opportunity for his hero in the vision, which unwittingly confers Zeena with overwhelming power. It is at this point that Zeena's silence becomes a strength, vigorous and commanding, while Ethan's becomes nervous and timid. For, now that he has been assigned a romantic interest outside his marriage, Ethan must wonder, and worry, what Zeena is thinking.

As the narrator moves more closely into a psychological space of the characters, Zeena becomes the more intriguing of the two. If she had continued to talk as she did when she first came to the house, Ethan could ignore her and "think of other things" as she spoke (54). Unfortunately, instead of continuing to speak, as perhaps the narrator

²⁸ It may be of interest to note that critics have pointed toward *Ethan Frome* as a mirror of Wharton's own romantic life at the time. In his 1975 book *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, R.W.B. Lewis notes that "*Ethan Frome* portrays her personal situation, as she had come to appraise it, carried to a far extreme, transplanted to a remote rural scene, and rendered utterly hopeless by circumstance. As she often did, Edith [sic] shifted the sexes in devising her three central characters. Like Edith Wharton, Ethan Frome is married to an ailing spouse a number of years older than he, and has been married for about the same length of time as Edith had been tied to Teddy [they married in 1885]" (95). He notes further that in the "savage quarreling between Ethan and Zeena, in the latter pages of the story, we hear something of the bitter recriminations Edith and teddy had begun to visit upon each other. And in the denouement – where the bountifully healthy and vindictive Zeena commands a household that includes Mattie as a whining invalid and Ethan as the giant wreck of a man – we have Edith Wharton's appalling vision of what her situation might finally have come to [Lewis footnotes: "Teddy Wharton's deteriorating condition, his speculation with Wharton's fortune, and his sexual affairs had brought matters to a head in their marriage]" (95). Furthermore, Ethan's and Mattie's relationship, says Lewis, echos the relationship between Wharton and Morton Fullerton (95).

believes Ethan would have liked, Zeena elects to use Ethan's own preferred choice of communication: silence. And her silence, a portent for "queerness" akin to his mother's, begins to "trouble him" (54); it is menacing, "secretive," "brooding" (54, 28, 87):

At times looking at Zeena's shut face he felt the chill of such forebodings. At other times her silence seemed deliberately assumed to conceal far-reaching intentions, mysterious conclusions drawn from suspicions and resentments impossible to guess. (54)

Part of his resentment can likely be linked to his propensity for inertia;²⁹ her silence forces him to think, to be actively engaged... and he detests it. Needless to say, his need to exert himself mentally to keep up with Zeena's silence does not make Ethan seem particularly powerful, nor does it help Ethan's masculine persona that he cannot penetrate Zeena's thoughts, that he must spend his own precious thinking on hers. Evidently, "nobody knows Zeena's thoughts," which is a significant source of her power (131).

Zeena's power becomes that which victimizes Ethan, and according to the narrator, is that which makes Ethan heroic. In order to prove his heroic masculinity, he must be seen as the villain's prey kept in Starkfield against his will. Naturally, when one begins assigning power through interpellation, controlling power, through framing, even if one has the advantage as the narrator does, it will most likely do what it will. The narrator's commentary at times illustrates this fact. For example, at one point the narrator describes Ethan's response to Zeena herself, noting that Ethan had "remained indifferent" to Zeena as long as he could "ignore and command" her (87). This is quite strong language for Ethan's character. We can believe in Ethan's indifference; surely, that personality trait is glaringly obvious and pervasive throughout the text, but to suspend our disbelief long enough to accept his "command" over Zeena is quite a bite to choke down. There is nothing in the text, or from the neighbor's comments, that suggest Ethan has any command over his house, least of all the woman who runs it. Evidentiary sentences, in fact, point toward exactly the opposite. If Ethan were in command, he certainly would not allow Zeena the "patent medicines [that] doubled his burden" financially (Cooper 312). He might also curtail or refuse her trips to new doctors in different counties, since we know Ethan "had grown to dread these expeditions because of their cost" (Wharton 46). When Zeena wants to visit the new doctor at Bettsbridge, Ethan does not know she is going until he finds her sitting at the kitchen table in her best dress (46). To this picture, Ethan asks, "Why, where are you

²⁹ Since Lionel Trilling's 1956 article, critiques of *Ethan Frome* presuppose Ethan's inertial personality. For example, Kenneth Bernard notes that, "throughout the book, Frome recognizes his futility and accepts it rather than trying to fight his way out of it" (181). He also states that Ethan is "weak," and his "character never changes" (181).

going, Zeena?” and she answers him in a “matter-of-fact tone, as if she had said she was going to the store-room to take a look at the preserves” (46). We then learn that these “abrupt decisions [are] not without precedent” for her (46). Her unapologetic attitude and the knowledge that she is known to do this from time to time indicates Zeena’s power to do what she likes, with or without Ethan’s consent (although of course both are strapped to an extent by their economic status).

Another example of Zeena’s power is the often-cited description of her in the doorway upon Ethan’s and Mattie’s return from the dance:

Against the dark background of the kitchen she stood up tall and angular, one hand drawing a quilted counterpane to her flat breast, while the other held a lamp. The light, on the level with her chin, drew out of the darkness her puckered throat and the projecting wrist of the hand that clutched the quilt, and deepened fantastically the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face under its ring of crimping pins. (40)

True, as Ammons and others have suggested, Zeena appears here as a ghostly apparition, perhaps even witch-like (Ammons 130), but she is also a masculine figure, and a powerful one at that. She is tall and angular, has a flat, masculinized chest, and a high-boned face that is not feminized even under the fact of the “crimping pins.” She stands at the door in command of the two who stand below her; between her possession of the key as well as her prominent figure, she controls access to the Frome house.³⁰ Even when Ethan attempts to stay downstairs so as not to have Mattie watch him go to bed with his wife, he is compelled “with lowered head” to “follow in his wife’s wake” (41). In attempting to make Ethan sympathetic here for the reader, the narrator shames him as a man.

Another unsuspecting example of Zeena’s power is through a specific attempt to display Ethan’s masculinity against Zeena, which one can imagine does not go as well as the narrator might have hoped. When they have their first fight after seven years of marriage, over Mattie, Ethan asserts his masculine authority over his household and his wife. Striving to appeal to her sense of familial responsibility and reaching even further

³⁰ Compare this scene with the doubled one of Mattie, the next night, standing in the exact same position as Zeena. The two are dissimilar in the narrator’s focus on age and gender, which relate to power. The light evokes Zeena’s age/masculinity and with it her ability to control the entrance of the two beneath her, while the light plays on Mattie’s youth and the maternal (“milky”), which seems surprisingly a double reference to her childishness but also her femininity: “She stood just as Zeena had stood, a lifted lamp in her hand, against the black background of the kitchen. She held the light at the same level, and it drew out with the same distinctness her slim young throat and the brown wrist no bigger than a child’s. Then, striking upward, it threw a lustrous fleck on her lips, edged her eyes with velvet shade, and laid a milky whiteness above the black curve of her brows” (Wharton *EF* 60).

into an imagined anxiety about status, he attempts to outsmart Zeena during the argument:

You can't put her out of the house like a thief – a poor girl without friends or money. She's done her best for you and she's got no place to go to. You may forget she's your kin but everybody else'll remember it. If you do a thing like that what do you suppose folks'll say of you? (87)

But Zeena reveals, if not her superior intellect, her more exercised mind. She demonstrates that, unlike Ethan, her verbal restraint is productive. While the narrator fills Ethan's head with dreamy notions of romance, Zeena is left to herself to argue the stark reality of her life. She silences him with her comeback: "I know well enough what they say of my having kep' her here as long as I have" (87). With the drop of a hand from the doorknob he'd been clutching, Ethan knows he is defeated. And like a "knife-cut across the sinews" he feels "weak and powerless" after the quarrel (87).

Zeena becomes so powerful in Ethan's mind that the very idea of Zeena has power over Ethan. During his evening with Mattie, Mattie sits in Zeena's chair and as Ethan watches, Zeena's face appears and "obliterates" her (66). When Zeena's name is mentioned throughout this same evening, it consistently stops Ethan's actions and thoughts. "I suppose he got Zeena over to the flats all right?" Ethan asks Mattie, which silences them both and throws a "chill between them" (61). At the mention of her name Ethan is "paralysed" or "benumb[ed]" (61-2). Later, when they talk about what Zeena's attitude is toward Mattie, just the "repetition of the name seemed to carry it to the farther corners of the room and send it back to them in long repercussions of sound" (69). Both characters must wait until the echo of the name falls in order to speak again (69). And, of course, the most potent display of her power is when, as Ethan and Mattie rush down the hill toward the big elm, Zeena's face "thrust[s] itself between him and his goal" (124).

These examples of Zeena's power portray her masculine domination over not only her house – her home truly is her castle – but over her husband. With that said, surely with the narrator's empathy squarely on Ethan's side, the narrator has entrusted Ethan in kind. Although the narrator must allow Ethan to be victimized, surely his silence or some other attribute can shore up his heroism, the reason he is victimized in the first place. But, instead we receive a man who cannot act in any definitive way, whose tremendous inertia overwhelms any hope of a stable power or masculinity. In Zeena we see a character whose simple *presence* acts as power: when she returns from the new doctor, she looks at Ethan "with a mien of wan authority" (81); her tone is "resolute" (82). In fact, her very thoughts are actions, acknowledged by Ethan's and Mattie's reaction to the news that Mattie would be leaving: "Both bowed to the inexorable truth: they knew that Zeena never changed her mind, and that in her case a resolve once taken was equivalent to an act performed" (90).

To create a personality more active, more masculine, more powerful than Zeena, would be quite a feat. Therefore, the few attempts to illustrate Ethan's strength or command are disappointing. The moment he should be most resolute and commanding is immediately before the sledding accident, but he is not even the one who comes up with the idea, which again exemplifies his psychological torpor. Even at this point, the moment in the story where he should make his own definitive decision, he does not. Instead, he sees Mattie as the "embodied instrument of fate," and allows this fate to force his actions (122). Granted, it has been noted that Ethan insists on sitting in front of the sled, using the rather lame excuse of wanting to feel her holding him (123). This could certainly be seen as a chivalrous act, a masculine one in which Ethan attempts to protect Mattie from the impending collision, but it can also be seen as rather thoughtless or cruel. Whoever sits in the front of the sled is most likely to "fetch it"; therefore, by placing Mattie behind himself, Ethan may have saved her from dying but inadvertently assured her physical mutilation. Which scenario is more generous is debatable, but surely maiming the woman one loves cannot prove any type of positive masculinity.

Another opportunity for the narrator to focus on Ethan's strength, at least of character, is his decision whether or not to leave Starkfield. When Ethan decides hypothetically to run off with Mattie, but can only figure out how to do so by deceiving the Hales, he decides against it (105). Is this a show of strength? It seems to be. Yet, once again, it is another example of the narrator speaking out of both sides of his mouth. In his balancing act to keep victim and hero status steady, he allows Ethan this moment of strength (although this type of strength is not valued by the narrator as noted earlier in his overlooking of the fact of Ethan's caretaking), but checks it with Ethan's weakness. Rather than a revelation of Ethan's strength, it is further proof that when active choices must be made, Ethan chooses the status quo. Morally, yes, the decision he makes shows a strength of character, but as with his other situations, one cannot help but think that Ethan is mostly relieved by the call for inaction yet again.³¹ Perhaps this is because when the logistics of acquiring money for his reckless elopement is relayed by the narrator, it is near the end of the chapter and the idea is brushed aside almost immediately. By choosing not to deceive the Hales, Ethan relinquishes himself of the necessity of any future planning, something that seems difficult for him to do in the first place. Ethan could have easily plotted, with or without Mattie, his escape from Zeena and the farm since he was going to be paid for the lumber delivered to Mr. Hale within three months (55-6). It would not have been impossible to make a plan for the future. But, Ethan is

³¹ Ethan's decision-making capacity is, of course, examined brilliantly in Lionel Trilling's article "The Morality of Inertia," cited earlier.

more accustomed to making do with choices made for him in the present than making them himself for the future.

All is not lost, however. Perhaps the one moment where Ethan is most strong is the moment of the broken pickle dish (63). It is here that he displays a “sudden authority,” where he commands Mattie, “subdue[s]” her, and feels a “thrilling sense of mastery” because she seems to obey him (63-4). The narrator suggests this thrill over Mattie is akin to Ethan’s feeling of “steering a big log down the mountain to his mill” (64). What a peculiar analogy to make at this moment in the romance, but also what a typically conventional masculine image as the narrator endeavors to balance out this moment of Ethan’s domestic feat. This scene, the moment of shattered glass at supper is almost humorous, because it is this moment out of all the moments of his life, this incident in the kitchen that is deemed so serious as to summon forth “all of Ethan’s latent resolution” (63). To avoid an imminent crisis, he restores the dish to its cupboard, placing the “pieces together with such accuracy of touch that a close inspection convinced him of the impossibility of detecting from below that the dish was broken” (64). He plans to glue the glass together before Zeena’s return and then to replace it later with a look-alike. This is his brilliant master plan.

It is his moment of triumph, and we anticipate seeing him at his best. But, as with everything else with Ethan, he cannot follow through with the entire act. He does not heroically fix the broken dish before Zeena returns, and his infertile brain is unable to come up with a plausible excuse when he is confronted with it. He is, again, the victim of his more observant and vigorously thinking wife, and his masculinity shatters right along with the “gay red glass” he had returned, broken and precarious, to the china-closet (60-4).

It is scenes like these where one wonders on whose side the narrator really is. His desire to make Ethan a hero seems apparent, but his other desire, to rather infantilize him by condescending to his backward country bumpkin persona, placing his most important moments amid pickle dishes, rather makes one wonder. The balancing of hero and victim has dipped decidedly toward the victim, which, in all its interconnectedness with power and masculinity, has emasculated Ethan more so than the reverse.

From(e) Framing to Maiming

The narrator in *Ethan Frome* is no less interesting than he was a century ago. That we continue to argue, even implicitly, about his role in the story attests to this fact. As the authority figure in/of the text, he attempts to interpellate and meticulously frame the broken subject, Ethan, in his vision. This is not the first time a narrator has attempted to redeem a maimed figure. It has been seen before in such novels as *Jane Eyre* and *Aurora Leigh*, where Edward Rochester and Romney Leigh respectively meet physical

deprivation at the end of the book after making questionable romantic decisions. The narrators find the two male characters just as attractive after their unfortunate accidents, and it can be argued that the narrator of *Ethan Frome* feels similarly about his protagonist. However, the attraction of the narrator for Ethan is one that paradoxically involves his own fears, and his investment in the character contests his exploitation of their separateness. The interpellation of Ethan by the narrator cannot help condescending to him. Between his naïve ideas about country folk, his youthful anxiety about Ethan's questionable masculinity, and his foolhardy attempts at building heroism with victimhood, his framing of Ethan does Ethan no good.

In the end, the narrator's apology for Ethan leaves the reader with little choice but to pity him, but not as the narrator has dictated. Constructing a subject is a perpetual process, according to Butler; it requires maintenance since "the law must be laid down again and again" (Kirby 77). As the narrator repeatedly lays down the law with his persistent characterization of Ethan, gaps appear in the repetition of these acts, guiding the interpellation into unintended areas. Even the narrator's vigilant framing of Ethan as hero and victim cannot finally be controlled by the narrator himself, for Ethan becomes pitiful and Zeena becomes powerful. The performative aspect of Ethan's subject formation and his corresponding vision finally fail, i.e. the process of interpellation that turns the subject into that which it names is unsuccessful. Ethan is not seen as an heroic figure; he is not the romantic male protagonist who saves any damsel; he cannot even save himself. His reticence is his most masculine feature, yet the narrator mitigates this feature by demonstrating that Zeena's reticence is just as stubborn as Ethan's. Besides, the narrator dilutes this argument by presenting himself as a talkative type, more in the line of Ruth Hale than with the other male characters in the novel.³² Therefore, the masculinity of reticence, Ethan's one standard masculine trait, is arguable. He is less powerful and by extension perhaps less masculine than his wife Zeena, who continues to care for and oversee both Ethan and Mattie. Like the broken dish that is scooped up and precariously returned to the cupboard, Ethan's and Mattie's mangled bodies are scooped up by Zeena and returned to the Frome farm. But, unlike the dish that Ethan is never able to repair, he and Mattie are glued back together in their more grotesque forms to remain fixed under the silent sovereignty of Zeena.

³² The narrator displays his talkativeness through his strategy of getting at the story of Ethan Frome by speaking with Harmon Gow and Ruth Hale, and through his "vision," of course. In the end, after he has stayed the night at the Frome farm, the narrator attempts his own strategies of speech and reticence as he attempts to gather even more information from Ruth Hale (Wharton *EF* 129-132).

Chapter 9.

In the Place of Clare Kendry: A Gothic Reading of Race and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

Feeling her colour heighten under the continued inspection, she slid her eyes down. What, she wondered, could be the reason for such persistent attention? Had she, in her haste in the taxi, put her hat on backwards? Guardedly she felt at it. No. Perhaps there was a streak of powder somewhere on her face. She made a quick pass over it with her handkerchief. Something wrong with her dress? She shot a glance over it. Perfectly all right. *What* was it?¹

In a book where the protagonist prides herself in knowing *who she is*, the final question in the epigraph above is indicative of Irene Redfield's willful self-ignorance. It is also a reasonable question readers have had about the protagonist and her relationship with the notorious Clare Kendry. What was it between the two women that in the end warrants Clare's demise? The answer to this question lies somewhere within Irene's need for ontological certainty – sureness in the knowledge of her own being – that begets security in every aspect of her life. Irene's security is based on, among other things, stasis. When we meet her, Irene has already meticulously defined and secured her concepts of race and sex and relegated them to their respective compartments in her psyche, never to be revisited. For revisiting either of these ideas would surely breach the serene outlook she entertains about her life. It is her resolve to maintain security that drives the action of the novel and will illuminate what it “was” in Clare that incites such anxiety.

¹ Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell 149.

On the roof of the Drayton, unsure of why she elicits a stranger's scrutiny, Irene responds to the stubborn stare by inspecting herself, mentally running through a list of possible reasons for this unsettling attention (see epigraph). Her mind whirls as she attempts to pinpoint what it is about her appearance that might be worthy of this penetrating gaze. It is not until after she has exhausted the list of possible material/physical anomalies that she finally resolves to ignore the woman and "let her look!" (149). Ironically, however, foreshadowed by her heightening "colour," at length Irene suspects "it" may be something less visual, less tangible than her hat, makeup, or dress:

[...] Gradually there rose in Irene a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar. She laughed softly, but her eyes flashed. Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro? (150).

This early scene is indicative of Irene's incongruous character. She prides herself in her bourgeois participation toward racial uplift, and yet race does not cross her mind until there is no other alternative. It is a remarkable juxtaposition between the title of the novel *Passing* which implies race as no less than *the* major theme, and the absentminded protagonist who pinpoints the issue only after she has ruled out all else. It is no wonder criticism of *Passing* has struggled with its importance. Because Irene's interest in race proves sparse and erratic, the reader may resist its significance to the novel, and certainly to Irene, altogether.

Ambiguity surrounding the issue of race is not the only thing vague in Larsen's novel. The book has a penchant for opacity: the unreliable narrator,² the conflation of protagonist with antagonist,³ the shocking and uncertain ending,⁴ and critics have been flustered by this murkiness since its publication. For example, in his 1958 book *The Negro Novel in America*, Robert A. Bone dismisses the novel as Larsen's "less important" one, preferring Larsen's other work *Quicksand* (101). His dismissiveness is illustrated through his irritation by certain structural features in *Passing*. For Bone, "a false and shoddy denouement prevents the novel from rising above mediocrity" (102). Hoyt Fuller has similar concerns; in his introduction to the 1971 publication of *Passing*, he asserts that Larsen's "deliberate scene setting" is reminiscent of a "mediocre home magazine story teller" (18). Because these critics position the work within the realm of the "typical"

² "Of course, many critics have pointed out that Irene is an unreliable narrator" (85), states Martha J. Cutter in her article "Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen's Fiction."

³ "Initially, *Passing* seems to be about Clare Kendry, inasmuch as most of the incidents plot out Clare's encounters with Irene and Black society" (Tate, "Nella" 143).

⁴ "Critics of Larsen have been rightly perplexed by these abrupt and contradictory endings" (McDowell xii).

passing novel (Bone 101) and presume the tragic mulatto myth⁵ to explain any social or psychological issues, themes such as “race” are relegated to the background of their criticism while their interests in convention and composition are foregrounded.

Later critics such as Claudia Tate, Deborah E. McDowell, and Mary Helen Washington reject these earlier critics’ irritations and use their analysis to validate *Passing* as a rich and extraordinary text, a work of art with a number of themes and techniques overshadowed by the earlier critics’ obsessions with conventional novelistic form. For example, Tate in her article “Nella Larsen’s *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation” (1980), specifically opposes critics like Bone and Hoyt. She argues that elements such as “jealousy, psychological ambiguity and intrigue” transform *Passing* from an “anachronistic, melodramatic novel into a skillfully executed and enduring work of art” (142). Likewise, in her 1986 introduction to *Passing*, McDowell also argues against these earlier critics. Ignoring the previous arguments about form and foregrounding the issue of sexuality, McDowell widens the realm of subjects in *Passing* worthy of critical study. And, finally in her 1988 book *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960* (1987), Washington, like McDowell, introduces another important issue that had been overshadowed by the formulaic and stylistic concerns of prior critics: gender (232).

In their quest to validate Larsen’s work, however, this next generation of critics it seems is content to leave the issue of “race” in the background, foregrounding other issues that move the novel beyond the tragic mulatto type.⁶ Thanks to their work, Larsen’s novel has become firmly ensconced in the Modernist canon and the scope of its criticism has widened. Assessments of *Passing* within the last twenty years have reestablished the importance of “race” to the novel. But discussing race, I think, is most fruitful if explored in conjunction with other issues to which it is inextricably bound.⁷

⁵ The tragic mulatto motif was first seen in a story by abolitionist Lydia Maria Child in 1842. Although the motif began as sympathetic propaganda against slavery, the myth that continued into 20th century literature emphasized the “personal pathologies” of mixed race persons. One thing particularly emphasized was her confusion of self identity, self-hatred, and her pity or hatred of Blacks. Please see David Pilgrim, “The Tragic Myth.” Deborah McDowell notes simply that the “tragic mulatto” myth shows a person “alienated from both races, she is defeated by her struggle to reconcile the psychic confusion that this mixed heritage creates” (xvii). For more on the tragic mulatto, especially in Larsen’s work, please see Reginald Watson “The Tragic Mulatto Image in Charles Chestnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* and Nella Larsen’s *Passing*.”

⁶ Deborah McDowell, for example, undermines the importance of the theme of race while centering her argument around sexuality: “Though, superficially, Irene’s is an account of Clare’s passing for white and related issues of racial identity and loyalty, underneath the safety of that surface is the more dangerous story – though not named explicitly – of Irene’s awakening sexual desire for Clare” (xxvi). Josh Toth also makes this point: “Many critics, in fact, have suggested that the novel’s focus on race is a deflection of other much more troubling (or ‘unspeakable’) issues” (57). See Josh Toth, “Deauthenticating Community: The Passing Intrusion of Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*.”

⁷ Because the “politics of race and class” as well as “race and sex” are “crucially interlocking factors in the work of Black women writers” (Smith 170; Butler 174), and because Irene herself is a complex character, an amalgamation of these factors, I will at times be compelled to discuss class and sex in conjunction with Irene’s

Race and identity, race and representation, race and the act of passing, these are the combinations of topics most commonly critiqued about the novel today.⁸ Race has clearly been placed in a central position for contemporary critics regardless of their other interests in the text. Therefore, in my analysis, I will integrate two of the most important thematic foci of the novel in recent years: race and sexuality. Through these concepts, I shall explore Irene's curious emotional ambiguity regarding Clare, for her ambivalence on both fronts is incited by her.

My interest in the combination of race and sexuality stem from the protagonist's vehement indecisiveness toward Clare, the childhood friend who reappears one day to disturb Irene's placid comprehension of both concepts. To be sure, Irene is at the center of "uplifting the brother," and prides herself in her loyalty to her "race," but she can and often does disregard race because of her own lack of visible racial markings⁹ (Larsen 186); in other words, she can *pass*. Likewise, she has settled into a secure, middle-class Harlem life at the expense of things she has come to disregard as unimportant. Sexual fulfillment, for instance, has been brushed aside by both persons in the Redfield couple. Irene simply ignores it and her husband Brian finds sex "a grand joke" and largely disappointing (189). Irene has a mental picture of a life intentionally framed by a static sense of security and permanence, which she is unwilling to compromise. Security and permanence are what holds her picture together (187); they are what make her very being possible. Furthermore, she has an uncanny ability to repress anything that may threaten that security. Therefore, when Clare Kendry compels Irene to unearth and reexamine the significance of race and sexuality, the security that anchors her very ontology is unhinged.

In her article, Claudia Tate argues that "race," in *Passing*, "is more a device to sustain suspense" and that "racial issues [...] are at best peripheral to the story" (143). Certainly

race anxiety. I will apply a certain theoretical angle or lens through which I will discuss the text, but this lens, I hope, rather than downplaying or eclipsing the matter of race and its interlocking issues, should expand it and show that I find race (and class, and sex) essential to understanding this work. For more on the interconnection of race, class, and sex, please see Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism"; and Judith Butler, "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge."

⁸ For example, in his recent article Josh Toth balances the considerations of race, which he sees as standard for this novel, despite other anxieties: "Although it [*Passing*] is obviously interested in the issue of race, and racial ambiguity, Larsen's text – like the concept of passing itself – evokes a more general ontological threat of transience and instability" (Toth 56). Please see also the following related titles: Corrine E. Blackmer, "The Veils of the Law: Race and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*"; Linda Myrsiades' introduction to *Race-ing Representation: Voice, History, and Sexuality*; Ann Pellegrini, "Women on Top, Boys on the Side, but Some of Us Are Brave"; Catherine Rottenberg, "Passing: Race, Identification, and Desire"; Linda Schlossberg's introduction, "Rites of Passing"; John Sheehy, "The Mirror and the Veil: The Passing Novel and the Quest for American Racial Identity"; and Nell Sullivan, "Nella Larsen's *Passing* and the Fading Subject."

⁹ Please note that "race" is a contested term, and my use of the term "racial markings" is only to enable a means of discussing concepts of "race" in conjunction with the "colour" of one's skin.

the subject of race and the act of passing both generate suspense in the novel, but “race” is certainly not of marginal concern to the text. I will argue that the suspense of the novel owes its success to the mysterious and alluring Clare Kendry who materializes the concepts of race and sexual attraction for Irene. Embodying at once a double of her *self*, a gothic site, and a sublime façade, she disrupts Irene’s static and superficial notions of race and sex. Clare terrorizes and astonishes by exhuming these concepts that Irene has long ago settled, defined, and put to rest. The primary component of my argument is that race and sex are not “merely” “compelling social issue[s]” (143) in *Passing*, but *the* compelling issues of the novel. Anxiety about race and sex, their definitions and significance to the protagonist, her very being, all intermingle to function as the main focus of the text. I will argue that the matter of race and sex are not simply “device[s] to sustain suspense,” although that is certainly one product, but the means by which the protagonist comprehends who she is and struggles to maintain that ontological assurance. Race and sexual anxiety are the causes of Irene’s and Clare’s intriguing and volatile relationship. They are also finally the motivation behind Clare’s tragic end.

Through a reading of gothic tropes at work in the novel, this paper will explore Irene’s persistent, extreme, and contradictory responses to Clare Kendry. Through her sublime façade and gothic architecture – Clare’s face and place respectively – Clare embodies Irene’s homoerotic attraction and anxieties about race.

Although it is a given that Irene ironically manifests “detail for detail” the “same faults of which she so harshly accuses Clare” (McDowell xxv), and Clare is “Irene’s projected psychological double” (Little qtd in Cutter 88), it is interesting that no one has delved more deeply into the gothic implications of these conclusions, i.e. the obvious image of a doppelgänger. Martha J. Cutter skims the potential for a gothic interpretation in her article “Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen’s Fiction” (1995),¹⁰ in fact performing an excellent psychoanalytic critique of Irene’s character, but finally declines to take that additional step into exploring the gothic connotations of the analysis. By taking up these connotations and exploring the elements of the gothic and by extension the sublime, I hope to offer the reader a glance into the machinations of the extraordinary, mystifying, and turbulent dynamic between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry.

There are a number of tropes employed in gothic literature that facilitate gothic ambiance. Claudia Tate applies a number of these when she defines what constitutes a

¹⁰ Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, in her article “A Plea for Color: Nella Larsen’s Iconography of the Mulatta,” also asserts that Larsen was familiar with ‘the gothic genre’ as evidenced by ‘similarities’ between *Passing* and the Victorian gothic (vampire) novel *Carmilla*: “Erotic, alluring, and ultimately deadly, Clare is a 1920s version of Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872)” (859).

“romance,”¹¹ and, there are many other gothic tropes that could be applied to this novel. But the ones I find most compelling are the ones that envelop and overwhelm the main character: the doppelgänger, the gothic site, and the sublimity of the gothic façade. To be clear, I will not argue in this paper that *Passing* is a gothic text,¹² but I will argue that recognizing elements of the gothic through the anxieties of race and sexual attraction will explain what a number of readers find ambiguous, unpredictable, or problematic, especially regarding Irene’s conduct and judgment. Clare will be noted as the alluring mystery and danger that threatens to deconstruct the ontological groundwork of the main character, causing Irene Redfield’s erratic behavior.

To begin, then, perhaps background in the gothic is appropriate. By the turn into the 20th century, the gothic threat had turned inward, transforming exterior threats into personal, interior ones. This meant that the threat posed by gothic edifices – traditionally represented by ancient or decomposing architecture – were renovated and rebuilt within the self. The self and other selves held as much of a threat as any foreboding house or fortress. The “grand gloom of European Gothic was inappropriate” to the American gothic tradition begun by the likes of Nathaniel Hawthorne in the mid-1800s, instead the “commonplace of American culture was full of little mysteries and guilty secrets from communal and family pasts” (Botting 115).

In his introduction to the genre, *Gothic*, Fred Botting states that in the 20th century,

The loss of human identity and the alienation of self from itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured are presented in the threatening shapes of increasingly dehumanized environments, machinic doubles and violent psychotic fragmentation. (157)

In other words, the threatening figures of the dilapidated castle or the monstrous abbey, dangers outside the self, were no longer necessities in creating that menacing gothic location. That location made an internal shift, resituating itself into a more “familiar” structure, which could now be the site where those same “awesome and inhumane terrors and horrors are loosed” (158). The architecture of the mind, especially, becomes a significant structure for terror rife with metaphorical staircases, hidden compartments, secret passageways, and shadowy corridors.¹³

¹¹ The term “romance” is an abbreviated term for “gothic romance” described in full by Eugenia Delamotte. See her introduction to *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*.

¹² Delamotte delineates what texts she does and does not deem gothic. She has limited gothic novels to those written between 1764 and 1824. My intention here is not to argue with her or anyone else’s definition of what should and should not be considered gothic, but to argue that recognizing gothic tropes can be helpful in understanding discrepancies within a text as confusing as *Passing*.

¹³ In *Bodies That Matter* Judith Butler devotes an entire chapter to Nella Larsen’s novel entitled: “Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen’s Psychoanalytic Challenge.” My approach mirrors hers in that it handles the workings of repression and the psyche, but I found the psychoanalytic argument in her essay to be incongruous with

It is this more intimate and internal, more familiar type of gothic trope at work in Larsen's novel, specifically manifested through the beautiful and enigmatic Clare Kendry. And understanding Clare through these tropes can elucidate Irene's notoriously capricious conduct and contradictory prudence. I will argue first that Clare operates as Irene's double, conflating the two characters and unconsciously¹⁴ revealing Irene's faults and weaknesses while initiating the small fissures that will erupt within her feelings of security. Second, that Clare embodies gothic architectonics, the treacherous gothic site that looms before and terrorizes Irene as a constant reminder that race is never quite a settled affair. Through her reckless *passing* and uncanny mirroring Clare forces the issue of race into Irene's foremost thoughts. And finally, Clare's façade evokes a terrifyingly desirable response from Irene akin to the emotions evoked by the sublime described by Edmund Burke.¹⁵ As a sublime site, Clare threatens to deconstruct Irene's controlled self-knowledge by compelling her gaze and desire. As Irene becomes increasingly moved by Clare's sublimity, her fixed ideas concerning sexuality begin to crumble. In the end it is Clare who transports Irene into an hazardous psychological space of terror and ecstasy, inciting the potential for highs and lows of feeling that threaten her rigid ontological identity of self and security. It is Clare who finally *is* the place of danger for Irene, her door ajar, inviting the heroine across the threshold. And it is this place that in the end must be demolished in order for Irene to survive.

We receive a good deal of evidence supporting Clare as Irene's double,¹⁶ for as Jonathan Little states, "it is through Irene's descriptions of Clare that readers learn about Irene's deepest and unacknowledged impulses and desires" (177). As her double, Clare is the person most near to Irene's psyche. It is even obvious to Irene that Clare has the ability to "get into" her head. She muses at one point in the novel that "Clare Kendry always seemed to know what other people were thinking" (Larsen 234). She thinks it "uncanny" at another point, how Clare can "divine" what she is thinking (167). In one instance Clare "guess[es]" Irene's "perturbation," and in another she is "aware" of Irene's "desire" and "hesitation" (157). In another instance, Irene feels as if Clare is in

the overall purpose of my analysis, and therefore Butler's chapter is not the basis of this critique. In the Segue section following this chapter; however, I do utilize Freud's theory of "The Uncanny" to complement the architectonic psychological effects of Clare on Irene.

¹⁴ "As is often typical of an unreliable narrator, Irene is, by turns, hypocritical and obtuse, not always fully aware of the import of what she reveals to the reader" (McDowell xxv).

¹⁵ Edmund Burke, "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful." Full citation in bibliography.

¹⁶ Regarding the double, Freud states that through recurrence, repetition, and/or duplication, the double can provoke consistently stronger feelings of the uncanny. "Transferring mental processes from the one person to the other – what we should call telepathy – so that the one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other identifies himself with another person, so that his self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own – in other words, by doubling, dividing and interchanging the self" (162). Please see Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny."

the “secret” of her thoughts (156). And finally, Irene takes for granted Clare’s ability and is “determined that Clare should not get at her thoughts” (234).

Although Irene finds Clare’s mind reading only slightly peculiar, this strange talent forewarns Irene of Clare’s dangers. Clare does allow Irene into her own mind at one point, giving away her personal opinion regarding Irene’s precious security. In this scene, Irene explains to Clare that it is not “safe,” that she “ought not to run the risk of knowing Negros.” Clare responds with one word: “Safe!” (194-5). She says nothing else, yet the narrative relays Irene’s explication of Clare’s one word:

It seemed to Irene that Clare had snapped her teeth down on the word and then flung it at her. [...] It was as if Clare Kendry had said to her, for whom safety, security, were all-important: ‘Safe! Damn being safe!’ and meant it (195).

Irene also has a number of moments where she analyzes Clare in her own mind or to the reader. In these moments, the two individuals conflate, since it is unclear about whom she is speaking. Irene thinks she is making observations about Clare, but to the reader, Irene is charging Clare with a number of her own vices (Butler 169). For example, there are myriad moments where Irene comes to very specific conclusions about Clare’s nature. She attributes Clare with an “innate lack of consideration for the feelings of others” (Larsen 177) after the calamitous afternoon where Clare’s racist husband – assuming all three women (his wife included) to be white – lets go a litany of racist remarks. Irene definitively concludes the other woman’s inherent selfishness: Clare, she believes, is dismissive of the “annoyances, the bitterness, or the suffering of others” (181). Ultimately, Irene thinks, the “trouble” with Clare is that she wants “to have her cake and eat it too,” but she also wants “to nibble at the cakes of other folk as well” (182).

As readers, we find these comments from Irene mildly amusing since we gather that Irene herself demonstrates the same selfishness and opportunism of which she accuses Clare. For we see that Irene’s security, her very definition of self, has rested precariously on having her own way. She has long ago pressed her husband to give up his dream of living in Brazil, a less racist country; yet as Brian’s unrest resurfaces, we see clearly her self-interested logic.

Irene, watching him, was thinking: “It isn’t fair, it isn’t fair.” After all these years to still blame her like this. Hadn’t his success proved that she’d been right in insisting that he stick to his profession right there in New York? Couldn’t he see, even now, that it *had* been best? Not for her, oh no, not for her – she had never really considered herself – but for him and the boys. (186)

With all Irene’s self-interest, it is no wonder she cannot break through the barrier of Clare Kendry. It becomes rather obvious, as Irene attempts to interpret Clare, that Irene does not have the access to Clare’s mind that Clare has to hers. What this does for Irene,

then, is to heighten Clare's mystery, one way she will operate as the site of Irene's anxiety. In gothic romance, architectural sites function as the "repository and embodiment of mystery" (Delamotte 15).

Specific secrets are hidden in it, and to discover them one must confront the mystery of the architecture itself; its darkness, labyrinthine passageways, unsuspected doors, secret staircases, sliding panels, forgotten rooms. (15)

Irene admits early on in the novel that Clare is mysterious, that she is "capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, had never known" (Larsen 195). And those heights and depths, those mysteries, although intriguing, are something that Irene states rather vehemently that she has "never cared to know" (195). We will find, however, that both women are so interconnected it is not easy, in fact it may be nigh impossible, for Irene to ignore Clare's mystery.

Although she does not set out to find the hidden secrets within Clare, and the novel illustrates Clare as a puzzle Irene does *not* care to solve, Irene *does* find her mysteriousness captivating, in spite of herself.¹⁷ In fact, Irene finds herself a little put out, in the early pages of the text, at the fact that she cannot "communicate" with Clare, "drop her a card" or "jump into a taxi" and find her. She finds that not only is Clare literally unreachable, but metaphorically unreachable as well (163). The mystery for Irene is simultaneously frightening and alluring. In an early scene Irene, before recognizing Clare from her childhood, notes the other woman's "peculiar caressing smile" (148). In that same scene she also is drawn to the woman's "strange languorous eyes" (150). Irene is torn between this woman's "peculiar" and "strange," even mysterious characteristics, but is also enticed by her "caressing" and "languorous" qualities. At this point in the novel, Irene and Clare are studying each other on the roof of the Drayton hotel. Both are African American women light enough to *pass* and are in the act of doing just that, although neither recognizes the other. Irene's conflicting emotions here foreshadow the schizophrenic split Clare is capable of causing Irene's ontological sense. Clare is a destabilizing presence to Irene's racial identity (Cutter 88), for at this point Irene does not recognize that her fear and captivation of this woman will be a threat to her meticulously neglected understanding of race.

Unlike Clare, Irene has spent her adult life in the black community. While Clare passes into the white community – even marrying a white bigot who is unaware of her African American connections – Irene ensconces herself in the New York Harlem community. However, although she has enveloped herself in the community, even becoming somewhat an activist for racial uplift (186), she has repressed her

¹⁷ Josh Toth notes that Irene sees Clare "as a type of mystery that *must* be solved, a dangerously unstable object that requires stabilization" (58).

understanding of what it means to be raced in the United States. Because her skin is light enough to *pass*, and she does so periodically and at times unconsciously, and because she is more concerned about her bourgeois status, which signifies security, she has taken on many white, elitist characteristics, even employing two African American servants. Corrine Blackmer states in her article “The Veils of the Law: Race and Sexuality in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*”:

“[...] socially conservative African Americans like Irene Redfield, whose understandable desire to gain marginal acceptance and security in American society [...] compels her to imitate the prejudices of the dominant society” (59).

Because Irene is free of visible racial markings, racial issues are not her first concern.¹⁸ Instead, her principal interest, security, is dependent on her class status and her ability to ignore or repress real life issues relating to African Americans.¹⁹

Irene emphasizes Clare’s mystery and her own inability to comprehend her friend when she personifies a letter from Clare attributing Clare-esque characteristics to the harmless epistle. The letter, Irene notes, is “mysterious and slightly furtive,” and a “thin sly thing” (Larsen 143). Irene is annoyed by Clare’s mystery and is apprehensive about opening the letter, the door, the staircase to unknown regions within Clare, which will, as her double, ultimately open regions within herself. These regions most refer to Irene’s comprehension of race, which is intermingled with “this hazardous business of passing” (157). That the letter bears “no return address,” annoys Irene because it is a reminder of Clare’s severed ties with her African-American heritage when she chose to *pass* from “that life which long ago, and of her own choice, she had left behind her” (143, 145). Irene believes that *passing*, outside of convenience,²⁰ is a non-returnable offense. It is also annoying to her because it further demonstrates that Clare’s recent history/mystery, those twelve years where the only known information about her was hearsay, is unavailable to even Irene.

¹⁸ This point is underscored by the ongoing disagreement between Irene and her husband Brian, on the subject of South America. Brian is an African American man who, unlike Irene, can’t “exactly ‘pass’” (Larsen 168). To him South America symbolizes “a less racist, more integrated society” than the United States, and he yearns for the opportunity to live there (Blackmore 477). This dream, however, is cut short by his wife who is an “American” and belongs in “this land of rising towers.” She stubbornly holds that “she grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted” by anyone (Larsen PSS 235). For more analysis of Brian, please see David L. Blackmore, “‘That Unreasonable Restless Feeling’: The Homosexual Subtexts of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*.”

¹⁹ As Christopher Hanlon notes, Irene is a “genotypically ‘black’” character who is “able to move freely through otherwise restrictive social spaces by virtue of [her] phenotypically ‘white’ characteristics” (23). Please see his article “The Pleasure of Passing and the Real of Race.”

²⁰ Irene explains to a friend: “I don’t believe I’ve ever gone native in my life except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that. Never socially I mean [...]” (Larsen PSS 227)

But, in spite of her apprehensions, Irene opens the letter and attempts to make some kind of sense out of the mystery. But the more Irene tries to find the sliding panels or make her way carefully through the labyrinthine passageways, piecing the Clare-puzzle together – which begins the unraveling of her own carefully formed self – the more she must actively repress the significance of Clare, of race, and becomes irritated because of the conflict that Clare evokes. One reason, for example, she resists opening the letter is because she believes herself to be “wholly unable to comprehend” Clare’s attitude toward “danger” (143). Irene never fully defines what she means by “danger,” but from her numerous comments regarding it we can deduce its definition as that which threatens her security: *passing* itself. And Clare is *passing* full-time, has married a racist white man, is once again associating with African Americans, and as Irene sees it, is ultimately meddling with the fixed boundaries of race. As Irene reacquaints herself with Clare, she realizes that it is not just her attitude, but Clare herself who becomes the danger. The threat of racial fluidity, for Irene, is associated with instability,²¹ and instability would obviously jeopardize Irene’s security, for all Irene’s static beliefs about race, about self, would begin to disintegrate if any one of them gives way. Of course, being ‘unable’ to comprehend and being ‘unwilling’ are two different things. Irene is certainly “able” to comprehend whatever she would like, but comprehending Clare’s attitude, and finally Clare herself, would mean breaching her own security, a sanctuary of a racially unified ontological whole: knowing who she is.

In order, then, to ignore the danger her friend poses, Irene projects, as has already been mentioned, many of her own flaws onto Clare. To Irene, Clare is mysterious, secretive, selfish, and ruthless. But, in trying to definitively separate herself from Clare in her own mind, by attributing her negative characteristics, she unwittingly brings them closer and closer together. The more she argues about their differences, the more conflated the two become:

Since childhood their lives had never really touched. Actually they were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness. Between them the barrier was just as high, just as broad, and just as firm as if in Clare did not run that strain of black blood. In truth it was higher, broader, and firmer; because for her there were perils, not known, or imagined, by those others who had no such secrets to alarm or endanger them (192).

²¹ In her article, “Decoding Essentialism: Cultural Authenticity and the Black Bourgeoisie in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” Candice Jenkins suggests that both Larsen’s novels “point out how ambiguously raced figures are simultaneously necessary and unsettling to notions of black identity. They accomplish this in part by constructing a series of tensions between the notion of an intangible black ‘essence’ and a rigidly concrete code of black behavior and custom, which mulatta figures are seen repeatedly to embody and to violate” (132).

Irene's intense effort to argue herself out of their inevitable amalgamation is hopeless. It represents Irene's fear of "confrontation with herself, with the contradictory, plural, or even absent self behind the social façade" (Cutter 88). In fact, they both have so collapsed into each other that by the end of her argument, even, the pronoun "her" has no clear antecedent.

Aside from mystery, architecture is also a "repository and embodiment of the past" (Delamotte 15).

It contains evidence of specific life histories: a skeleton stashed beneath the floorboards or locked in a chest, a prisoner shut away in a dungeon, a manuscript reporting a crime, an ancestral portrait revealing the hero or heroine's true lineage, the ghost of a previous occupant, an aged retainer who remembers certain sinister events of long ago. (15)

After a twelve-year hiatus, Clare returns to haunt Irene with reminders of her roots, drawing her attention to a lineage Irene has neglected if for nothing else, at least class status that offers Irene a sense of security. Irene, residing within the black community yet arguably living without it, can be juxtaposed with Clare living outside the community but passionately yearning to be within: "You don't know, you can't realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (Larsen 200). Clare has been imprisoned these many years in a fixed identity with her white, bigoted husband. But, after running into Irene she moves toward a middle space between races that Irene, who sits safely on the outside, finds dangerous. How dangerous, though, is unknown since when speaking about passing to Clare, Irene suggests that it is a "silly risk" that she shouldn't take (195). "Silly" is an interesting word to describe issues that make up one's very identity,²² and illustrates that Irene, with all of her teas and dances intended for "racial uplift," places racial concerns far below other more important priorities. Brian expresses this discrepancy when he remarks wryly about the number of whites at one of her parties: "pretty soon the coloured people won't be allowed in at all, or will have to sit in the Jim Crowed sections" (198).

Breaching the boundaries of race is only a portion of what Irene finds threatening about Clare. Clare's presence is a ghostly reminder of what Irene has sacrificed to have the bourgeois existence she has been so desperate to secure. In a later scene, after attempting to ignore and/or repress the feelings, wishes, dreams from her own

²² I am not suggesting that skin color dictates race or identity; however, in a racist society those who are considered "raced" because of skin color must come to terms with what that skin color means to her/his identity construction. For an excellent discussion of race and performativity, please see Elaine K. Ginsberg, introduction: "The Politics of Passing," and Catherine Rottenberg's, "Passing: Race, Identification, and Desire" noted earlier.

childhood that Clare's presence has uncovered, Irene at last has a moment of introspection, mulling over the cost of holding "security" at the topmost of her list of priorities:

"Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained? And did too much striving, too much faith in safety and permanence, unfit one for these other things? (235)

These questions placed adjacent to Clare's "having" way is considered by Irene with a pang of envy (174). Clare is a reminder of possibility, of childlike openness to the new and the unpredictable. Of their childhood, Clare states: "You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them [...]" (159). And, it is obvious that she has gotten these "things" and more. In a moment of resentment about Clare's determination, Irene notes that Clare "still retained her ability to secure the thing that she wanted in the face of any opposition" (201). This bitterness with Clare seems to be rooted foremost in the past. Irene does not become irritated with anything Clare is at present, but seems to refer back to Clare's ways as having always been there. Clare's transformation, then, becoming exquisitely beautiful, being accepted by both white and black alike (through the very process of *passing*), retaining her "having" way are all things that symbolize what Irene has sacrificed for her own security.

Simply put, Clare is the location of Irene's discontent. Her physical and structural design is assembled out of Irene's introspection, uncertainties, and insecurities. It is no wonder that she induces fear:

In a world of fixed identities, Clare is such a powerful presence because she denies all the boundaries that the other characters work so hard to establish and maintain; she denies divisions of race, class, and even sexuality" (Cutter 89).

As her double, Clare haunts Irene through her embodiment of unanchored definitions, a visual reminder of obscured borders.

For Irene, Clare has embodied an architectonic space of both mystery and the past regarding race, forcing the protagonist to open doors long out of use, walk down lost and hidden hallways, unbolt closets containing proverbial skeletons. But one last function of Clare's architectural space is the function of the façade, the exterior surface of the gothic edifice that can be a "source of the sublime," summoning both terror and awe in the human mind (Botting 39). "A gothic cathedral," for example, "raises ideas of grandeur in our minds, by its size, its height, its awful obscurity, its strength, its antiquity, and its durability" (Blair qtd in Botting 39). Clare's face represents that cathedral for Irene. Her dimensions are infinite because of her representational value of both mystery and the past. Therefore, she displays both antiquity and durability. Her strength is displayed by her tenacity, her refusal to let Irene alone. And finally, her

“awful” obscurity is in that absent racial marking (colour) that, ironically, makes “race” impossible for Irene to ignore.

As Botting points out, our response to the sublime is based in contradictions:

Objects which evoked sublime emotions were vast, magnificent and obscure. Loudness and sudden contrasts, like the play of light and dark in buildings, contributed to the sense of extension and infinity associated with the sublime” (Botting 39).

Like a response to the sublime, if we look at the dynamics of Irene’s and Clare’s friendship we note that it is full of contradictions as well, especially in Irene’s response to Clare. Irene instinctively recognizes that Clare is a danger, a threat to her racial ontology, and is repelled by her; but even as she is repelled, she finds herself sexually drawn to Clare as well. Irene’s ambivalence to Clare’s danger illustrates Burke’s argument regarding danger in conjunction with the sublime. “Danger and pain, he suggests “at certain distances,” may be “delightful [...]” (Burke). So, if Irene can keep Clare at a safe emotional distance she can gauge her own proximity to danger while appreciating, even reveling in her friend’s façade. When Clare is present, visible, Irene is placated, is charmed, is overwhelmed. In Clare’s presence she is mesmerized, fascinated: “suspicions and fears” fade away (150), annoyances flee (165). There is “no resisting” the charm of Clare’s smile (150); it is “potent” (165), “seductive [and] caressing” (169). Irene is awestruck by her beauty and ambiance, often displaying an overt homoerotic desire for her friend.²³ Irene often feels like she is being “petted” or “caressed” by Clare’s mouth or eyes (161). To Irene, Clare has a “tempting mouth” (161), an “incredibly beautiful face” (176); she is “really almost too good-looking” (156), “so lovely” (174). “Yes, Clare Kendry’s loveliness was absolute,” Irene states definitively at one point (161).

Clare’s physical beauty is magnificent. It lures Irene toward her, compelling her to explosive feelings that seem dangerous, dangerous because Irene assumes that for security one must not feel “depths” and “heights” of emotion (195). On the roof of the Drayton, for example, when Irene and Clare are parting, Irene thinks it a “dreadful thing to think of never seeing Clare Kendry again. Standing there under the appeal, the caress, of her eyes, Irene had the desire, the hope, that this parting wouldn’t be the last” (162). There is also an instance where Irene is in her bedroom musing over a decision to discontinue her friendship with Clare (yet again), and is interrupted by Clare herself who walks right in. And, “once Clare breaks into the ‘sanctum’ of Irene’s private bedroom and ‘drop[s] a kiss on [Irene’s] dark curls,’ Irene’s distance and aversion

²³ For more on the homoerotic undertones of *Passing*, please see Deborah E. McDowell’s introduction to Larsen’s novels *Quicksand* and *Passing* noted above.

transform almost magically into admiration and desire for intimacy” (Blackmer 62-3). In fact, when she turns then to look at Clare, Irene is overwhelmed with emotion and with something “like awe in her voice” blurts out: “Dear God! But aren’t you lovely, Clare!” (Larsen 194).

Comparing these moments of wonder and awe with other moments of anger or dread, explains more completely Irene’s sublime response to Clare. The vision of Clare Irene carries in her mind is an ominous one. When contemplating Clare, Irene is often frightened or angry, which manifests itself often in an obstinate irritation that Irene can never quite understand or explain. This irritation will become an enduring emotion for Irene throughout the entirety of the book. For example, although she and Clare have a perfectly lovely afternoon on the roof of the Drayton, after she is away from Clare, Irene becomes “aware of a sense of irritation with herself” (162). Although Irene does verbalize reasons for her irritation, there is no real objective correlative for the extent of her reaction. We are given the meager facts that between the time it takes for Irene to leave the hotel and return to her parents’ home, her irritation has grown so considerably that she does not want to “spend another afternoon” with Clare. Her reasoning? Because Clare’s life “had so definitely and deliberately diverged from hers” (162-3). But, as soon as Irene makes this statement, we discern that it seems slight even to her. Therefore, she argues with herself further that Clare holds a “low opinion of her loyalty” and “her discretion” since she neglects to offer Irene her married name, making it impossible for Irene to “reach Clare in any way” (163). And, finally, at the end of the scene, although Irene has just become re-acquainted with Clare after twelve years and they have just spent a very agreeable few hours catching up, by the time Irene opens the door to her house, she has decided she is “through with Clare Kendry” (163).

Irene may have written off Clare in the very first chapter of the novel, but Clare remains a formidable, attractive, and persistent power that haunts Irene’s sense of self. Irene’s fear of Clare is unexpectedly strong. Even Irene is surprised at the violent feelings a letter from Clare elicits (181). After the agonizing tea party with Clare’s bigoted husband, Irene experiences a “sense of fear” from a look on Clare’s face that is “partly mocking” and “partly menacing” (176). The morning after, Irene sees Clare again as “foreboding” (164). Her fear of Clare also reveals itself in Irene’s inability to articulate emotions, which I argue is because of overwhelming astonishment. Of the sublime, Burke states that “astonishment” is the,

passion or state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it (Part II, Sect. 1).

For example, in attempting to explain a look on Clare’s face, Irene can “find no name” (176). Similarly, she “could not define” a gleam in Clare’s eyes (171). She feels a

“nameless foreboding” after she is seen by Bellew (228), and a look of Clare’s that Irene wants terribly to understand is “unfathomable” (176).

Because Irene sees Clare as the sublime, Irene’s contradictory responses to her are confusing, for herself and for the audience. If Clare represents danger or Irene’s proximity to it, then Irene’s ambivalent responses to Clare – here attracted, there repelled – are at the least disconcerting, especially since Irene’s very ontology is founded on certainty, stable definitions and boundaries. But, as Burke makes clear, for the sublime to maintain its power over the spectator, it must remain obscure, for “when we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes” (Part II, Sect. 3). Irene’s only wish is to keep herself secure. In fact she describes security to be the “most important and desired thing in life” (235). Even with the digression, the disruption that Clare presents to Irene’s routine, she intends to “keep her life fixed [and] certain” (235). Unfortunately, Irene has no opportunity for a consistent, concrete response to Clare. Clare eludes clearness, begetting opacity instead.

Irene’s sexual attraction to Clare is a beautiful contradiction of feelings that can be explained through her response to sublimity. Clare makes Irene furious, vulnerable; she takes Irene’s breath away. And, “while beauty can be contained within the individual’s gaze or comprehension,” explains Botting, “sublimity present[s] an excess that [can] not be processed by a rational mind” (39). It is obvious that Irene has a sublime response to Clare’s visage. Away from her, Irene has the luxury of explicating Clare’s faults, of rationally cataloguing their differences, attempting a level of certitude, but in the presence of Clare’s overpowering physical magnificence, Irene’s opinion is drastically transformed; her rational mind is overcome and she can think of nothing else but Clare’s immeasurable power, and the pain – and pleasure – she can provide. Therefore, safe or secure interactions with or responses to her are impossible; Clare will always demand a level of capriciousness from Irene.

And in the end, the level of the unstable and the unpredictable becomes too much for the protagonist. Irene, finally, cannot function with Clare’s dangerous presence. For by the end of the novel, Clare’s level of danger to Irene’s security has become excessive; the pain Clare has inflicted, real or imagined, has become too much. And this sublime, which relies on both the subject’s feelings of its “own extinction” and “self-preservation,” finally tips the balance of Irene’s “delight and horror, tranquility and terror” (Botting 39). The danger has become too real, and when “danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight” (Burke Part I, Sect. 2).

Irene ultimately begins to break down. By her very lack of racial markings, Clare forces Irene to see, to explore her African American-ness. By coercing her into an

uncontrollable situation where Irene must look at race and racism directly,²⁴ she can no longer ignore the issue. And although we have noted the number of times Irene has repressed or ignored race or race issues, she finally cries out: “Race!” and the narrative explains it as “[t]he thing that bound and suffocated her” (225). This moment of anguish is near the end of the novel, when Irene is struggling about how to rid herself of Clare and the dangers she represents. She considers hypothetically the option of “outing” Clare to her bigoted husband, but feels like she is being “caught between two allegiances,” between herself and her race (225). She expounds on this struggle sitting by herself in the quiet of her living room:

[...] Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one’s own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved. Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham’s dark children. (225)

This is the first (and last) time the reader observes Irene wrestle with what it means to be raced. Yet it comes nearly at the novel’s end and has no preceding struggle to justify its intensity. Therefore, it is no wonder that many readers, and critics, have overlooked or minimized the significance of race in this novel. Even the heroine seems not to consider it until the very end. These lines clearly indicate that through her life (and obviously through the novel) Irene Redfield has consistently repressed what it means to be a black woman. If we remember, on the roof of the Drayton when she first runs into Clare Kendry, it is the *last* factor to pop into her head, the final option (149-50).

For Irene Redfield, remaining steadfast in her assumptions about “race,” disallowing the hideous reality of the American race problem, promises security of self, her most prized possession. From beginning to end Irene ignores the complexities of race and the arduous journey that would come with re-thinking her assumptions. Her very disregard for the subject places it squarely in the center of the novel. It is the physically unmarked and thereby marked presence of Clare, the double continuously mirroring and confronting Irene, the gothic site housing the history and mystery of race. Likewise, by the end Irene can no longer afford the unstable and overwhelming emotions brought on by Clare’s sublime façade. Terrifying, exquisitely beautiful, awesome... Clare’s loveliness

²⁴ It is the tea at Clare Kendry’s home with her racist husband that commences Irene’s progress toward an acknowledgement of race (170-74), but acknowledging the distasteful problems that surround race in America would alter the safe and secure foundations on which Irene has so carefully constructed her life and the life of her husband and children. Near the end of the novel, John Bellew bumps into Irene and a friend (who is “golden” herself and with “curly black Negro hair”) on the street (Larsen PSS 226). It is obvious he understands Irene’s “race” now.

taps into Irene's sexual desire, letting flow sensations Irene finds she cannot control and refuses to name.²⁵

"In the twentieth century Gothic is everywhere and nowhere," says Fred Botting (155). Just as Clare is there one minute "a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold," and gone the next (Larsen 239), gothic tropes overspill the boundaries of so-called "gothic texts," and are lost and found in others.

Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone! (239)

Unveiling the gothic tropes underlying the text, I believe, can "elucidate many of the otherwise quixotic motives that impel the narrative and serves in part to explain Irene's highly contradictory and volatile reactions to Clare" (Blackmer 53).²⁶ Ultimately, Irene's fervently unpredictable feelings toward Clare cannot be maintained simultaneously with her need for static calm:

... to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life. Not for any of the others [-'happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known' -] or for all of them, would she exchange it. She wanted only to be tranquil (Larsen 235).

Finally, Irene's security and the tumultuous emotions she has for Clare cannot co-exist; Irene's fixed ontology takes precedence. Unfortunately, "in removing Clare" Irene "eliminates the possibility of her own freedom from the shackles of the racial [...] conventions that imprison her" (Blackmer 63). No more mysteries to solve, no more terrorizing gorgeousness, Irene's trustworthy psychic compartments remain locked, her *self* remains fettered to convention, just as she likes it.

²⁵ Irene's sexual repression illustrates the double-bind in which bourgeois African American women were placed. For, as McDowell and others have noted, a "network of social and literary myths [have been] perpetuated throughout history about black women's libidinousness" (xii). Because of this the subject of sex has been approached with caution: "it is not surprising that a pattern of reticence about black female sexuality dominated novels by black women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (McDowell xiii). With this level of anxiety about sexuality, it is no wonder then that McDowell argues Irene's lesbian desire would be exponentially more threatening (xxix).

²⁶ Blackmer is referring here to McDowell's excellent interpretation of *Passing* as referenced previously in this paper.

Segue

Ethan Frome & Passing

Subjectivity, Possibility

Unruly Mimesis, Failed Intentions

In a preceding chapter, I utilized Judith Butler's interpretation of Louis Althusser's theory to analyze the subject of Zenobia Price through the narrator's interpellation of the titular character in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. In this analysis, I support Butler's argument that interpellation is not as stable a process as Althusser's narrative suggests.¹⁸⁴ In fact, a reading such as has been done, as a mimetic demonstration of interpellation culminating performatively in the materialization of the subject, manages to illustrate how unstable is the process in general. Butler's reading of Althusser proffers an indeterminate element into his theory. For, Butler assumes that the power (of ideology) that interpellates the subject has the ability to fail in its intentions... not in creating a subject, but creating a *kind* of subject. This is what Butler ultimately brings to

¹⁸⁴ Near the end of his essay, in fact, Althusser concedes to – but does not expound on – the fact that the essay itself projects a chronology that can be misleading. For example, the temporal process of an individual becoming a subject is not really governed by temporality at all. He admits that: “Naturally for the convenience and clarity of my little theoretical theater I have had to present things in the form of a sequence, with a before and an after, and thus in the form of a temporal succession. There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: ‘Hey, you there!’ One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that ‘it really is he’ who is meant by the hailing. But in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing” (301).

the Althusserian conversation, a sense of *possibility*, for without Butler's insight, Althusser's stance on ideology and our subjectivity is deterministically bleak. In Butler's variation on the theory, failure is inbred in the process of interpellation. That means the ways in which the subjects are ultimately subjected are not (always) determined. The repetitive process of interpellation attempts to recreate a kind of subject, one that is recognizable in particular ways, but the product of repetition can never be infinitely certain and therefore there is always the possibility of agency: something *otherwise*, something with a *difference* being produced.

This is what is evident in this critic's analysis of *Ethan Frome*. The locus of power, the narrator in this case, with full range of motion to create a hero out of the protagonist, repetitively attempts – quite literally with his words – to interpellate the subject, Ethan, into a hero of his story. His intention is to control mimesis, the representation of masculinity in the narrative. Instead, he fails in his quest. His interpellation of Ethan as the powerful, masculine hero is compromised by his need to portray him as the victim as well. These constant and conflicting interpellations converge in the phenomenon that Zeena, whose interpellation is repetitively reflected and refracted by that of Ethan, becomes the more powerful and masculine subject in the book, far surpassing her husband. This phenomenon is how “the subject emerges both as the effect of [...] power and as the condition of possibility for a radically conditioned form of agency” (PLP 14-15).

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf observes that, “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (35). This statement refers to the ways men represent women, especially in literature, through a myriad of “feminine” foibles in order to reflect opposing characteristics onto themselves that prove superiority. This is exactly the strategy attempted by the narrator of *Ethan Frome*. Through a lens explicitly sympathetic to Ethan, Zeena is villainized while Ethan is victimized. The mimetic tradition of Zeena's “type” has been noted most conspicuously by Elizabeth Ammons, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The characters in the novel fit within the paradigm of a fairytale, witches and all. But, although this is of course an archetype found in our literary traditions, the reading of such archetypes through contemporary critical theory, a different reading in a different context, elicits the performative aspect of the mimetic archetype; its repetition with alterity can display new results, old interpretations read otherwise. *Ethan Frome* shows us firsthand that interpellation is a tricky business. Although Zeena has long been seen as the villain in this novel, and the power to name her and subject her under that name is supposedly localized in the narrator's hands, the performative dimensions of interpellation subvert that power. Interpellation relies on continuous reinforcement of that naming by which power has hailed the subject. In the case of Zeena, it is the recurrent hailing of Ethan as a hero/victim that circuitously hails Zeena as the villain. But the hailings of both Zeena

and Ethan ultimately fail in their intended results. The reinforcement of naming, which is the performative aspect of interpellation that attempts to bring about that which it names, allows the subject access to alterity, a chance for something different springing forth from its repetitive processes. Knowing the nature of interpellation is performative, we can see how the narrator cannot always succeed in his quest to subject Zeena as the villain through his narrative discourse. Add to this fact that the narrator's interpellative intensity is aimed at Ethan, and therefore the vigor of Zeena's is diluted. And finally, the more the interpellation is done and re-done, re-read and re-interpreted through the discourse of critics, the more likely the interpellation will find ways of exceeding its prior namings. This critic, for example, has suggested that Zeena can no longer be seen only as the villain to Ethan's victim. Zeena becomes a stronger and more powerful subject against the wishes of the narrator, as his interpellation slowly but surely backfires.

Excess of the Same is Uncanny

In the introduction to mimesis at the beginning of this project, I note that the concept has a normative aspect. Mimesis in general consistently and repetitively (performatively) produces pictures, images, texts, concepts, etc. that are immediately understandable, recognizable... familiar. It would seem as if it is only the *similar*, the observation of likeness, within the repetition that makes the mimetic process/product familiar and therefore natural, but I suggest that this is not, in fact, the case. Our contemporary consciousnesses do see similarity as common and comfortable, therefore normative; we do find the repetition of similarity comforting or what Freud would call *heimlich*. But I suggest that our comfort in the repetitive movements, processes, and results of mimesis relies very much on the hidden alterity inherent in its repetition, or its *unheimlich*-ness as well, and especially in a balance of the two.

At the beginning of his essay on the uncanny, Freud discusses the term *heimlich*, explaining that one of its simple meanings is something akin to "belonging to the home," "familiar," "not strange" (154-5). This is supposed to be in contrast to its opposite, *unheimlich*, which ranges from "unfamiliar," and "novel" to the intellectually uncertain to the "eerie" and "bloodcurdling" (154, 156). It is the *unheimlich* then, Freud suggests, that supposedly evokes the fear within the uncanny: "that which is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar" (154). However, as Freud unravels *heimlich*'s various definitions, *heimlich* itself turns into *unheimlich* as the meaning of *heimlich* is expanded to its full usage, which surprisingly also includes "that which is hidden," "concealed," and "kept from sight" (155-6). "On the one hand, it [*heimlich*] means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight," and although *unheimlich* should be its opposite, we see that *unheimlich* also comes to mean that which "ought to have remained secret and

hidden but has come to light” (156). One can see the shades of meaning of both words paradoxically bringing them together. Therefore, *heimlich* becomes “a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite” (157).

My contention, then, is: within that which is familiar and comfortable (similarity) in mimesis, there is always to some extent the unfamiliar and uncomfortable (alterity). Our reaction when we feel something is uncanny is when the spectrum of the similar and the different becomes lopsided toward an extreme similarity, when alterity is not simply overlooked, but absent... or nearly so. To our contemporary consciousnesses, a mimesis that is over-reliant on similarity can result in feelings described as uncanny, for “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old” (166). It is at this point that we palpably feel the *unheimlich* in the *heimlich*.

Freud notes a number of situations where feelings of uncanniness tend to arise: when we are confronted by a double, a doubling of the self or the self’s behavior (same face, character-trait, twist of fortune, crime); by recurrence (of the “same situations, things and events”); and by the occurrence of “presentiments” (164-5). All of these situations rely on a specific mimetic balance to signal whether or not the conditions warrant an uncanny response. For example, the same face must be so like one’s own that it tips the balance of difference and similarity acceptable between two visages. Likewise the repetitions of the same situations or the repetition of an occurrence too similar to what one has already experienced or imagined tilt toward the unfamiliar, which suggests a non-normative dosage (overdose?) of similarity within the mimetic.

This sense of the uncanny in mimesis augments (and makes possible) the gothic elements of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and allows us to see this novel in a new light. Clare Kendry is the performative creation of an uncanny subject, the double of Irene Redfield, the visage that becomes the embodiment of gothic terror and sublime awe. Clare materializes through Irene’s (mis)understanding of her self, her own repressed desires and fears. And as Clare becomes more developed as a character, as the repetitive process of mimesis produces a recognizable image, the normative balance between similarity and difference becomes disproportionate and there is increasing *likeness* between the two. The critic, with more distance from Clare, sees the likenesses clearly, while Irene attempts to argue them away as differences. In fact, Irene would have us believe the two women to be nothing at all alike. However, if this were the case, if the mimetic balance were tipped in the favor of difference, then the text would be void of the uncanny. The gothic impulses and possibilities of the text would be unavailable. The mysterious ambiance surrounding Clare, Irene’s curious desire for her friend, the doubling of the two women, would be undetectable, and a reading that creates Clare as a gothic architectural site and a sublime landscape would finally be impossible.

Chapter 10.

The Power of Robin

Temporal Subjectivity in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*

When processes of normativity fall apart the effects can be bewildering; our conceptions of how the world works become jumbled and confused. It is this perplexing atmosphere that we step into when we open the pages of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*. Since its publication, the book has disturbed readers with its bizarre communities, irreverent humor, explicitly sexual overtones, and openly wounded characters. To many readers, the characters in this book run rampant about the pages of a lawless community. And yet, there is a law... of sorts, hidden within the pages of this brilliant escapade. There is a power that holds sway over the other characters in the novel. But, this power is not simply an invisible force. It is embodied in the *other* of the novel, the character of Robin Vote.

Robin, the woman-center of *Nightwood*, is a fundamentally inchoate character; her opacity being her only feature clearly comprehensible. But, her vagueness notwithstanding, she can be seen as the axis by which all other characters spin. The main characters are drawn to her as if their lives depend on it. And well they should, for she is depended on in one way or another to aid in securing their own subjectivities. For them, it seems that only through Robin can they comprehend themselves. Of course, Robin is no model of subjectivity. In fact, that there is a subject there in the first place can be argued (and will be discussed later), but the potential for subjectivity she offers her lovers Felix, Jenny, and Nora can be seen through her ambiguous correlation with temporality.

This chapter will argue that to her three lovers, Robin is the power by which they believe they can achieve subjectivity.¹ As noted in Judith Butler's theory of subjectivity, subjection of the individual to power is "literally, the *making* of a subject, the principle of regulation according to which a subject is formulated or produced" (PLP 84). In other words, subjection is both the "subordination and becoming of the subject";² therefore, power "not only *acts on* a subject but, in a transitive sense, *enacts* the subject into being" (13). Robin is seen as the power – "regulation, prohibition, suppression" (9) – that will compel the subject into subjectivity... again. For subjectivity is not accomplished through a founding moment that finally settles the matter altogether, rather a "subject is not only formed in subordination," but that "subordination provides the subject's continuing condition of possibility" (8). As Butler explains in *The Psychic Life of Power*, her view of subjectivity through power is a Foucaultian one, and

[f]or Foucault the subject who is produced through subjection is not produced at an instant in its totality. Instead, it is in the process of being produced, it is repeatedly produced (which is not the same as being produced anew again and again) (93).

Subjectivity is a process not a product, and being a subject is a precarious placeholder;³ to be recognizable in society the subject's subjugation to power must be persistently reiterated. Power, says Butler in her treatises on subjectivity, "maintains subjects in subordination by producing and exploiting the demand for continuity, visibility, and place" (29). Furthermore, power provides "recognition that the subject produced [is] continuous, visible, and located" (29). In other words, it is through the regulatory and reiterative practices of power that allow the subject a visible, recognizable place in society.

This is the predicament in which we find the characters of *Nightwood* and doubtless why the ambiance of the novel is so disconcerting. These characters discover themselves in middling spaces, unanchored and arguably invisible: liminal

¹ I follow Merrill Cole here in envisioning Robin as something otherwise. In his article "Backwards Ventriloquy: the Historical Uncanny in Barnes's *Nightwood*," Cole states: "Going too far in trying to see Robin as a person obscures the textual function she performs." Further, he suggests that Robin "figures" the "trauma of historicity [that] involves an absent cause only accessible in textual form" (403). These allusions to Robin's temporality and absence, as figured by indifference, will be foundational points of my argument.

² In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler asserts that *assujettissement* is a condition of subjection through both subjectivity and subjugation (5), or the "simultaneous *forming* and *regulating* of the subject" (32). Moya Lloyd summarizes the idea well in her book *Judith Butler*, noting that it is simply the concept that an "individual's formation as a subject depends on their submission to power" (97).

³ Butler states "'the subject' is sometimes bandied about as if it were interchangeable with 'the person' or 'the individual.'" The genealogy of the subject as a critical category, however, suggests that the subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation" (PLP 10-11).

subjectivities.⁴ Their liminality can be attributed to the repetitive nature of subjectivity, and illustrates how that repetition can both give subjecthood... and take it away. After all, the repetition of norms subjects are compelled to perform “establishes a domain of risk, for if one fails to reinstate the norm ‘in the right way,’ one becomes subject to further sanction, one feels the prevailing conditions of existence threatened” (28-9). The lovers of Robin Vote have become anachronisms within the reiterative process of subjectivity unable to properly reinstate norms that make them visible, viable. Felix and Jenny in specifically different ways, have no history to establish them as recognizable identities. Both seem to have jumped over one temporal plane to get to another. They exist in the present, liminally, but without a past they cannot have a future. As a result, their very existences in the present remain questionable.⁵ Their saving grace is Robin Vote, the power on which they depend to bring them into recognizable subjectivity through her temporal connections. Nora, Robin’s most significant lover, has a different issue. She is brought into subjectivity by Robin, brought into the raucous present from her serene space of human non-participation. Her involvement with the present initiates her passionate attachment to Robin, the power that subjects her, and that power which she must finally release in order to keep her identity.

But Robin is the epitome of the indifference of power; she works under no regime. Her summons⁶ is no lawful one; she belongs to no ideology, no divine or civil disciplinary mechanism. She is representative of nothing other than herself, which is a contradictory, vague, and unknowable identity. Furthermore, she remains unconscious of her hailing anyone at all. Rather she executes the summons like she executes everything in her life: unintentionally and in complete oblivion.⁷ As a good representative of power, Robin is a negligent one.⁸ She is more a careless celestial

⁴ As noted in Victoria Smith’s article “A Story Beside(s) Itself: The Language of Loss in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*”: “The narrative shapes itself around a blank space, an absence, that outlines a loss of access to history, to language, and to representation in general for those consigned to the margins of culture because of their gender, sexuality, religion, or color – an awful fate indeed” (194-195).

⁵ I believe it is this liminality that is distressing for readers of the novel, and can explain the number of critiques about *Nightwood* that discuss the characters through ghostly or gothic elements as well as beastly, grotesque, or animal characteristics. If they are human but not quite subjects with unrecognizable identities, it is understandable that we might read them in perplexing and even disturbing ways. Their very existences elicit anxiety. If the normative cycle – the one that repetitively displays the illusion of the continuity of a subject, its given place and visibility – breaks, it can be uncanny and unsettling. For titles related to these types of readings, please see the bibliography.

⁶ In subjectivity, the individual is compelled to “turn around” toward the call of power (usually imagined as embodied by a figure of the law) as power simultaneously summons it.

⁷ Merrill Cole calls Robin the “sovereign power, shaping the destinies of those around her, the dummy that makes the ventriloquists speak, though a cause absent even from herself” (406).

⁸ An interesting note: Foucaultian power conceded by Butler is already negligent, since it is a structural and not a human construct. However, as power is given a face in *Nightwood*, the face of Robin, there is an

divinity than a staunch terrestrial overseer; therefore, she at once allows and negates her unwitting acts of subjection, leaving her (non)subjects flailing in a world of despondent hope.

As if by touching the hem of her garment they will obtain a bit of her, Felix and Jenny both hope their propinquity to Robin will in turn link them to the temporal spheres in which Robin exists. Both are searching for something in Robin to configure what they believe to be their rightful identities, and both have the same desire; they are drawn to, are hungry for *history*. The past lingers palpably around Robin, luring these two into an urgent search backward. Nora, on the other hand, is brought careening into the present through her relationship with Robin and wants only to keep Robin in that immediacy, which is possible in the end only with great heartache.

Robin is an unambiguous contradiction. Throughout the novel she is clearly inscrutable. Yet, for all her contradictions, her incomprehensibility continues to entice the characters stirring through the pages of *Nightwood* at once stilled by the novel's interminable commentary and harried by their own inexplicable passions. Matthew O'Connor, whose voice suspiciously resembles the narrator's and thus holds a bit of weight in the text, declares Robin "always the second person singular" (127),⁹ which suggests both her incapacity to be a subject herself and the integral part she will play in the others' identities. For the presence of the *you* is that which causes the subject to question itself. Robin, the embodiment of power also functions as the *other*, always the *you* to everyone else's (precarious) *I*. This *you* obliges the subject to ask "who are you?" which is followed anxiously by "who am I?"¹⁰ In response to this search for self-recognition, each subject sends herself in wild pursuit of the answers to these questions. But, in English, the second person singular is also the second person plural; therefore, the *you* that is Robin also transcends the *other*, is the ultimate *other*, the collective *other*.¹¹ From the privileged place of the reader, the combined conclusions to questions raised by the *other* seem to be the following: Robin is no *who* but rather a *what*; a representation of temporal possibility, and unsurprisingly each subjectivity – each "who am I" – hinges upon that *what*.

interesting convolution between Foucaultian power and the face of authority by which traditional power is assumed to be wielded.

⁹ Alan Singer notes the similarity between Matthew and the narrator in his article "The Horse Who Knew Too Much: Metaphor and Narrative Discontinuity in *Nightwood*." He states that Matthew is "charged with the novelistic burden of explaining Robin vote to all the other characters," and then further asserts that Matthew "employs the same strategy of metaphoric displacement that we find in the omniscient narrative voice throughout *Nightwood*" (73).

¹⁰ Judith Butler notes that in theories of identity "who are you?" followed by "who am I?" are two questions necessary in attempting self-recognition on confronting an "other" (GA 24-40)

¹¹ For a more comprehensive discussion of the Hegelian *other* in Butler's thought, please see *Subjects of Desire*, full citation can be found in the bibliography.

Again, it is Matthew's commentary that suggests the importance of Robin's queer association with time when he proclaims her the "eternal momentary" (127). This paradox expresses accurately both the temporality she induces and the temporal discrepancies she evokes. Robin's continuity with time, her ability to blur the lines of future, present, and past and any other temporal configurations can perturb the reader, but provokes possibilities and hope for the subjects of the novel. At once gracious and awkward Robin lurches and glides her way through the pages of *Nightwood*, the mantle of *time* shrouding her and tempting others. She is the power that promises subjectivity and never quite fulfills its promise. For Felix, Jenny, and finally Nora, Robin acts as a temporal beacon that incites the potential for subjectivity.

The promise of subjectivity that Robin represents in turn grants her power over these characters. It is power of which she may be unaware, but it is power just the same. These characters have the "desire to survive, 'to be,'" which is a "pervasively exploitable desire" (PLP 7). Unfortunately for those who need that survival in the world of *Nightwood*, "[t]he one who holds out the promise of continued existence plays to the desire to survive" (7). Because the other characters look toward her as an accessible past and believe the past holds meaning for their present and future identities, Robin is seen as offering "the promise of continued existence."

Felix and the Great Past

Felix is summoned by Robin early in the novel when he accompanies the doctor to her hotel in an attempt to revive her from a fainting spell. But this hailing is a curious one. It is not an exclamation of a policeman from behind,¹² it is a silent one of an enigma from below. This dumb summons in the form of Robin lying unconsciously on the bed in front of the two men is our introduction into the paradoxical nature of the protagonist herself¹³ and the subjectivity Felix hopes to secure. Felix is immediately smitten by this fortuitous but mystifying collision with time. Through his voyeuristic lens,¹⁴ the first

¹² The hailing from behind of a policeman is in reference to Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation. As the policeman yells "Hey, you there!" the individual turns around, making it a subject. Please see Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."

¹³ I realize calling Robin the protagonist can be problematic for some. Other critics have been unable to label her a character at all, let alone, the protagonist. See Joseph Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (32); see also Merrill Cole, "Backward Ventriloquy: The Historical Uncanny in Barnes's *Nightwood*" (405, endnote note 21). Alan Singer in his article "The Horse Who Knew Too Much: Metaphor and Narrative of Discontinuity in *Nightwood*," refers to Matthew O'Connor as the protagonist (82). Still others, like Carrie Rohman, in her article "Revising the Human: Silence, Being and the Question of the Animal in *Nightwood*" (57-84), mention Felix, Matthew, and Nora as primary characters, but Robin, although referred to "as a character" in descriptive terms is categorized more clearly as a non-identity (58).

¹⁴ For more on Felix as the voyeur in the following scene, please see Jean Gallagher, "Vision and Inversion in *Nightwood*."

images the reader receives of Robin are statuesque. She is transfixed in a moment, immobilized: “Her legs, in white flannel trousers, were spread as in a dance, the thick lacquered pumps looking too lively for the arrested step. Her hands, long and beautiful, lay on either side of her face” (34). She is poised in picturesque form, described as a painting by Rousseau, a painting in the past. She is also suspended in time – the present surprisingly – in possibly the only way she can be, unconsciously. Even here, at our first meeting of her, we meet a temporal paradox. She is at once there and not there; her body is there, but she is considerably not there in mind. The visibility of her body signifies her presentness while her unconsciousness, the unreachability of her mind, signifies a psychic delay, a postponement of moving into the present from the past. Her position is both mid-action/mid-dance yet halted, suspended. She is the always already dangling, as it were, in the present; but her corporeal dangling does not negate her intellectual suspension, her resistance to move wholly into the present. Her mind remains in the past while her body performs in the present. Robin can exist in more than one temporal plane, and Felix is compelled toward that which is not there, that which hails him from the past.

And so Robin can also be said to literally hail Felix in the way most significant to him, a behind or below that is rather in temporal terms, a before. Her temporality of a former time is represented in the decidedly curious underwater perspective in this first scene. Her body smells of earth and damp; her “flesh” is the “texture of plant life”; around her head there is “an effulgence as of phosphorus glowing about the circumference of a body of water” (34). These comparisons to earth and water again make her a figure suggesting a sense of time. Basic matter as these imply her timelessness, agelessness, her connections to death and life, but finally a distinctly fundamental and primitive image, a sense of always having been.¹⁵ Her phosphoric radiance is indicative of not only her primal existence but suggests divinity and otherworldliness. We perceive almost immediately that any temporal space is accessible to Robin; corporeally she is present, but her mind is elsewhere, behind. She is simultaneously accessible and inaccessible. Regardless of where she is, however, past or present, she cannot be gotten to easily.

Remarkably, even as she awakens from her fainting spell,¹⁶ the first and only words she utters are “I was all right,” and immediately faints again (35). Her use of the past tense here suggests that her unconscious state is suitable – perhaps even preferable – enough a condition to have considered herself “all right,” while her awakened state is less desirable, therefore, leading her to faint again in order to regain her prior

¹⁵ Robin is described as a “supremely primordial and elementary being” in one article (66). See Carrie Rohman, “Revising the Human: Silence, Being and the Question of the Animal.”

¹⁶ I disagree with the recent interpretation of this scene by Jeanette Winterson in her preface to the 2006 edition of *Nightwood*. There is no indication that Robin is “dead drunk” other than she is unconscious. No other evidence in the text supports the assertion that her unconsciousness is brought on by alcohol (xi).

insensibility. Whatever the meaning of her cryptic words, the (final) awakening of Robin, the somnambule, is the birth of an absurdity that remains in perpetual contradiction. This birth introduces a mystifying temporality into the novel that hails each individual with the promise of chronology.

Felix, repeatedly interprets Robin as something prior. Her prior-ness is acquired through her primitiveness, her intimacy to the natural world and the earth, as well as her persona, i.e. her dress and image. As we get to know Robin, she is described as being “gracious and yet fading, like an old statue in a garden” (41). In one particular scene Felix feels like he is “looking upon a figurehead in a museum” (38). She is a “‘picture’ forever arranged” (37). Her very fixedness takes her outside the realm of present identities, making her even more distant and more *before*. She is a “statue,” a “figurehead,” a “picture;” all permanent, past, and unchangeable, yet distinctly *there*. Felix himself, by contrast, has an uncanny presentness about him, insomuch that when his name is mentioned “three or more persons would swear to having seen him the week before in three different countries simultaneously” (7).¹⁷ With Felix’ privileging of history over all other things, it is obvious his own contemporaneity would be maddening.

When Robin is present (corporeally), she evokes paradoxical emotions that are both “painful” and pleasant for Felix (41). Not surprisingly, however, having her there, this incarnation of the past, makes his own memory “confused and hazy” (43). At one point he reverts to “repeating what he had read” about historic buildings in Vienna to her, because his memory fails him (43). While in her presence, we are told, that “thinking of her, visualizing her,” was an “extreme act of the will”; however, “to recall her after she had gone [...] was as easy as the recollection of a sensation of beauty without its details” (41). In other words, although an arduous task to grasp her particularly and in the moment, recollecting her in a general sense afterward, outside that present and in the past, is quite simple. Like a magnet of the same charge, Robin’s presence – presence of the past – repels Felix’ memory. He cannot make sense of her or his historical reminiscences until she is gone again.¹⁸ But, to pin her down in the moment, that present time somewhere between past and future, would be to assume Robin as a stable identity that remains consistently recognizable. Her temporal aspects, however, disallow this option. She exists more fluidly. Clock-time has no bearing on her, and because she is not bound by any temporal measuring devices such as the instant or the

¹⁷ It is interesting that the narrator here compares Felix to the wandering Jew, which adds just that much more to his being ensconced in the present. The myth itself, it would seem, should do the contrary. It should give us a sense of history about Felix, but the wandering, the perpetual movement in the now outweighs the past; therefore encapsulating Felix fairly rigidly in the present.

¹⁸ Robin is described by Victoria Smith as a “metonym for memory and history” as well as other temporal tropes (198).

moment, her stature as an entity swells in space and time. This wide temporal space is what draws Felix. It is the stepping back and seeing something larger than himself, his own conception of what a stable history – a great past – looks like, that compels him backward, toward her. Her historical embodiment, her lasting promise summons him and the eager Felix turns around... and around... and around.¹⁹

Felix harbors an immense amount of shame about his identity, which leads to his need to bow before the power he sees in Robin. In the process of subjectivity, Butler points out that the act of subjugation to power suggests the culpability of the individual. Althusser's theory of interpellation, discussed in an earlier chapter, describes the individual being "hailed" by the law while simultaneously turning toward the hail. In her interpretation of this theory, Butler notes: "The call itself is [...] figured as a demand to align oneself with the law, a turning around (to face the law, to find a face for the law?), and an entrance into the language of self-ascription – 'Here I am' – [is] through the appropriation of guilt" (107). By underscoring the necessity of guilt in the process of subjectivity we are given an insight into Felix' identity. For we know that Felix feels guilty about who he *is*, his presentness, that fragmented identification that manifests itself through his incomplete ancestry. His father dies before he is born and his mother dies in childbirth (Barnes 1). And, we are told, by the time Felix turns thirty he has become "the accumulated and single – the embarrassed" (9), his identity accumulated much as his pseudo ancestral line has been: a yellow and black handkerchief here, a coat of arms there, not to mention the "diversity of bloods" and his past being made "from a crux of a thousand impossible situations" (8).

"His embarrassment," the narrator explains, takes "the form of an obsession for what he termed 'Old Europe': aristocracy, nobility, royalty" (9). Felix' obsession for the past is rooted in his need for chronology, a personal connection to a history. But this is not to say that Felix' obsession is *with* the past per se, rather Felix' obsession lies in a view of the future. It is about his future that he worries. Like his father before him, Felix repeats an obsession with nobility, hoping his son Guido will authenticate himself – and Felix by association, *through* Robin – in the future (a kind of past-that-is-to-come) and thereby validate his/their past, his/their history. The break in ancestral continuity between child and parent, and his father's dubious claims to a noble heritage, leave Felix by himself – single – and lacking a sense of an historical identity. Therefore, his obsession with history and his need for Robin to represent it becomes imperative to his very existence. Matthew describes Robin as a certain kind of woman. "Such a woman" he suggests,

¹⁹ In her exegesis of interpellation, Judith Butler argues "there is a certain readiness to be compelled by the authoritative interpellation, a readiness which suggests that one is, as it were, already in relation to the voice before the response, already implicated in the terms of the animating misrecognition by an authority to which one subsequently yields" (PLP 111).

is the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache – we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers (37).

This macabre image implies a vampiric²⁰ foreshadowing of Felix' hunger for what Robin represents, for without Robin, Felix' is threatened with annihilation.

His anxiety about the passage of time while he yet remains a liminal subject is exemplified in his bizarre reaction to a comment made by Matthew during their first encounter. Nora Flood has just interrupted their conversation, asking them: "Are you both really saying what you mean, or are you just talking?" (18).²¹ In response Mathew states, "Ah!" [...] Nora suspects the cold incautious melody of time crawling" (18). And at the words "time crawling" Felix breaks into "uncontrollable laughter" (18). Felix becomes more and more hysterical, "waving his hands" and "saying 'Oh please! please!'" over and over again until he finally finds himself staring at the floor in embarrassment (18-19). His reaction is two-fold, anxiety and shame. He is first affected by the acknowledgment that time is indeed passing at every moment, which draws him further and further from the past that he seeks before him. But, ironically, he also feels acutely ashamed at being the cause (along with Matthew) of time "crawling," an allusion to his engagement in tedious conversation or vapid talk simply to make time pass. The insinuation of being a part of a dull bourgeois crowd rather than the smart, noble set is a certain embarrassment.

Felix' shame compels him to place himself at the mercy of the "great past," but in full view of his fraudulent namesake. Like the individual who, coming into her self-identity through interpellation, turns – a turning that Butler describes as not only turning toward the law but "turning back upon oneself or even a turning *on* oneself" – Felix' turn toward Robin's hail is just the beginning of his turning on himself (*PLP* 3). And, because interpellation, according to Butler, is iterable even ritual, i.e. consists of acts

²⁰ For more on the gothic in *Nightwood* please see Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, "Strolling in the Dark: Gothic Flânerie in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," and Deborah Tyler-Bennett's "'Thick Within Our Hair': Djuna Barnes's Gothic Lovers."

²¹ The context of this quote appears at Count Onatorio Altamonte's party in the chapter Bow Down. Nora Flood, overhearing the conversation between Matthew and Felix introduces herself: "The young woman, who was in her late twenties, turned from the group, coming closer to Felix and the doctor. She rested her hands behind her against the table. She seemed embarrassed. 'Are you both really saying what you mean, or are you just talking?' Having spoken, her face flushed, she added hurriedly, 'I am doing advance publicity for the circus; I'm Nora Flood.' The doctor swung around, looking pleased. 'Ah!' he said, 'Nora suspects the cold incautious melody of time crawling, but,' he added, 'I've only just started.' [...] Felix, as disquieted as if he were expected to 'do something' to avert a catastrophe (as one is expected to do something about an overturned tumbler, the contents of which is about to drip over the edge of the table and into a lady's lap), on the phrase 'time crawling' broke into uncontrollable laughter, and though this occurrence troubled him the rest of his life he was never able to explain it to himself" (Barnes 18).

reiterated throughout an individual's lifetime rather than a one-time moment or situation, "to become a 'subject' is to be continuously in the process of acquitting oneself of the accusation of guilt" (118). Yet, Felix does not attempt to acquit himself. His turn toward Robin and against himself is a literal and wrenching turn. In fact, in a frenzy he assists in the fraud when he "hunt[s] down his own disqualifications [...] with the fury of a fanatic" (9). In his desire for a past, Felix lays his life bare, paying "homage," succumbing, and bowing to it in hopes that somehow his religious-like fervor will make amends for his very existence (9). But in his enthusiastic groveling and self-effacement, Felix reveals his inherent inability to gauge the "correct thing to which to pay tribute"; therefore, it is no wonder he attempts a conduit in Robin (9).

When the Baron and Matthew have their final chat, over duck and oranges in the Bois, we get a better understanding of how much Felix really comprehends Robin, and by extension, himself. He explains that the "Baronin had an undefinable disorder, a sort of 'odour of memory,' like a person who has come from some place that we have forgotten and would give our life to recall" (118). He confesses further that he "never did have a really clear idea of her at any time" (111). He states, "I had an image of her, but that is not the same thing. An image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties" (111). Here it seems Felix is beginning to speak in Robin's language. He seems to consciously understand Robin's temporal potential. And finally, Felix is able to articulate what he does understand about Robin and his need for her all along. He states that the memory of his aunt, regarding his family, is "single, clear and unalterable" (112). "In this," he believes he is "fortunate" because "through this [he has] a sense of immortality" (112). He strongly suggests that "our basic idea of eternity is a condition that *cannot vary*" [*italics in original*] (112). He goes on to explain then, his attraction to Robin:

This quality of one sole condition, which was so much a part of the Baronin, was what drew me to her; a condition of being that she had not, at that time, even chosen, but a fluid sort of possession which gave me a feeling that I would not only be able to achieve immortality, but be free to choose my own kind. (112)

It appears, then, that Robin is not simply representative of the past for Felix, but representative of the fluidity of time, eternity. For Robin, as Felix states above, resides in "one sole condition" that beckons him. Eternity, in the Augustinian view, is "'forever still'; nothing moves into the past: all is present'" (qtd in Ricoeur 25). But Felix also notes that Robin's attention seems to have been taken by "something not yet in history" (44). And, she seems always to be listening "to the echo of some foray in the blood that had no known setting" (44). With these comments about something that far surpasses the present, and does not quite settle on the future, we can now understand her even larger position as not simply the past, but the eternal for Felix. And, we can also grasp the basis of Robin's temporal contradictions according to Felix, since eternity itself is intrinsically paradoxical. It is through Robin as an eternal a(i)llusion, that sole condition

that is always present, yet, to the present, always before and always after, and never ending, that Felix feels the promise of subjectivity, a way of *being* precipitated by her all-encompassing region of time. But, in the end, Felix must give up his quixotic yearning:²²

Once [...] I wanted [...] to go behind the scenes, back-stage as it were, to our present condition, to find, if I could, the secret of time; good, perhaps, that that is an impossible ambition for the sane mind. One has, I am now certain, to be a little mad to see into the past or the future, to be a little abridged of life to know life, the obscure life – darkly seen, the condition my son lives in; it may also be the errand on which the Baronin is going. (121-2)

His desire for the “secret of time” is what we see in his guilt, in his eagerness to be interpellated into a subjectivity he believes can be rendered through Robin.

In the end, Felix’ disappointment is keen as he explains his dulled desire. Robin leaves him, and it is his son’s lot, not his own, to move beyond the present that entraps his father.²³ Still, this final discussion with Matthew in “Where the Tree Falls,” remains despairingly hopeful. Felix cannot help but ask about Robin, wonder about Robin, wonder about his son, wonder about his future. His questions are not put fully to rest, and therefore betray a hopefulness of future understanding. They remain as present as Felix himself, no matter how much drink he now consumes (122).

Jenny, Citation, and the Second-Hand

Jenny Petherbridge is an extreme example of a subject who takes the situation of her recognition into her own hands. Like Felix, she is eager to be hailed by Robin, the embodiment of power, but she is so impatient she attempts to facilitate the hailing. She is already standing anxiously in front of the law before the law can summon her. Jenny lives in the future and therefore is even more creative... or desperate than Felix. She

²² In his book *Mimesis*, Arne Melberg notes: “The struggle for immortality, to reverse and annul time itself, is the very driving force of the quixotic project” (Melberg 57). The quote is in regard to the insight of Miguel de Unamuno in his book *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* (Madrid, 1966).

²³ For clarity’s sake, provided is a short summary of Robin Vote’s three most important relationships. Her first (or her first of the novel) is Felix Volkbein, followed by Nora Flood and Jenny Petherbridge. Felix and Robin’s relationship is fast and indifferent (for Robin anyway). Felix proposes to Robin quite spontaneously after meeting and courting her for a short time. They are married, Robin produces a son, and they separate all within the second section “La Somnambule.” Robin leaves Felix and their son, Guido, and for the remainder of the novel none of them sees each other. However, in the section “Where the Tree Falls,” Felix discusses Robin and his inability to understand her with Matthew. After leaving Felix, Robin reappears in “the Quarter” with Nora Flood. Her relationship with Nora Flood is the most important relationship in the novel. Although theirs is an intensely passionate relationship, it is not monogamous for Robin, which causes severe issues between the two women. Robin finally leaves Nora for Jenny, and Nora is then left to her musings about Robin, their relationship, and her inability to let Robin go.

uses her proximity to Robin to be sure, but she also widens her chances for good measure. Known as the “squatter,” as her chapter heading announces from the start, Jenny buys or pilfers other people’s possessions attempting to create citational links to things, objects, emotions in order to secure intelligibility as a subject. Intrinsically, Jenny understands – perhaps better than Felix – that an integral part of becoming intelligible, or recognizable is the performative (a reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names) nature of the process. It is the citation of discursive practices – things past²⁴ – that make the subject intelligible, the performative function of citing those practices (norms) that materialize the subject (Butler *BTM* 1-2). Jenny’s stealing is a reckless and desperate attempt at attaching herself to a temporal citational sequence. Unlike Felix’ mortification at his own counterfeit heritage, Jenny has no qualms about the fake, the copied, the used. In essence, she deals wholly in the second-hand (66). And that second-hand status alludes both to her taking up after others and her expectations of time, the second-hand of the clock.

Jenny’s ingeniously crafted character is the next lover who employs Robin’s temporal associations for her own subjectivity. Jenny, we are told, has already “endeavour[ed] to make [four husbands] historical” and “they could not survive it” (65). What it means to make someone historical, one can hardly guess, but watching her flit about the pages of *Nightwood* gives us some indication. Jenny, it seems, is “nervous about the future” (67), for she wants to have gained an identity in a future present. Matthew explains that she is nearing fifty “without a thing done to make her a tomb-piece, or anything in her past to get a flower named for her” (102). Collectibles such as tomb-pieces and flowers named in her honor would be gathered in her future to pay homage to her past. But, Jenny’s own past has not only proven to be irrelevant for future significance, but has also failed to produce subjectivity, which is why she is an itinerant collector of the pasts of others’. She has a “passion to be a person” (67), which is a brilliant description of Jenny’s liminal subjectivity, a willingness but inability – as yet – to be recognized. Ravenously active in darting to and fro, her mind obsessed with a constant movement forward toward something else outside the present, she attempts to attain a future identity by any means necessary. The text even suggests that Jenny’s fervor is not discriminating – as long as it is some *one*, she does not care what “person” that may be – but her self-creation never quite sticks. She is never entirely recognizable as a subject.

²⁴ It is important to note Butler is quick to point out that the citations of norms create the illusion of a continuous connection to the past, a nonexistent ‘originary’ and naturalized citation mistaken as truth or simple fact. For example, it is this to which she refers when in *Gender Trouble* she argues against gender as an “attribute of a person who is characterized essentially as a pregendered substance or ‘core’” (14). Revealing the derivative nature of performativity and citationality, however, does not change the way in which it continues to work to make the subject recognizable.

We are told by the narrator that Jenny “was one of the most unimportantly wicked women of her time – because she could not let her time alone, and yet could never be a part of it” (67). Jenny cannot *be* in the present, but she cannot leave the idea of it alone. Like Felix, Jenny proves herself to be an anachronism, unable to exist properly, chronologically, in subjectivity. She has her head in the future, hoards things from the past, and makes impossible a presence for herself in the present. For citation and temporality have a slippery association: “[E]very act is itself a recitation, the citing of a prior chain of acts which are implied in a present act and which perpetually drain any ‘present’ act of its presentness” (BTM 244n7). As Jenny cites and re-cites symbols belonging to “prior chain[s]” of signification, the constructedness of the chains become visible drawing her away from any presentness they might have otherwise possessed.

Although the term “squatter” denotes a present-ness, an action whose occurrence (and recurrence) is occurring in the *now*, Jenny cannot be present because of her constant and frantic search for the future in the past, for that next something – used, borrowed, aged – that will be the key to her future-present recognition. Ironically, the repetitive nature of her searching for the *before now* is always a movement *forward* toward the future, for repetition advances as it is repeated again and again.²⁵ If her future searching can establish a past for herself through the secondhand things she attains, things that she can point to and say “yes, this is from where I have come,” which would correspond at last with “this is who I am,” Jenny believes she can will herself into the present. She obtains other people’s things in the hope that they will finally establish her in her own time, but ultimately she cannot exist properly in the present because she lives in the future and has no coherent past. And, akin to Felix, her constant looking toward the future is a looking toward Robin, a desire for the possibility of the past by which to ground herself finally in a present.

Jenny’s citation of temporal symbols, her pinching, stealing, borrowing, and looting are attempts to create a (future) present identity, but “her present is always someone else’s past” (98). For, in order to be always second-hand, one must necessarily accumulate items already extant: the pasts of others.

Her walls, her cupboards, her bureaux, were teeming with second-hand dealings with life. [...] Someone else’s marriage ring was on her finger; the photograph taken of Robin for Nora sat upon her table. The books in her library were other people’s selections. She lived among her own things like a visitor to a room kept “exactly as it was when -” (66).

²⁵ Arne Melberg, musing on Kierkegaard’s notion of ‘repetition,’ states that repetition is a “movement in time”; [it is to] re-take, re-peat, re-turn, re-verse, [which means] going back in time to what ‘has been’” (136-7). “The reason,” he continues, “this movement backward is actually a movement forward is temporal: you cannot re-peat/re-take what has been, since what has been, has been” (137). See the final chapter of Melberg’s book entitled “Kierkegaard’s ‘Gjentagelse’” 130-189.

At one point, we even find that Jenny has attempted to buy the portrait of Felix' grandmother, to buy the symbol of his sham of a lineage (114). With this stunt she displays her preference for the second-hand even twice removed.²⁶

Even when dealing with people, Jenny manages to deal indirectly, continuing her preference for the second-hand and once again removing herself from the present. The carriage ride, for example, is one such moment. Jenny is speaking to Matthew in a loud voice, but her only desire is to be noticed by Robin, who is flirting with the English girl sitting next to her. Jenny repeatedly raises her voice to question Matthew while only really hoping to gain Robin's attention (73). Her eyes do not leave Robin's face and she ignores Matthew altogether. Yet, here she is, talking to someone through someone else. Again, she is utilizing her penchant for the second-hand, as if by showing her agony to Matthew it will somehow get to Robin in the end. She displays this tendency again when after failing to gain Robin's attention, she begins talking about both her and the girl "as if they were no longer present" (75). Now, there is a mirroring of her indirect speech. First she speaks to Matthew with her attention on Robin while ignoring Matthew altogether. And then she speaks to Matthew about Robin – still not particularly interested in Matthew – as if Robin is no longer there. Her talk is about and around people, her indirectness reveals her inability to engage with people firsthand and in the present.

Her storytelling offers the same evidence. We are told that when she relates a story, "everyone in the room had a certain feeling [...] sensing that there was one person who was missing the importance of the moment, who had not heard the story; the teller herself" (67). She is not present even during her own experiences, and everything else is cited through the second-hand. The "words that fell from her mouth seemed to have been lent to her," and even her suffering is done far removed from what might be a primary experience: "She frequently talked about something being the 'death of her,' and certainly anything could have been had she been the first to suffer it" (66).

Jenny's restless preoccupation with the future demonstrates the importance of the past to her, but also illustrates her inability to share Robin's temporal plane. In fact, these dueling temporalities can be seen in the imagery of the couple's interactions. For example, Robin and Jenny first meet through Matthew at the opera. As the three of them leave the theater, Jenny is "tripping beside" Robin "so fast that she would get ahead and have to run back" (103). Her anxious running illustrates Jenny's constant movement ahead, toward the future, and always looking behind, in the past, for Robin. In fact, all of Robin's and Jenny's interactions portend this temporal dynamic of their relationship. Jenny is eager to move toward some unseen future through Robin's past

²⁶ The reader knows that Felix' portraits of grandmother and grandfather are counterfeit, as seen in the chapter "Bow Down" (Barnes 7).

that will ensconce her in a present. In describing the two together, the narrator states that although Jenny is early for their meetings, Robin is always late (69). What's more, the description of the two talking together is a fantastic spectacle of temporal allusion: As Jenny sits forward in her chair, "so far forward that she had to catch her small legs in the back rung of the chair, ankle out and toe in, not to pitch forward on the table" (69). Robin, on the other hand, sits "far back, her lugs thrust under her, to balance the whole backward incline of the body" (69). Her persistent tardiness, the backward leaning of her body in these conversations, and her reluctant appearance in the first place denote Robin's resistance to exist in the present, her yearning to always remain behind somewhere in the *before*. The two together create a vivid image of a temporal balancing act. The act is described as the "two halves of a movement" which will never be completed; "they were like Greek runners with lifted feet but without the relief of the final command that would bring the foot down – eternally angry, eternally separated, in a cataleptic frozen gesture of abandon" (69). As a unit, the narrative suggests, they are doomed to remain apart and in an expectant state neither of past nor present, since both spaces would require a completion of action.

There is a scene, however, where the two women do complete an action, and because of the violence of the action, Jenny nearly brings Robin (not the other way round) into a different temporal space. After watching Robin flirt with the young Englishwoman during the carriage ride, in a fit of jealousy and hysteria, Jenny strikes Robin, "scratching and tearing [...] striking, clutching and crying" (76). And as the blood begins to "run down Robin's cheeks" while Jenny strikes repeatedly, Robin begins to "go forward as if brought to the movement by the very blows themselves" (76). Robin is brought forward into the *presence* of violence authored by Jenny, but as if to battle her forward reaction, she begins "sinking down in the small carriage, her knees on the floor, her head forward as her arm moved upward in a gesture of defence" (76). Although it seems as if Robin is moving forward into the present of the situation, her defensive maneuver returns her to her enigmatic temporal space. But as Robin sinks,

Jenny also, as if compelled to conclude the movement of the first blow, almost as something seen in retarded action, leaned forward and over, so that when the whole of the gesture was completed Robin's hands were covered by Jenny's slight and bending breast, caught in between the bosom and the knees (76).

This is the one action completed by the two women, and the impetus for Robin's desertion of Nora.

Jenny's material expression is much like her material consumption: both are confused attempts at citing particular representations of identity. At one point during a gathering at her house, Jenny becomes alarmed by Robin's inaccessibility and uses clothing as a way to attempt yet again a connection with her. After Jenny has rushed off to her bedroom, Robin says: "She will dress up now." "Dress up; wait, you will see."

“Dress up in something old.” (71). And sure enough Jenny appears again “got up in a hoop, a bonnet and a shawl” (71). Two incongruous things are going on in this scene. First, someone getting *dressed up* connotes someone dressing in the style of the day, or the chic that is *now* or projected to be the near future; yet Jenny dresses up, an implication of at least the present, by dressing old, a clear evocation of the past. Like Felix who, always concerned about being dressed properly, is dressed contradictorily instead:

He was usually seen walking or driving alone, dressed as if expecting to participate in some great event, though there was no function in the world for which he could be said to be properly garbed; wishing to be correct any moment, he was tailored in part for the evening and in part for the day” (8).

Felix and Jenny’s dress endeavors to “be” of that past to which only Robin is party. Jenny’s old clothing and Felix’ immaculate but confusing dress are attempts at passing into a realm to which they have no access. Jenny’s dress reaches back to the past through an older style that is most likely also second-hand, and Felix’ is a reaching back to an imagined, noble ancestry by staying true to flawlessness in his attire, although in reality it is “some haphazard in the mind of a tailor” (44).

Jenny’s stealing is shown to be larger than the material possessions she acquires. She is described as “appropriating in some measure [the] identity” of a concert she might be listening to, believing herself to be “a part of the harmony” (71). She is said to have the “continual rapacity for, other people’s facts,” and “absorbing time she held herself responsible for historic characters” (67). Again, she claims second-hand participation in, desire and responsibility for things of which she has no part. And the most egregious of these stolen citations is noted by Matthew: “she sets about collecting a destiny – and for her, the sole destiny is love, anyone’s love and so her own. So only someone’s love is her love” (98). Her shoplifting, then, has always had to do with thieving something more than the things she attains. Ultimately, she attempts to burgle a destiny, having Felix’ similar need for a past in order to grasp a present in the future. We hear that she has finally committed grand larceny when she “appropriate[s] the most passionate love that she [knows], Nora’s for Robin” (68).

In the end, all her moving about, co-opting, posing, is for nothing, as she cannot secure a stable history, cannot attach herself to a past (or perhaps, attaches herself to too many pasts), but neither can she exist in the present. Like Felix, she is always looking beyond the present, citing things in the past, keeping her mind on the future, and therefore never exists in the present, for herself, or anyone else.

Nora and Immediacy

Temporally speaking, Nora is in no need of a past. When we meet Nora – before she meets Robin – she is noticeably *present* but in a present that stands outside the present altogether. Nora is described as singular and visible. Wherever she is, there is no question as to whether or not she is corporeally *there*; her bodily presence is present; she “stood out” as it were (50).²⁷ But, her mind is inaccessible to those around her; she is always aloof, indifferent, and alone. For example, in the chapter “Nightwatch,” it is noted that “[t]he world and its history were to Nora like a ship in a bottle; she herself was outside and unidentified, endlessly embroiled in a preoccupation without a problem” (53). Not only is Nora described as outside the world and its goings-on, but to that world she remains unidentified as she lives within her own “preoccupation.” Her smile is “quick and definite, but disengaged” (53); consequently, regardless of the *presentness* of her body, her mind remains always elsewhere.

She is “known instantly as a Westerner,” and her image immediately conjures visual clichés of the American West, such as “covered wagons,” children “looking in fright out of small windows, where in the dark another race crouched in ambush”; women “with heavy hems [...] becoming large, flattening the fields where they walked; God so ponderous in their minds that they could stamp out the world with him in seven days” (50-1). To the European “foreigners” who encounter her, she is in the “midst” of “early American history [...] re-enacted” (51). Although she is in France, she carries her country so copiously it is not she who is the foreigner here, it is they. Complementing her hyper-visibility, she appears always to be in the middle of things, for a re-enactment takes place in the present. But again, she simultaneously remains remote; she is representative or symbolic of a kind of time, but it is a general, pervasive time and she is only representative of it, not a part of it. When reading about Nora, the reader struggles with a sense of knowing and not knowing her. She is visible: we see her in the salon, at the opera, at a play, but she is always unreachable: “singular,” “alone,” or “apart” (50-52). Her aloofness is the most universal aspect of her image.

But, then Nora meets Robin. They are visually introduced three times to be exact (53);²⁸ in those three *presents* presented. From the moment Nora “turns” to look at Robin, she is thrust concurrently and interactively into the present, becoming coupled and attached as a “we.” Nora abruptly becomes a present presence. Although she has

²⁷ Discussing the way in which Nora is displayed, Jean Gallagher notes: “The observer or focalizer” is “reminiscent of the viewer at the peephole: a disembodied, single, atemporal eye before which Nora is ‘perpetually’ in view” (291).

²⁸ The text accentuates the importance of the meeting between the two women by noting it thrice. The text states that Nora meets Robin, although she has yet to do so: “Then she met Robin” (53). On the following page there are three separate moments where Nora acknowledges Robin. First: “Nora turned to look at her,” second: “she looked at her suddenly because [...],” and third: “At that moment Nora turned” (54). Jean Gallagher has a fine cinematic analysis of the repetition of Nora’s action and the movement in this scene (291-293).

been seen up to this point from a distance, a woman who listens to “smaller but more intense orchestration” when she attends an opera or a play, she is always separate (52). Her eyes are described as “clear,” but have “that mirrorless look of polished metals which report not so much the object as the movement of the object” before her (52), that sense of constant preoccupation (53). Once she falls in love with Robin, however, that preoccupation and distance are gone; she becomes a more conscientious and accessible character.²⁹

Unlike the two lovers before, Nora *becomes* by Robin’s side, literally. Before the reader’s eyes, Nora begins wholly interacting with another person (although it is interesting that it is Robin with whom she interacts, as Robin seems the person least capable of interaction). As with the other characters, Robin embodies the “you” they must try to comprehend in order to attempt comprehension of themselves. Yet subjectivity for them is inaccessible because of their need for Robin’s equally inaccessible temporal promise. But Nora does not need Robin’s temporality, she is in the present and induces a very specific past herself. She wants Robin for Robin... whatever that might mean. And for four splendid paragraphs Nora and Robin become inseparable, as the identification process for Nora begins:

She stayed with Nora until the mid-winter. Two spirits were working in her, love and anonymity. Yet they were so “haunted” of each other that separation was impossible (55).

Nora and Robin are so indivisible that even the text does not clearly separate the two in the above paragraph. The pronoun “her” in the second sentence does not definitively refer back to either woman, and the pronoun “they” in the final sentence is similarly opaque in whether it refers back to “two spirits,” “love and anonymity,” or Robin and Nora themselves. Nora has been brought into a present subjectivity and has become an identity with Robin as “we.”

By the fifth paragraph, however, we note that Robin has taken to her routine wanderings, and Nora is “alone most of the night and part of the day” (56). And this time, she is truly alone, not simply aloof from the crowd. But when a subject is formed, that subject becomes attached to the very power that subjects it. This “passionate attachment” is the exploitation of the subject’s need to endure, for the subject “would rather exist in subordination than not exist” (PLP 7). Therefore, Nora may be alone, but “[i]n Nora’s heart lay the fossil of Robin, intaglio of her identity, and about it for its

²⁹ This reading is perhaps in contradiction to Jean Gallagher’s cinematic reading where she argues that once Nora meets Robin, Nora “previously described as the image under the classical cinematic gaze, now occupies the privileged viewing position, external to the visual field, ‘outside and unidentified’ (Gallagher 291). I do not disagree with Gallagher’s account, and believe both readings can coexist within their respective arguments without weakening either position.

maintenance ran Nora's blood" (56). This passionate attachment then can be seen in all the ways Nora attempts to handle Robin's wanderings: her half-conscious "tabulat[ion]" of "the sounds of Robin dressing" in order to predict "the exact progress of her toilet" (58); her attempts to lure Robin back to the apartment by staying home: "realizing that if she herself were not there Robin might return to her as the one who, out of all the turbulent night, had not been lived through" (59); and when "lying awake or sleeping" Robin's absence becomes a "physical removal, insupportable and irreparable"; Nora engages in her own desperate peripatetics in search of Robin, the

"amputation that Nora could not renounce. As the wrist longs, so her heart longed, and dressing she would go out into the night that she might be 'beside herself,' skirting the café in which she could catch a glimpse of Robin" (59).

But Nora knows of Robin's timeliness/timelessness, her access to a temporality beyond her own newly found present. Mirroring Felix' first encounter with Robin noted earlier, Nora is offered a similar and cryptic statement at their first encounter: "I don't want to be here" (55). For, to what is Robin referring? Where is "here"? In another novel, we could assume that "here" means "this place at this very moment, in the lobby." But, in *Nightwood*, with a character like Robin who is so obviously inside and outside the realm of consciousness, inside and outside the moment, "here" can mean all manner of things. It can be that moment outside the circus ring or it can be a more overarching "here" regarding her being in the world at all, the present in which she only occasionally finds herself.

For Nora, Robin is "beyond timely changes" (56). She hangs in the balance "between Nora and the cafés," between her day life and her night life, between present and past (59). And Nora's frenzied searches for Robin become searches, not for Robin herself but for "traces of Robin" (61). In fact, Nora actually avoids "the quarter where she [knows] her to be" (61). The traces of Robin, for Nora, allude to Robin's temporal paradoxicality. They are not just the residue Robin has left behind, such as those things accumulated in their apartment, otherwise known as "the museum of their encounter" – the very name attests to Robin's temporal incongruity, asserting tradition and history together with a fleeting meeting – (56) but also point toward the future in that Nora seeks traces of Robin that *will be left behind* in strangers' gestures, gestures that "might turn up in the movements made by Robin" (61). In this Nora anticipates the past, as traces are marks of the endurance of things no longer present. These traces also work collectively as a performative rendering of who she is for Nora. Robin is only graspable for the characters in this novel through mnemonic devices, her "eternal momentary" status keeping her whirling in an infinite "now" neither present nor absent, but both... and neither. She is best known, as in Felix' case, when she is gone. For Jenny, following in Robin's temporal wake is an optimal second-hand space. And for Nora – she admits that she knows Robin best by her leaving. Her departures "became increasing rhythm" (59),

the perpetual leaving of the past. In fact, Nora tells Robin one day: “In the resurrection, when we come up looking backward at each other, I shall know you only of all that company” (58), so often has Nora seen the back of Robin, the leaving, the moving into the future as a past.

And yet, regardless of her frenzied, passionate attachment to Robin, to continue as a subject, Nora must deny her love for Robin; she must let her go. But, as is evidenced by the chapters “Watchman, What of the Night?” and “Go Down Matthew,” Nora cannot let go Robin entirely, which leads her to a melancholic incorporation.³⁰ Within this process, rather than a final break when the subject lets go an object, the subject incorporates the “attachment as identification, where identification becomes a magical, a psychic form of preserving the object” (PLP 134). More clearly:

If the object can no longer exist in the external world, it will then exist internally, and that internalization will be a way to disavow the loss, to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss. (134)

Nora cannot let go. She must write to her; she must talk to Matthew about her; she must try to explain her or have her explained. For example, Nora asks repetitively about the future of the two of them, since she has incorporated Robin into her own identity and continues to identify herself and Robin as a “we”: “what will become of her? That’s what I want to know” she says at one point (96); at another she asks, “She is myself. What am I to do” (127); at yet another, “What will happen now, to me and to her?” (129); and finally she states, “A man is another person – a woman is yourself, caught as you turn in panic; on her mouth you kiss your own. If she is taken you cry that you have been robbed of yourself” (143). She even seems to understand her predicament – the reality of her melancholic incorporation – when she asks, “have you ever loved someone and it became yourself?” (152).

In the midst of Nora’s anguish, Matthew finally understands that Nora has taken on subjecthood: “You are still in trouble – I thought you had put yourself outside of it” (128). He had known her before her newfound *presentness*, and assumed she had been able to subsist through temporal distance and space from Robin. But, with the immensity of her suffering Matthew has new insights into her subjectivity. He shrewdly diagnoses her malady: “You are [...] experiencing the inbreeding of pain. Most of us do

³⁰ Please note that Victoria L. Smith also discusses *Nightwood* and melancholia. She states, “I use this idea of the process of melancholia – the internalization of and identification with a lost object that produce an excessive narrative – to suggest that *Nightwood* is a paradigmatic melancholic text” (196). I suppose my only quarrel with Smith’s interpretation is that I argue that Felix and Jenny do not become subjects at all and therefore cannot go through the processes of melancholia. The most obvious reason for this is because it is not Robin herself that they desire, but what Robin represents. They desire temporal access and therefore would not suffer from melancholia *per se*.

not dare it. We wed a stranger, and so ‘solve’ our problem. But when you inbreed with suffering [...] you are destroyed ...” (129-30). He follows this with surprisingly spot-on analysis. He tells Nora, “you have been unwise enough to make a formula; you have dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known” (136). Nora’s incorporation of Robin, her so complete ingestion of her has created an incestuous relationship, an “inbreeding” of pain. From all of her comments, Nora seems to have slept with her lover, her *self*, her child. Even Nora notes that “Robin is incest” (156). Not to mention that both Nora and Matthew know that Robin is an unknowable entity, that she, as power, can never be understood or known by formulae. She is anachronistic, unable to be comprehended by their temporally finite minds.

“A Low Drawling ‘Aside’”: Further Accounting for Robin

I cannot leave this chapter without mentioning the discrepancies in Robin’s gender representation throughout the novel. For not only is she a paradox of time, but she is a paradox of representation as well, sometimes feminine, sometimes masculine, sometimes child, sometimes adult. Her malleable image makes visible the power she represents, since she seems to embody everything to everyone. There are moments where images work in collusion to paint a coherent picture of Robin, but there are others that belie that coherence. There are at least three Robins implied in the text: a feminine and timid Robin, a masculine and cruel Robin, and a childlike Robin. The first is a Robin that has been gendered feminine by Felix. This Robin wears dresses and is rather a silent woman. From Felix we get a description of her dress:

Her clothes were of a period that he could not quite place. She wore feathers of the kind his mother had worn, flattened sharply to the face. Her skirts were moulded to her hips and fell downward and out, wider and longer than those of other women, heavy silks that made her seem newly ancient. (42)

This is in the beginning of their courtship, before he asks her to marry him. He is searching within Robin to find that great past that he so urgently seeks. Through his interpretation of her clothing, he finds the evidence of her timelessness, her access to the past. Yet, when, to fulfill his fate Felix forces Robin to be *present* in her biology – in an effort “that she might bear sons who would recognize and honour the past – ” Robin begins to become femininely dismantled (45). It is after she becomes pregnant – her pregnancy performatively *becoming* immediately after his bewildered questioning of her: “Why is there no child? *Wo ist das Kind? Warum? Warum?*” (45) – that Robin’s gender performance begins to change.

When Felix first meets her, she is in a typically feminine performance: as noted earlier, lying on the bed in a magnificent faint. When she finally awakens (for the second time), she stays true to Felix’ view of her femininity by speaking in “the tones

[...] of one enchanted with the gift of postponed abandon,” a voice that suggests more to “be said at some later period” (38). And Felix is smitten by this intimation, both feminine and childlike. Yet, after she is pregnant, she “suddenly” takes the “Catholic vow” (45) and becomes represented in a more masculine manner. When she begins to frequent the churches, she is seen as “a tall girl with the body of a boy” (46). She has “broad shoulders” and “her feet [are] large and as earthly as the feet of a monk” (46). At one point, Robin herself worries “about her height” and wonders if she is still growing (46).

In church, while attempting to think historically important and religious thoughts, instead “[s]he wander[s] to thoughts of women, women that she had come to connect with women” (47). She begins reading the Marquis de Sade (47). During delivery, Robin curses “like a sailor,” telling Felix to “Go to hell!” (48). And by the time she has the child, she is “lost,” as if “she had done something irreparable” (48). There is no matronly cultivation here. As she had when she was pregnant, Robin takes to “wandering again” around Paris, is “almost never home,” and can be found more often than not at a bar in a café (48-9). At one point Felix, “having come in unheard, [finds] her standing in the centre of the floor holding the child high in her hand as if she were about to dash it down” (48). In the end, Robin does not dash the child to his death, but she does strike Felix across the face and tells him she “didn’t want him!” (49). She asks him why they do not keep “secret about him”; “[w]hy talk?” implying a shame of her own heterosexual culpability³¹ in this humiliating creation (49). She then leaves Felix forever: “‘I’ll get out,’ she said. She took up her cloak; she always carried it dragging.” (49). From her violent tendencies to the ways in which she carries herself near the end of their relationship, the representation of both masculine and feminine behaviors are presented.

It is soon thereafter that Robin shows up again in the quarter with Nora Flood. When she first meets Nora (and Felix as well), Robin is a timid character and especially in Nora’s case rather described as a child, and somewhat feminine. Nora meets her at the circus. Disconcerted by the animals, Robin is lighting a cigarette with shaking hands when Nora notices her and leads her out of the arena (54). Nora, who instinctively takes her hand as both women stand up, introduces herself in the lobby and is told by Robin: “I don’t want to be here.” In this scene, Robin is represented as a frightened child. She is actually called a “girl” during the scene above (54), although she is at least twenty (40). Moments like these, when Robin is confused and helpless, give her the childish³² and

³¹ The articles that have handled the theme of perversion in *Nightwood* are many, and these articles have projected a shame upon the characters in the novel because of their sexual ‘inversion’ or homosexuality. However, the only real shame I can see literally displayed by any character in the novel, is this one: Robin humiliated by her feelings of the unnaturalness of childbirth.

³² In her article on *Nightwood*, Teresa de Lauretis notes that Robin’s acts are “childlike, unreflective and unaccountable” (121). See “*Nightwood* and the ‘Terror of the Uncertain Sign.’”

therefore benign qualities that set her off from the other adults of the novel. She is described in a similarly confused way when the narrator gives *what if* scenarios to scenes that seem to *have been* and will continue *being* (60).³³ For example, the narrator suggests that occasionally, on her way to the quarter, Robin becomes agitated by distractions to her route (60). Her obvious confusion tones down the angry responses of strangers who would otherwise have spoken to her quite sharply. When Robin begins her meanderings (again), we see this childishness (again). She is described by Nora as a “tall child who had grown up the length of the infant’s gown, walking and needing help and safety” (145). Nora sees her as “a girl who resembles a boy” (136); in the final scene Robin is dressed in what Nora calls “her boy’s trousers” (169); and she talks about Robin playing with her “toys, trains, and animals and cars to wind up, and dolls and marbles and soldiers” (147).

Yet, to round out the paradox there are these startling moments of clear, adult sexuality, mischief, and malevolence. We think we have a view of Robin, as a childish, rather silent, forever confused woman, someone who will always be in need of looking after. But, then we see an entirely different side of her that is garrulous, self-commanding, and viciously cruel. Our first view of Robin through this lens is during childbirth as noted above, swearing, looking drunk, her hair swinging in her face (48). We see this person again with Jenny when she pokes fun at her wardrobe (as noted earlier) and in the carriage when Jenny indirectly fights with Robin. At one point, Robin tells her simply to “shut up”: “Shut up, you don’t know what you are talking about. You talk all the time and you never know anything. It’s such an awful weakness with you” (75-6). Another episode is when Nora finds Robin drunk, per usual, at a café and the two get into an horrific fight. When Nora finally begins walking home by herself, Robin follows her: “She began running after me. I kept on walking. I was cold, and I was not miserable any more. She caught me by the shoulder and went against me, grinning” (144). It is at these moments where we get a very different view of Robin. We see a crafty

³³ A temporally interesting detail about *Nightwood* is that Barnes’ style evokes the present perfect progressive tense (or the present perfect continuous), which indicates an action that begins in the past and continues into the present. In a book that has very little to anchor the reader, this style functions as an anchor that enables the reader to find something seemingly stable, continuous patterns of behaviors and patterns of the dynamics between characters. For example, in the chapter “Night Watch,” the narrator explains Robin’s wanderings “[i]n the years that they [Robin and Nora] lived together” (59). It narrates Robin’s thinking, her movements, her look, but crafts them in such a way as to imply they are done and done again in the same way throughout the years. At one point, for instance, the narrator states that during Robin’s walk, [i]f she was diverted, as was sometimes the case, by the interposition of a company of soldiers, a wedding or a funeral” she became agitated and “seemed a part of the function to the persons she stumbled against” (60). In other words, the narrative describes this scene as if it were a continuous action occurring again and again, as if it always occurred in this way and continues to occur in this way. Looking more deeply into what this tense invokes about Robin and her interactions with the rest of the cast of characters could be a rewarding endeavor for future study.

playgirl who uses sex not only haphazardly, but strategically. In contradiction with her childish obliviousness, Robin is often more deliberate in her actions. For example, Matthew describes her, when she first meets Jenny, as “smiling sideways like a cat with canary feathers to account for” (103). And, in Jenny’s front room, while Robin mocks Jenny behind her back, it is with a “malign gentle smile on her mouth” (71).

Conclusion(s)

The final scene in *Nightwood* has long been seen as a terrifying one by a number of critics who suggest it to be the culmination of the despair and hopelessness of the novel. Robin, they assume, has finally devolved into the inhuman; at long last she has turned into a beast.³⁴ However, in keeping with the contradictory theme of this chapter, I would like to suggest that if anything, we are shown throughout the novel that Robin is evolving, not devolving. She is the “beast turning human,” not the other way round (37). She is the “wild beast” whose “long unqualified range in the iris” has not yet “tamed the focus down to meet the human eye” [emphasis mine] (37). Her temples are “like those of young beasts cutting horns” (134). All of these comments point toward the possibility of Robin evolving... or at worst, doing nothing of the kind. If evolving, Robin moves somewhere between *power* and the initial stages of a *person* in the final section of the novel. From her static plant-like beginnings when she first meets Felix, through her concurrent indifference, childlike (animal-like) simple-mindedness and cruel sexual manipulations, it can be argued that Robin proceeds toward a land animal at the least. With the possibility of this movement, I find the final scene “obscene and touching,” like the narrator suggests it to be (170). I am not horrified by Robin’s crawling on the ground, dragging her hair in the dust, nor am I bothered by her actual barking. This, I take to be at best play, at worst despair, and more than likely both, very contradictory and very *human* emotions. And, when she finally collapses to the floor, crying, I am more moved than mortified. The scene most critics have believed to be a problematic end, I find to be a new beginning.

With this scene, we are returned to our picture of Robin in the beginning. Her position in the chapel, her “pose, startled and broken” (169) alludes to the position in which we found her at the beginning of the novel on the bed, although this time she is not “all right.” This time, she is crying, a human emotion that we have not seen in Robin throughout the entirety of the novel. We have seen timidity, anger, arrogance, confusion, but we have not seen tears. And, tears, of course, can mean a number of

³⁴ In discussing this final scene, Merrill Cole describes the reader as being left with the “uncanny concatenation of botched lover’s reunion, bestiality, and blasphemy” (406). “Robin seemingly attempts to become-dog” (65), states Carrie Rohman. Kenneth Burke thinks the ending is Robin’s “ambiguous translation into pure beastliness” (250). See “Version, Con-, Per-, and In-: Thoughts on Djuna Barnes’s Novel *Nightwood*.”

things, which is why I do not find the ending to be particularly devastating. I find the tears, like everything else about Robin, must be paradoxical, emoting both despair and happiness, confusion and clarity. It makes for a distressing scene, to be sure, but it also displays hope. Not a shimmering, conventional hope that makes one smile as if one knows what new and positive possibilities are available to these characters, but the temporal hope of continuity. The hope at the end of this novel is only that.³⁵ It does not suggest that Nora and Robin have or can ever reconcile themselves to each other. It does not suggest that Robin will fully evolve into a person from the beastly and indifferent source of power in the novel. Neither does it suggest that anyone will understand Robin any better. But, it does suggest that Robin and Nora will continue... continue to find in each other the misery, and therefore the comfort, they both desire.

Nightwood may very well be one of the single most interesting accounts of subjectivity formation in literature. It is a story of characters' confrontations with the embodiment of power, an *other* who displays the very indifference of power and how that power controls the formation of the subject. As readers we witness the interactions between the individuals of the text and Robin, watching their hopeful (and desperate) subjection before the power that will lead them to subjecthood... or not. In the end, the fact that the process of subjectivity is never guaranteed nor fully accomplished is evidenced by Jenny and Felix who remain liminal subjectivities at best, while Nora, the one who does become a subject, must then handle the melancholia of losing and not losing Robin. This failure of the normative processes of subjection and the playing out of melancholic incorporation are disturbing for the reader, for the repercussions of these failures are not often visible. Yet, *Nightwood* is a testament to these failures, and nevertheless maintains its dark humor and its shards of hope. As the source of power and the *other* in the novel, Robin's identity can never be finally determined, which makes it impossible for anyone's identity to be concluded. The characters entangled with Robin remain entangled within their own solar systems of hope and pursuit of identification, as meaning and recognition forlornly swirl, unfixed and unreachable around them.

³⁵ Merrill Cole notes that *Nightwood* "negates... the prerequisites of a stable identity and a settled past" (402). This seems reasonable, in light of my argument. Even liminal subjectivities such as Jenny and Felix seem to continue on regardless of their failure to secure any kind of established history.

Segue

Nightwood

The Power of Indifference

Anxiety about the past and attempts to think differently about time are standard concerns of the modernist mind. The tightrope that someone like T.S. Eliot walks in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” for example, when he looks to “tradition” or an “historical sense” in which to place the modern is a slippery move at minimum. Attempts to fit the “new” alongside the “old” while demanding a break from the past demonstrates a problematic quarrel over temporality itself. In his book *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*, D.H. Lawrence articulates this

[W]e have to drop our own manner of on-and-on-and-on, from a start to a finish, and allow the mind to move in cycles, or to flit here and there over a cluster of images. Our idea of time as a continuity in an eternal straight line has crippled our consciousness cruelly. (96-7)

In *Nightwood* the modernists’ uneasy relationship with the past plays out in the cyclical movement of the novel, but especially in the ways in which the other characters respond to Robin Vote. The mimetic rendering of this argument with *time* is brilliantly contradictory as is Barnes’ offering of the relationships between individuals and the power that subjects them, especially with her use of Robin as the embodiment of an important site of power and desire. Through Robin Vote’s representation of power itself and her access to temporal planes ungraspable to the individuals of the novel, the reader can divine new ways of seeing this difficult novel.

Subjectivity, the name by which an individual is called, is not controlled by the individual her/himself. Under the influence of Judith Butler's thought, the chapter analysis of *Nightwood*, the nature of power – and its indifference – is explored, as well as the attempt (and failure) of individuals to have some control over their own naming. These ideas, these new ways of seeing the characters of *Nightwood* and the novel itself can help to explain why the novel is so disconcerting. The previous chapter demonstrably shows the indeterminacy of the representation of Robin, the protagonist, as well as the indeterminacy built into the novel itself. The chapter's analysis of *Nightwood* never quite reconciles itself (to itself), for it can only follow the lead of the novel; the constant and inconsistent representations of Robin mirror the contradictory nature of power and time and their instabilities and indifference.

As far as representation is concerned, Djuna Barnes, unlike many of her contemporaries, creates a character that is almost wholly unrecognizable, which leads to earlier critics' assumptions that the reasons for this can be attributed to Robin's lesbianism or her "invert" status. Our modes of recognition – what can be seen as mimesis at work – even the modes of recognition by the characters within the novel itself are inadequate when it comes to understanding this character. If mimesis, as Paul Ricoeur has noted in his volumes of *Time and Narrative*, relies on preunderstanding, a kind of recognition or anchoring of social meaning (64), then what does it take to make a character such as this less disconcerting? It is no wonder the characters of *Nightwood* have been so maligned, even by critics sympathetic to the novel. Because critics struggle with recognizable characters, sexual orientation that is anathema to heteronormativity or the passionate attachments of atypical characters to the ineffable Robin Vote, even their most benevolent criticism has made the whole lot out to be misfits, perverts and inverts.¹

The tool of mimesis is "inverted" in order to create a character (Robin) who jars us at every turn. The plot of *Nightwood* is by no means ordinary, but if Robin were more recognizable (less difference in the mimetic repetition),² the play of the characters might not seem so bizarre. As it is, however, readers who continuously attempt to normalize Robin and plot, only lead both to seem outlandish and fantastic. As Annette Kolodny notes, *Nightwood* "places its readers" in a situation "embroiled in the hopeless

¹ In her 1975 article, Annette Kolodny states of *Nightwood* definitively: "It is not a novel written to explore the world of perverts, as some of its earliest critics insisted, but instead a novel which explores the psyches of those who inhabit and perceive what is to the 'normal' reader an inverted version of his own highly conventionalized sexual and social reality" (81).

² In this manner of thinking, Joseph Allen Boone states: "Barnes's prose style is 'queer' in multiple senses but particularly in its refusal of any easy coupling of the label and the labeled, dominant culture's most effective tool for categorizing and quarantining its misfits and thereby eliminating difference" (240).

task of trying to decode or decipher a strange and incomprehensible reality” (82). Likewise, Joseph Allen Boone states of *Nightwood*:

[I]t is a text that resists categorization of all sorts, “slapp[ing] down,” as Marilyn Reizbaum aptly puts it, the reader’s attempts to naturalize or “know” it. Moreover, despite its modernist affinities – which include its experimental narrative style, intricacy of literary allusion, thematics of alienation, and representation of the power of unconscious desire – the novel can only with the greatest difficulty be assimilated into the canon of high modernist practice. Indeed, if *Nightwood* maintains a relationship to mainstream modernist literary efforts, it only does so by making, in Jane Marcus’s memorable and often-quoted phrase, “a modernism of marginality” (233-4).

With that said, however, a critic can performatively materialize characters in her/his analysis, shifting the expectations about characters and plot in order to thrust them both out of a heteronormative reading.³ As noted in the previous chapter, the characters of *Nightwood* and their relations to Robin are mimetically built on intersecting matrices of desire, for time and for subjectivity. Looking at Robin as a variable center for the whirling bundles of emotional energy surrounding her offers new insights into how to read this novel and the representation of women. In 1998, Boone previously proposed this type of reading, suggesting that the characters of *Nightwood* “more often than not, serve as symbols of the unconscious or psychodramatic projections of states of desire” (234). It seems to me that this type of reading, of characters as symbolic or representations of human experience rather than simply human bodies, seems a productive way to read this enigmatic novel.

Robin Vote may well be the epitome of the modern. If we continue to view the modern as contradictory this female subject is paradigmatically so, fraught with both oppositions and therefore possibilities.

³ A heteronormative reading of *Nightwood*, I suggest, is one in which the novel is seen as too outrageous and too incomprehensible. Reading outside the heteronormative response, then, is to acknowledge the difficulty of the novel and its disconcerting aspects, but reading it in such a way as to make the novel less incomprehensible, not because it is any closer to the heteronormative, but because the heteronormative is no longer the standard by which to read.

Conclusion

If often within this project, one has found oneself re-reading ideas, re-experiencing concepts, and repeatedly returning to core themes and opinions, this is no accident, for this text is caught up in the repetitive. Through feminist and queer deconstruction of mimesis theory and performativity, this project has found itself circling dizzily around how we make meaning, how we recognize that meaning, and how to question that meaning in literature. If at times, literature and life overlap, character and subject merge, fiction and reality mingle, the unreal and the real blend together, it is because none of them are or ever have been entirely separate from the other. These fusions have been apparent since Plato's first theorization of mimesis, for his concern with the morality of mimesis – which is supposedly only sport or play – is deathly serious to the State because of its direct affect on people's behaviors in "real life." If it remains impossible even today to finally separate these alleged binaries, it seems reasonable to assume that when one critiques literature one's critique does not stop at literature per se. And many of us, especially those of us who consider ourselves feminists, look at this intersection of literature and life as a moment of political agency in which we can, and we must, question societal norms. In her 1992 article, Carol Watts notes the importance of this work:

As Rita Felski suggests, isn't the representation of female experience, by whatever narrative strategy, a legitimate cultural need?: Literature does not merely constitute a self-referential and metalinguistic system, as some literary theorists believe, but it is also a medium which can profoundly influence individual and cultural self-understanding in the sphere of everyday life, charting the changing preoccupations of social groups through symbolic fictions by which they make sense of experience (88).

The Feminist Aim

When one takes on the label “feminist” what happens in the 21st century? In 1999, Vikki Bell suggested: “Declaring oneself a feminist is a risky manoeuvre because all statements of affiliation are just that. In the ‘yes’ to the appellation ‘feminist’, what does one sign up to repeat?” (*Feminist* 6). This project repeats the second wave feminist move into the exploration of literature and the search for alternative modes of reading. Since that time – if we can ever assume a severance with “that time” – we literary feminists have been doing and re-doing that search over and over, again and again.

But, in the re-doing, it is important to recognize that criticism itself, like every other repetitive act, becomes normative, and therefore we must be aware of how that normativity affects our subsequent readings of texts.¹ For, of course there are important past interpretations on which our present interpretations are built, but like the rock-and-hard-place that modernists themselves had to negotiate between present and past, we, as critics, must also negotiate. Can we afford, as feminists, to become comfortable in our readings of literary texts, sitting back on our haunches because the work has supposedly already been done? Surely we have something more to say about any given work. Surely we can continue to see innovatively into texts that have been read and analyzed so seemingly exhaustively. Normativity has done women no favors; therefore, reading literature with an intention toward subverting that normativity, or as Moya Lloyd suggests, “working the weakness within the norm” (68), can be a way to open possibilities for new readings of female characters (and characters in general). Although there is no one act that remains subversive in every enactment,² it seems logical that questioning the status quo, our naturalized assumptions, i.e. those epistemologies that have become normative, can often be productive. As we continue to engage in this act, we may now and then discover gaps in the normative, contexts in which the act disorients the norm or presents dissonance into the normative process.

The Butlerian Aim

Two decades after the publication of *Gender Trouble*, this project has revisited Judith Butler in an attempt to assess whether her theory remains relevant to literary criticism. Although she has been criticized as a challenging, even difficult writer, her strenuous

¹ Tom Cohen notes the propensity for normativity in criticism, stating: “How much has a mimetic bias to the traditions of interpretation constituted a conservative politics of its own, and is there, today an anti-mimetic or anti-representational politics located in the activity of reading” (1). I would argue with his terminology, of course, since a reading that undermines the normative vein of criticism would not necessarily be anti-mimetic or anti-representational. Please see the Introduction to this project for my view on these terms.

² Of course Judith Butler points out that particular acts are not subversive in themselves – as many readers believe she had suggested with her discussion of “drag” – rather, context dictates subversion (*GT* 176-7).

intellectual work continues to assist academics and researchers in making significant contributions to their disciplines. Her voice, dazzling and robust across the disciplines in the late 1990s and early 2000s, continues its resonance even now. For once a voice can be heard, once a voice breaks through the repetitive movements of the norms, creates a gap or fissure into a newly intelligible realm, it begins its own cyclical and repetitive movements within discourse.

In this project I have focused generally on Butler's theory of performativity, but also applied specific points of thought anchored within that theory. I also simply relied on the influence Judith Butler has had in my own ways of thinking gender, which led to re-thinking sexuality, identity, recognition, subversion, power, desire, and agency. Musing about the meaning of *Gender Trouble*, Butler states:

"The point was not to prescribe a new gendered way of life that might then serve as a model for readers of the text. Rather, the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized. One might wonder what use 'opening up possibilities' finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is 'impossible,' illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question" (Preface viii).

These sentiments can apply to this project, for the point of each chapter has been to embark on performatively atypical analyses of the primary texts, questioning more normative readings in order to demonstrate not just a re-visiting of gender, but of the presumptions that remain attached to – and unquestioned about – our ideas of gender. The project has attempted to unmoor the female characters in these texts from the normative mimetic anchors that determine their subjectivities, in the literature and in the criticism. It has suggested queerer³ readings of the most conservative of characters, has questioned their interests in heteronormative behaviors and desires. It has explored subjectivity formation through temporal and power relations, through ontological security, sublimity, and gothic place.

Outside of these general approaches, this project more specifically uses recurring themes one can see throughout Judith Butler's work. Therefore, each chapter focuses on exploring female subjectivities and their representations through themes such as: intelligibility, livability, interpellation, repressed desire, and the workings of power.

³ I would like to note at this time that the intention of this project was not necessarily to engage in queer readings of these texts. However, as I began my queries and analysis, especially engaging in the examination of assumptions critics have made regarding their sex and gender roles, they quickly became subsumed by questions of desire, the invisible link in that heteronormative chain (the link broken by Judith Butler and other feminist, gender, and queer theorists, as noted in the introduction). Other critics, even those who have sought subversive or unconventional readings themselves, have for the most part presupposed the link of heterosexual desire, and have therefore left that aspect of most of the novels undertheorized.

Working out feminist social/political issues performatively through literary criticism is one dynamic way of seeking possibilities in the mimetic cycle of normative cognition. Carol Watts suggests its usefulness in this way:

The observation that 'symbolic fictions' help us achieve a level of emancipation through self-understanding is central to Judith Butler's re-interpretation of Beauvoir: the formulation, that is, of a gendered cultural politics. If the process of 'becoming' a woman is seen as a 'tacit project to renew a cultural history in one's own corporeal terms', then literature is one cultural forum where such a renewal takes place. (Watts 88).

Although Judith Butler has been used as its foundational core, there is certainly no definitive model in this project for reading literary texts. However, perhaps there exist ideas for more original excursions into the increasingly crowded world of literary criticism.

Mimesis and Performativity

Our postmodern turn away from similarity and toward difference in mimesis is not a rejection of similarity and a preference for difference, but an accentuation of the complications within our ideas of likeness and alterity in general. Theories based only on similarity became simply too simple. As Gebauer and Wulf suggest:

All interpretations of mimesis as imitation rely on the similitude theory of reference, and their essential problems stem from a weakness that necessarily accompanies it. What these theories have not yet recognized is the difficulty inherent in the concept of similitude. It is simply not possible to maintain the similarity between an object and an idea in the way the imitation theorists have attempted to do. [...] We are not capable of attaining pure knowledge of objects in isolation from human modes of perception (158).

Mimesis theory, along with poststructuralist theories such as Judith Butler's, moved away from favoring either similarity or difference, toward a hybrid of both. They also raised the importance of context and our inability to transcend our very human epistemologies and ontologies.

Linking performativity and mimesis together was sometimes a sticky business since both reflect each other in their processes. In my analyses, I attempted to separate the two by dealing only with the aesthetic mode of mimesis (the representations of women in the text) and only the social/cultural aspect of performativity (the critique engaged in by the literary critic). And, although I attempted to keep these detached, the separation was not always successful. Often the one seeped into conversations about the other and vice versa, for each exists fundamentally in spaces where questions of reality,

fiction, truth, falsity, original, and copy reside. Both also are the ways in which we make meaning in our society, through their iterability. They make meaning by repeating the recognizable, the normative (and discursive) practices, images, sounds, behaviors, and languages. They repeat precisely or imprecisely, well or poorly, accurately or inaccurately, but they repeat nonetheless.

At this point, I realized that there may be a closer connection between mimesis and performativity. In my repeated attempts to place performativity inside mimesis, to place it under its umbrella, it mischievously seeped outside and out from under mimesis' porous borders. It was then I began to think that performativity might not be only an aspect of mimesis, but what mimesis *has become* through feminist politics, the uprising in new ways of thinking about gender, queer politics, and poststructuralist thought. Butler's theorizing of performativity has certainly made evident mimesis' darker side: its normative tendencies, its reference to originals that do not exist, our inability to control it, our mistaken belief that participation in it is of our own accord and under our power. This is not to say that theories of mimesis have not also made these discoveries themselves, only that performativity seems to have gained more urgency and notoriety in a short amount of time. But, just as performativity, which many people would like to confine to language or theater, cannot be confined, mimesis, which many people would like to confine to art, cannot be confined. Both pervade every part of life, including art. Gebauer and Wulf's book, for example, is indicative of this overarching reach of mimesis, for they have widened the "traditional understanding of mimesis to encompass the human body and the cultural practices of everyday life" (Reneau book cover).⁴ Performativity, by the same token, has had its own resignifications throughout its shorter career: In *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* it is "articulated first in terms of bodily acts and practices," then it "evolved into a purely linguistic notion by the time of *Excitable Speech*, only to be reconfirmed as combining the linguistic and corporeal in *Undoing Gender* (Lloyd 22). Of course, it seems that the reason performativity cannot be stabilized into just one particular category or realm of thought is because it, like mimesis, resides in many. And, like mimesis, it pervades all areas of human knowledge and thought. This popularity, the fact of nearly every academic

⁴ In their Introduction, Gebauer and Wulf suggest that mimesis "plays a critical role in nearly all areas of human thought and action, in our ideas, speech, writing, and reading" (1). They go on to expound on the pervasive use of mimesis: "A spectrum of meanings of mimesis has unfolded over the course of its historical development, including the act of resembling, of presenting the self, and expression as well as mimicry, *imitatio*, representation, and nonsensuous similarity. The accent may lie on similarity in sensuous terms, on a nonsensuous correspondence, or on an intentional construction of a correlation. Some writers have emphasized the intermediary character of mimesis; they locate it in medial images, which occupy the space between inner and the outer worlds. Depending on developments in the larger aesthetic, philosophical, or social context, the meaning of mimesis changes, betraying a hitherto scarcely noted richness in the concept" (1).

discipline recognizing its potential attests to the fact of its depth and variability, as well as its usefulness in our analysis of thinking the body, the mind, and everyday life and culture.

Feminist Mimesis?

In her 1997 book *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater*, Elin Diamond crafts what she believes mimesis might look like in the future under the influence of feminism.

A feminist mimesis, if there is such a thing, would take the relation to the real as productive, not referential, geared to change, not to reproducing the same. It would explore the tendency to tyrannical modeling (subjective/ideological projections masquerading as universal truths), even in its own operations. Finally, it would clarify the humanist sedi-mentation in the concept as a means of releasing the historical particularity and transgressive corporeality of the *mimos*,⁵ who, in mimesis, is always more and different than she seems (xvi).

Her projection is not far off, for contemporary theories of mimesis look very much like what Diamond has described. In fact, Melberg's book which questions traditional thought about mimesis was printed two years prior to Diamond's projections, as was Gebauer and Wulf's study (its English translation), which indicates the postmodern transformation of mimesis had already begun in the ways Diamond describes as "feminist." And, Judith Butler's theory of performativity was only a few years shy of a decade old at this point. And, as Vikki Bell points out, Butler's theories reveal a,

certain feminist inheritance of an emphasis on mimesis and imitation that resonates with the ways in which theoreticians responded to the calamitous events of essentialist politics and versions of belonging that were central to the political vision of Hitler's National Socialism and to the events of the Second World War ("Mimesis" 134).

So, perhaps we can draw the analogy that mimesis' decline can be attributed to its own form of "essentialism" (*imitatio*), the narrowed version of itself in the 18th century, and only in its general resurgence in the last few decades transformed mimesis into what Diamond suggests to be a "feminist" form. Or, perhaps the appearance of performativity

⁵ *Mimos* for Diamond is *mimesis*, and *muthos* relates to *mythos*. Diamond argues earlier that in his theory of mimesis in the *Poetics*, Aristotle rids himself of his "interest in resemblances and improvisation, or rather his teleology does. Mimetic activity becomes coherent art that will, like philosophy, refer us to the universals of type and action. Aristotle plants the effeminate body of the *mimos* firmly in a unified *muthos* that elicits and regulates the emotions toward appropriate rational standards" (x).

itself in 1990 is a manifestation of at least one direction contemporary mimesis theories have gone. Or, finally, perhaps both mimesis and performativity look more and more alike as they are drawn ever closer together by contemporary and poststructural philosophy and politics.

I do not suggest that I can answer these questions or definitively state that my hunches are correct regarding performativity and mimesis; that is for another study at another time to decide. But, what I can conclude is that both mimesis and performativity remain uncannily similar: that both are products and processes; that both delve into every aspect of human existence; that both help us make meaning in our worlds; that both rely on and expand narratives of truth, reality, fiction, original, copy, art, and life; that they rely on repetition, and that through repetition both uncover indeterminacies in their respective, normative cycles even while shoring up those norms. Both are normative and yet both show promise of agency. All of these characteristics are important to the study of literature, and uniquely to the study of representation in that literature. For, “representation and social-historical reality,” states Elin Diamond, “like everything else, are fully imbricated”; “discourse and its products (gender, identity, politics) are caught up in fantasies, identifications, and fictional models passing as truths” (iii).

Indeed, the aim of this project was not to argue truths and untruths about the representations of women, but to attempt to uncover *possibilities* for women within those representations. This aim, together with our understanding that representation and reality are constructed through mimesis and performativity – which both create and reveal their constructedness – can assist us in repeating the primary feminist interaction⁶ with literary texts of reading *otherwise*.

⁶ I want to close with a comment regarding my use of re-visiting older feminist thought with newer feminist and postmodern thinkers and methodologies. Retrospective feminist re-reading and re-doing within literary projects remain valuable and important in our feminist traditions, especially since our contemporary language usage regarding texts, the literary, the human, agency, etc., has so drastically shifted from the feminist language of old (thank you Dr. Kirsti K. Cole for reminding me of this fact). Feminist work cannot be entirely new or detached from previous feminist enterprises. We cannot afford the cultural “amnesia” pervasive in our societies, says Gill Plain and Susan Sellers in their introduction to *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*. “The result of this amnesia,” they note, “is a tension in contemporary criticism between the power of feminism and its increasing spectrality. Journalists and commentators write of ‘post-feminism,’ as if to suggest that the need to challenge patriarchal power or to analyse the complexities of gendered subjectivities had suddenly gone away, and as if texts were no longer the products of material realities in which bodies are shaped and categorized not only by gender, but by class, race, religion and sexuality” (1). I believe feminist critique must always be multidirectional, reflexive, and progressive simultaneously; therefore, returning to earlier critical feminist influences, especially in the decades where feminism was actually brought into the academy, seems always a valuable and fruitful endeavor. This project, like Plain and Sellers book, “is not a ‘post-feminist’ work, “but rather a ‘still-feminist’ one that aims to explore exactly what feminist criticism has done and is doing...” (1).

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Appendix

Judith Butler Revisited

In “Giving an Account of Oneself”, Judith Butler writes: “If the “I” is not at one with moral norms, this means only that the subject must deliberate upon these norms, and that part of deliberation will entail a critical understanding of their social genesis and meaning. In this sense, ethical deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique.” It is this sense of deliberation and critique that this project seeks to apply to Butler’s own theory/theories, through a two-pronged strategy involving the theory on the one hand, and a body of literature on the other. In order to address the political and literary-critical potential of Butler’s theory, her ideas will be tested against works by Edith Warton (1862-1937) and Djuna Barnes (1892-1982).

Djuna Barnes and the subversion of identity

Barnes’ most famous work, *Nightwood* (1936), seems to be a platform for a sort of “transgenderism”, at once evoking yet explicitly denying all binary oppositions that serve to categorize our world. Against the background of Butler’s ideas, many seemingly awkward passages from this novel appear in a new light. The main character, Robin Vote, can function as the ultimate “(im)possible being”, “the empty sign”, the unreachable centre that other characters are attracted by, either wanting to pin down her identity and sexuality, or wanting to exploit her fluidity in those realms for their own purposes. *Nightwood* can be read as “a story next to the story” in that the characters are created through cryptic analogies, metaphors and metonymies. Barnes seems to parody heterosexual performance, engaging in a Butlerian type of “drag”, aiming at resignification and appropriation of gendered signifiers. The novel is thus subversive of the heterosexual matrix in a way that echoes Butler’s theoretical concerns.

Edith Wharton and the discursive limits of sex

Whereas Djuna Barnes problematizes the constructed and performative nature of gender, Edith Wharton seems to aim at the exact opposite: she pursues a new “female essence” in the changing society that is the background to her writing. However, it seems that Butler’s ideas may lead to alternative (and hitherto uncharted) paths of interpretation of Wharton’s work. The women in Wharton’s work, with whom the narrator often sympathizes, regularly long for a “lost object” – a loss inflicted particularly by the rigid society in which they live. The tragic fate of heroines such as Lily Bart (*The House of Mirth*), Ellen Olenska (*The Age of Innocence*) and Mattie Silver (*Ethan Frome*) can be read as the result of these women’s (impossible) quest for the “lost object” and as a consequence of the melancholia this quest produces. An alternative reading of Wharton for this project may also consist of further exploring the “female essence” described above, and how those essences intersect with a fragile constructionist view of the sexes germinating just under the surface of these texts. In either case, the “performance” in Wharton’s characters is not so much an “acting out” as it is an iteration of the “heterosexual contract” through the rehearsal of behavioural codes and conventions. A final question, then, may be directed at whether or not the iteration of the “heterosexual contract” in Wharton can be seen as critique or consent of the contract itself.

Broader research question

Overall, the project seeks to determine the potential and limitations of Butler’s (queer) theory for research into women’s literature. It aims to test Butler’s belief in the possibility of dialogue between queer theory and feminism in the context of literary study and to find out which aspects of the theory perhaps stand in the way of any straightforward “application” to literary works (e.g. the genealogical angle? or the Freudian component within the foreclosure of homosexuality?); which facets of the literary study could possibly feed into the theory.

