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Faceting:
Rereading Feminism and Postmodernism

by
Kathryn Fleishman

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English
and the Designated Emphasis
in
Film Studies
in the
Graduate Division
of the
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Committee in Charge:

Professor Namwali Serpell, Chair
Professor Linda Williams
Professor Stephen Best

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Abstract

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Kathryn Fleishman

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University of California, Berkeley

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This project offers a feminist reconsideration of the postmodern aesthetic across a set of American fictions since 1945. From our current perspective, postmodernism is both overdetermined and undervalued; we limit our readings by equating its sheen and sparkle with irony, paranoia, and superficiality. I present an alternative to two longstanding default modes of interpreting the postmodern: the excavatory, hermeneutic model inaugurated by Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism*, and the poststructuralist model, which celebrates a seemingly infinite profusion of references and surfaces. My project's impact is threefold: I demonstrate how feminism refashions the postmodern aesthetic, I reanimate a quintessentially postmodern language of surface and depth in terms of our current crisis of reading, and I show how feminism is uniquely equipped to supersede, though not erase, that binary. Drawing together new debates in feminist, postcritical, and film theory, I present another approach to novels by Sylvia Plath, Christopher Isherwood, Thomas Pynchon, Vladimir Nabokov, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Leslie Marmon Silko, as well as several films and the television series *Mad Men*.

Feminist theory has a vexed relationship with postmodernism, both as an aesthetic category and in relation to its two major interpretive frameworks. For Jameson, the postmodern resists interpretation because of its baroque excesses, which he alternately compares to "heaps of fragments" and to "the distorting and fragmenting reflections of one enormous glass surface." Jameson's imagery emphasizes postmodernism's illegibility, whether by profusion or impenetrability; while poststructuralist readings distinguish themselves by ennobling and elaborating upon these assumptions, they do not fundamentally unseat them. I argue that postmodernism's aesthetic, supremely fragmented but also flatly reflective, actually invites the reader to make sense of the text in a pleasurable act of construction. This calls for a method of reading I term *faceting*, from the Latin *facere*, "to make or do," a word that connotes reflection, refraction, and repositioning. To constellate meanings in a postmodern text is to negotiate a plural but limited set of interrelations from its vast networks of data and its myriad surfaces. The reader fastens shifting, tessellated planes into a provisional, dimensional, if hollow, narrative whole. If, in Rita Felski's terms, intersectional feminism is always a "reworking," an essentially "purposeful and hopeful" project of improvement, its history brings much to bear on the recent disciplinary turn to the postcritical, which is rooted in feminist and queer theory and eudaimonic in its aims. The pleasures of postmodernism, I maintain, lie precisely at its jagged seams and shifting juxtapositions, which the reader herself

is constantly in the process of remaking. Rather than a readerly pose of ironic detachment or paranoid suspicion, faceting entails attachment, effort, and desire.

Faceting seizes specifically on metonymy as an alternative, feminist form of figuration that is both prominent in and amenable to the aims of postmodernism. Unlike metaphor, which encourages a binary reading, whereby the reader searches for significance behind a surface, metonymy enables the reader to perceive the postmodern aesthetic as a severality of surfaces – as, in a word, *multifaceted*. In each chapter, I analyze a seemingly binary mode of representation that faceting transforms into a limited plurality. I begin by using *The Bell Jar* and *A Single Man* to counter Jameson's claims in *Postmodernism*, as figures that appear to be dual yield greater complexity when viewed via faceting. I go on to trace the implications of narrative eversion – the process by which a shape is pulled inside out – in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Ada, or Ardor*. I consider how projections into the past and future in *The Woman Warrior* disrupt narrative teleology, building on those observations in an analysis of the later *Almanac of the Dead* and *Mason & Dixon*. The project is bracketed by analyses of film and television, which offer insight into the visual aspects of faceting, evident in its relationship to terms like *face* and *façade*. The introduction reviews the literature that contributed to faceting as a concept, as well as the hollow pleasures of two mid-century films, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *Imitation of Life*; the epilogue addresses the contemporary nostalgia for the postmodern in the tension between photographic and moving images in *Mad Men*.

*With gratitude –
for my parents,
for Jeff,
& for Isa*

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INTRODUCTION: FACETING

Everybody knows it's fiction, but then everybody knows the whole thing is fiction.
– A.S. Byatt¹

We apprehend the postmodern by its excesses of gloss and glitter, its sprawling, decentralized casts, its paranoid and melodramatic plotlines, and its parade of sexualized objects and commodified bodies. By apprehend, I intend both recognition and arrest; in categorizing postmodernism as impenetrable surface or illegible profusion, we limit the scope and kind of our interpretations. In this book, I will cast reading as an act of perpetual assemblage, engaging feminist theory to expand the available pleasures and meanings of a set of American fictions from the 1950s to the present. In turn, I posit a feminist rereading of postmodernism's distinctive aesthetic that is germane to the ongoing debate about how we read now. Rooted in the Latin *facere*, “to make or do,” *faceting* foregrounds the reader as constructor of text, accounting for the movements of reflection, refraction, and repositioning that inhere in the reading and rereading experience. The term is also related to *face*, *façade*, and *surface*, connoting planes of a multidimensional object. Through faceting, the reader arrays postmodernism's excesses dimensionally, producing textured meaning and subjectivity between, beside, and among the surfaces of the text and creating a richly embodied, if illusory, sense of narrative depth.

Faceting intercedes to build alongside, rather than to reconcile, two longstanding methods of reading postmodernism: a hermeneutic model, as delineated in Fredric Jameson's

Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (where an emphasis on metaphor encodes a search for significance behind appearance), and a poststructuralist approach, as in Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (which revels in the endless, rhizomatic possibilities of textual meaning, but does not distill them). In drawing out how these two interpretive modes operate along the lines of gender and sexuality, I highlight the textured seams on which the 'gloss' or 'heap' of American postmodern aesthetic production depends. Against their interpretive detachment and irony, and in concert with Rita Felski's concept of the 'postcritical,' I propose faceting as a feminist mode of reading, pushing critique into the realm of attachment, effort, and desire.

Jameson's hermeneutic model posits postmodern artistic production not only as embedded in consumer capitalism, but as an inveterate consumer itself, subsuming the stuff of history into its 'heap.' If modernist art "quoted" from the culture in order to critique it, postmodern works "incorporate" it "into their very substance."² This is one sign Jameson offers for the supposed loss of historicity in postmodernism, characterized by a "libidinal historicism" that seeks to assimilate "a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum" consisting of "nothing but texts."³ For Jameson, this untethering from time also encodes the depersonalization of affect, since "the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and memory" signals "a liberation from anxiety, but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well."⁴ Jameson explores the potential significance, if not the value, of this shift: "We now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic... our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism."⁵ While Jameson names this erasure of artistic depth, along with its excavatory forms of interpretation, as a loss, poststructuralism opens from the multiplicities that a more spatialized postmodern art makes available.

Poststructuralism follows Foucault's observation that the proliferating discourses of sexuality are "the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance."⁶ This is a movement of expansion, Foucault contends, "an entire glittering sexual array, reflected in a myriad of discourses, the obstination of powers, and the interplay of knowledge and pleasure."⁷ In *One Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose their ideal model, that of the rhizome, an endlessly connected series of lines, in which "any point... can be connected to anything other, and must be."⁸ For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome is a means of resisting dualism, an escape from the "binary logic and biunivocal relationships [that] still dominate psychoanalysis... linguistics, structuralism, and even information systems."⁹ Contra Jameson, it is precisely the collation of seemingly unrelated phenomena that thrills through *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Brian Massumi writes that "the authors steal from other disciplines with glee, but they are more than happy to return the favor."¹⁰ As the rhizome is made, however, it is always already being unmade, for "one side of a machine assemblage faces the strata... signifying totality," but "it also has a side facing a body without organs, which is continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate."¹¹ This constant deferral offers Deleuze and Guattari an interpretive parallel between multiplicity, irresolution, and erotic plateaus.

Feminism stands in ambivalent relation to postmodernism. As an aesthetic category, the postmodern represented, in Somer Brodribb's words, "the cultural capital of late

patriarchy,” chiefly concerned with the “writing it has nominated as central: masculine texts.”¹² At the same time, the movement also proved a space of difference and diffusion, in which women and minority writers flourished. Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) acknowledges the bind between the two movements, which was “to critique the inside from both the outside and the inside.”¹³ Feminism’s vexed relationship with postmodernism, both as an aesthetic category and in relation to its two major interpretive frameworks, is evident in how it so variously reflected and rejected the norms and challenges of both the hermeneutics of suspicion and poststructuralism. In Fredric Jameson’s characterization, the postmodern resists interpretation because of its baroque excesses, which he alternately compares to “heaps of fragments” and to “the distorting and fragmenting reflections of one enormous glass surface,” emphasizing postmodernism’s (arguably feminized) illegibility, whether by profusion or impenetrability.¹⁴ While poststructuralist readings distinguish themselves by ennobling and elaborating upon these assumptions, they do not fundamentally unseat them. For instance, Linda Hutcheon writes that “the decentering of our categories of thought always relies on the centers it contests for its very definition,” and “the power of these new expressions is always paradoxically derived from that which they challenge.”¹⁵ Thus Lyotard’s observation that the postmodern “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself,” that it “denies itself the solace of good forms,” and that it “searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” opens up a range of theoretical possibilities, but not necessarily textual meanings, to the reader.¹⁶

A certain commonality emerges, then, between these two diametrically opposed strategies of critique. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out in her proposal of the term “reparative reading,” critique has taken Ricoeur’s formulation of a “hermeneutics of suspicion” as “a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities,” thus delimiting our critical approaches to texts.¹⁷ Such a “paranoid” mode of interpretation, Sedgwick holds, has made us excellent diggers and detectives of texts, searching for a single and secret meaning, but has left us closed off to experiencing texts as they are, in all their potential variety of interconnections.¹⁸ On the one hand, Freudian-Marxist modes of symptomatic reading, rather than resisting power structures, often follow the same tempting processes of “drawing out” and “captivating and capturing” that Foucault describes as rendering us cyclically powerless. On the other, the endless, rhizomatic language games of poststructuralism can leave the reader stranded in a similarly powerless position. Rita Felski follows upon Sedgwick in *The Limits of Critique*, noting that the persistent spatial metaphors of “digging down” (associated with hermeneutics) and “standing back” (associated with poststructuralism) have become so widespread as to limit our imaginations: “the ongoing skirmishes between ideology critique and poststructuralist critique do not override their commitment to a common ethos: a sharply honed suspicion that goes behind the backs of its interlocutors to retrieve counterintuitive and unflattering meanings.”¹⁹

If the metafictional form of the postmodern novel, having taken the repetitive, proliferating multiplicity of these discourses into itself, is well poised to respond to this dually paranoid mode of critique, it is because, in Bakhtinian fashion, it is simply behaving as the novel always has. Indeed, what defines our understanding of the postmodern novel as “resistant” to depth reading or “illegible” in its excesses is its formation as a response to the discourses of its time. How strange then, Hutcheon remarks, to separate feminism from

postmodernism, when they are instead mutually influential: “it has been feminism that has shown the impossibility of separating the theoretical and the aesthetic, the political and the epistemological,” and it is feminism’s conception of “the multiple, the heterogenous, the different” that forms “the pluralizing rhetoric of postmodernism,” which dismisses “single otherness.”²⁰ In place of Jameson’s concerns, Hutcheon celebrates the fact that “there is no dialectic in the postmodern,” since

this deliberate refusal to resolve contradictions is a contesting of what Lyotard calls the totalizing master narratives of our culture, those systems by which we usually unify and order (and smooth over) any process of meaning-making in the production and reception of art.²¹

Though the surfaces of postmodernism may be *plastic* – that is, moldable – they are not *synthetic*; their movement is not towards resolution, but among multiplicities. For Hutcheon, this means that “the postmodern is not ahistorical or dehistoricized,” but instead attends to the way “we make historical ‘facts’ out of brute ‘events’ of the past, or, more generally, how our various sign systems grant meaning to our experience.”²² Hutcheon names that mode of postmodern writing that is self-aware of history as a construct “historiographic metafiction,” pointing out that, like feminism, it “always works *within* conventions in order to subvert them.”²³ Rita Felski, too, emphasizes the connections between these movements:

I often feel frustrated by Marxist discussions of the modern and postmodern that relegate women to a solitary footnote or, indeed, that fail to acknowledge them at all. To expound on the politics of contemporary culture while ignoring the seismic impact of feminism, perhaps the most influential social movement of the last thirty years, is either foolhardy, myopic, or perverse. The invocation of history in the singular is often a code word for business as usual: left-wing scholarship that remains oblivious or resolutely impervious to alternative visions of what counts as history.²⁴

To appreciate this critical turn to multiplicity while still straining to fabricate a meaningful textual structure represents a feminist ethics of reading. The refusal to wallow in dispersal or to winnow into seamless unity recuperates a set of aesthetic pleasures and possibilities for our reading praxis, bolstering the ongoing relevance of feminist criticism as well.

Since Hutcheon, a plethora of analyses of feminism and postmodernism have been penned. And yet the association of postmodern *art* with that which is coded male – the detached, ironic, expansive, and rational critique of culture – and the association of the postmodern *era* with that which is coded female – the attached, sincere, emotional participant in commodity fetishism – persists. Culture is to be criticized, while art is to be critiqued, and the treatment of these postmodern surfaces is itself highly gendered. As Renu Bora writes, surfaces are conflated with and devalued for their shininess or glossiness, where the lack of a signature of manual labor signals the absence of a “Benjaminian aura”:

In shiny, usually synthetic, fabrics, we can read sheen as an emblem of the artificial, the technological, the feminine, the Oriental, the luxurious, glamorous, tacky, or gay, in oppositional ideological codings that usually demand deconstruction....

The textural oppositions shiny/matte, gleaming/dull, smooth/rough, polished/crude, at times become forms of one complex epistemological and ideological structure.

These value-laden reversible codes could be mapped onto sexuality's problematic history of binarisms (such as heterosexual/homosexual).²⁵

A system of aesthetic binaries renders depth and meaning oppositional to surface, with that which is "glossy," "superficial," "false," or "tacky" becoming functionally illegible as well. In turn, the privileging of depth readings glosses the dismissal of surface meanings as a devaluation of a whole range of textures, genders, sexualities, and aesthetic modes and possibilities.

In "Taking the Smooth with the Rough," Pansy Duncan delineates the ease with which Fredric Jameson's assessments of postmodern flatness are conflated with a distancing irony and emotional unavailability. If, as Duncan posits, "the hermeneutic flatness of the postmodern image was the all too natural bedfellow of emotional flatness," then "it is not hard to grasp why scholars might construe the turn to affect and emotion as a turn away from a postmodernism now judged both chronologically over and critically moribund."²⁶ If feminism reclaims the personal as political, so Duncan reminds us that readerly emotion, not just collective affect, has interpretive value. As Isobel Armstrong puts it in *The Radical Aesthetic*, reason and emotion are another false binary to be interrogated: "the emotions should be included within a definition of the rational rather than fall outside of it."²⁷ The oft-termed "gloss" of the postmodern surface, which in Duncan's estimation elides the concept of texture altogether, lends itself to a false reduction of postmodernism's emotional richness: "Looked at as 'flat,' postmodernism's depthless, metallic landscapes seem wholly impervious to emotion; looked at as 'textured,' however, these same depthless, metallic landscapes turn up a wealth of emotional possibility."²⁸ In truth, the postmodern surface is "so richly embellished by texture that *flatness*, with its connotations of matteness, evenness, and dullness, and *depthlessness*, with its negative specification of the surface as absence of depth, seem spectacularly inadequate" as descriptors.²⁹ This texture comes, as I contend, not only from the surfaces themselves, but from the arrangement and juxtaposition of these surfaces beside and against one another. As Sedgwick, reading Bora, rightly insists: "however high the gloss, there is no such thing as textural lack."³⁰

The positionality of *beside* opens up a sweep of new understandings, as the language of reparative reading suggests: "*beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations."³¹ Duncan's articulation of texture multiplies the valences of 'surface' for us, but it also troubles the opposition of surface and depth, itself a binary correlated with the forms of ideological and rhizomatic critique, respectively. Mark C. Taylor exploits the multiple meanings of his title *Hiding*, including a gerund signifying "concealed" and synonym for exposed "skin," maintaining that while the stark division of appearance and substance may appeal to our categorizing impulses, it is often the case that what is on the surface is coterminous, if not commingled, with what is beneath: "If nothing separates inside from outside, skeleton and skin converge; there is no longer anything to hide because nothing remains but hides and skins. Just as the bodily structure is actually epidural, so ostensible infrastructure turns out to be involuted supra structure."³² Indeed, even as we attempt to separate or delimit into dualistic sets, the place of division is always in question: "For artists, as for Hegel, the distinction between surface and depth or appearance and essence, which their work seems to presuppose, proves difficult to

maintain.”³³

In *Surfaces*, philosopher Avrum Stroll elaborates on the variance of his titular term, arguing that “the concept of a surface is one of an indefinitely large number of notions that belong to what I have called ‘the geometry of ordinary speech.’”³⁴ A transparent or hollow object, as I contend postmodern fiction so often is, disrupts our notion of a depth reading: we can see through it, but that does not make its reflective wonders cease.³⁵ For Stroll, this “system of informal geometry” structures our most fundamental perceptions of the world: “Moore called this ‘the Commonsense View of the world,’ Wittgenstein describes it as ‘that which stands fast for us,’ and John Searle speaks of it as ‘the background.’”³⁶ Faceting’s treatment of surfaces, then, is a logical and an intuitive practice of reading, a commonsense pursuit, rather than a domination of the text’s secrets or a resignation to its many significations. In Stroll’s terms, “this system of informal geometry is an aspect or feature of a deep-lying, nontechnical view of the world that virtually all of us share” and “that human beings employ for organizing and structuring the world in quasi-geometric terms.”³⁷ As faceting helps us envision, the constellation of meanings in a postmodern text is the negotiation of a plural but limited set of interrelations drawn from its vast networks of data and its myriad surfaces. The reader fastens shifting, tessellated planes into a provisional, dimensional, if hollow, narrative whole.



*Works by Matthias Käss present possible models for faceting.*³⁸

One way to consider this paradigm of “besideness” is to examine Roman Jakobson’s formulation of metaphor (as substitution, condensation, and telos) versus metonymy (as combination, adjacency, and displacement). Faceting seizes specifically on metonymy as an alternative, feminist form of figuration that is both prominent in and amenable to the aims of postmodernism. Unlike metaphor, which encourages a binary reading, whereby the reader searches for significance behind a surface, metonymy enables the reader to perceive the aesthetic object as a severalty of surfaces – as, in a word, *multifaceted*. Sadeq Rahimi writes that while metaphor (a hallmark of narrative) operates on the exacting basis of replacing one thing with another, in Jakobson’s formulation, metonymy, or “combination, on the other hand, functions to join distinct meaning units together by locating them within the same context,” thus emphasizing multiplicity, adjacency, and difference.³⁹ Metonymy is of the prosaic dimension and metaphor of the poetic, so it makes sense that postmodern novels –

prosaic in both their generic form and their participation in quotidian, commercialized life – would rely on it especially. A fiction that emphasizes spatiality, not just temporality, would also logically shift towards the metonymic, rather than the metaphorical, and the multiple, rather than the dialectical, since metonymy stages a monadic aspect of connective meaning, versus the total cognitive leap of metaphor. In grammatical terms, my readings in this book build beside and among dualisms like “either/or,” so common to the ‘paranoid’ literature of the postmodern, seeking instead various concatenations of “ands” and “maybes” that expand those binaries into structured multiplicities of meaning.

In his analysis of the characteristics of postmodernism in relation to Jakobson’s two poles, David Lodge writes, “By presenting the reader with more details than he can synthesize into a whole, the discourse affirms the resistance of the world to interpretation,” concluding that “this is what the Russian Formalists called ‘barring the device’ carried to an extreme, and it is a persistent feature of postmodernist writing.”⁴⁰ If metaphor is a dialectical exchange between binaries, in faceting, the reader takes up metonymy in order to build binaries beside one another and into longer chains of meaning. As Barbara Johnson writes,

The principal sign of Pinocchio’s ‘realness’ is the disappearance of the signs of his articulation: in a puppet, the joints are marked; in a ‘real boy,’ they are erased. Pinocchio becomes a real boy when his body is entirely smooth. Organic form is thus, among other things, an erasure of articulation. This may be why Western cultures are intolerant of any lines on the body – any wrinkles or signs of experience – especially in a love object.⁴¹

As this play on ‘articulation’ emphasizes, rather than suture the pieces of narrative into a smooth whole, postmodern fiction attends to the joints between shifting surfaces, leaving the reader to assemble and justify the connections. I call on Christian Metz’s concept of the *syntagma* of montage to elucidate this distinction in filmic terms. Whereas the *parallel syntagma*, like metaphor, implies a dialectical relationship between cross-cut images, the *bracket syntagma* presents images metonymically, as portions of a similar reality, without implying their order. Metz terms bracket syntagma “a sort of articulation” of “brief scenes given as typical examples of a certain order of reality but without temporal sequence, often organized around a concept.”⁴² My concept of faceting also draws upon Metz’s contrast between *episodic sequence*, a chronologically organized discontinuity, and *ordinary sequence*, the non-chronological juxtaposition of distinct episodes, which leaves its connections implicit.⁴³ As Metz points out, there are parallels between bracket syntagma and ordinary sequence, since in both forms,

actions are not followed in their vectoral unfolding, but are merely chosen as representative of a certain reality... drawing together into a rhythmical entity a number of discontinuous images whose common denominator is simply their ability to suggest a particular atmosphere.⁴⁴

This filmic ‘articulation’ closely resembles the metonymic affordances of postmodern literature, and indeed, Lodge describes film as an essentially metonymic medium, since

we move through time and space lineally and our sensory experience is a succession of contiguities. The basic units of the film, the shot and the scene, are composed along the same line of contiguity and combination, and the devices by which the one-damning-after-another of experience is rendered more dramatic and meaningful are

characteristically metonymic devices that operate along the same axis: the synecdochic close-up that represents the whole by the part, the slow-motion sequence that rewards without rupturing the natural tempo of successiveness, the high or low angle shot that ‘defamiliarizes,’ without departing from, the action it is focused on.⁴⁵

Lodge’s six major characteristics of the postmodern novel – contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, excess, and the short circuit – lend themselves to a practice of reading that seeks out a metonymic logic of connection, since the genre’s “devices suggest an art of rupture, whereby invention resides in contrast – even in contradiction.”⁴⁶

This assembly recalls feminism’s ongoing call to intersectionality, which Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson envision as “a patchwork of overlapping alliances” among identities of race, class, age, ability, gender, and sexuality. If, in Rita Felski’s terms, intersectional feminism is always a “reworking,” an essentially “purposeful and hopeful” project of improvement, its history brings much to bear on the recent disciplinary turn to the postcritical, which is rooted in feminist and queer theory and eudaimonic in its aims.⁴⁷ Against the “defensive narrative stiffness of a paranoid temporality,” Sedgwick writes that the lives that inspire reparative reading “slide up more intimately alongside one another than can any lives that are moving forward according to the regular schedule of the generations.”⁴⁸ Whereas “strong” theories seek to dominate the text, isolating its hidden meaning, “the desire of a reparative impulse, on the other hand, is additive and accretive,” though not infinitely so: “there’s nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them.”⁴⁹ The readerly construction of the connections between myriad fragmented surfaces, then, has the potential to build a limited plurality of meaning, countering the vision of postmodern fiction as mere ‘heap’ or ‘wall.’ Reparative reading is driven by hope, “often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience,” which allows the critic to “organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates.”⁵⁰

Sedgwick’s language demonstrates how feminism was and is uniquely positioned to interrogate binaries without synthesizing them or surrendering to disarray. She cheekily mines the binary imagery of coding and the slippage of linguistic signification to address how the seeming duality of gender is actually a spectrum of multiplicity: “Women and men are more like each other than chalk is like cheese, than ratiocination is like raisins, than up is like down, or than 1 is like 0.”⁵¹ The multiplying, fragmented surfaces of postmodern literature, which, like gender performance, both reproduce and resist the commodification of bodies and the eroticization of objects, permit that task of renovation. In fact, calls to approach literary study with a lighter touch stretch back over half a century, following the rise of the postmodern and second-wave feminist movements. In “Against Interpretation” (1964), Susan Sontag writes:

The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs ‘behind’ the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one. The most celebrated and influential modern doctrines, those of Marx and Freud, actually amount to elaborate systems of hermeneutics, aggressive and impious theories of interpretation... manifest content must be probed and pushed aside to find the true meaning – the latent content beneath.⁵²

As an alternative, Sontag proposes descriptive readings, “acts of criticism which would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art.”⁵³ In an era of

noise and information, Sontag insists, the work of the critic is to liberate, not to strangle: “The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*.”⁵⁴ Finally, and famously, Sontag interposes: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”⁵⁵ Adumbrating the turn from structuralism to poststructuralism, Roland Barthes, too, suggests a gentler and more tactile handling of text. In “The Death of the Author” (1967), Barthes holds that “the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced,” since literature’s value lies in its very “refus[al] to assign a ‘secret,’ an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text).”⁵⁶ In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), whose title echoes Sontag’s call to an erotics of reading, Barthes notes:

Text means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving.⁵⁷

Tracing these many sketches of touch, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus begin their 2009 introduction of the term ‘surface reading’ by suggesting not that we abandon such forms of ‘decoding’ as that we combine them with a consideration for all the various surfaces available to us as readers. Best and Marcus do not insist upon surface reading as the only position we might take; they write that “as much as our objects of study may conceal the structures that give rise to them, they also wear them on their sleeves.”⁵⁸ This is in part because of a shift towards demystification in culture itself: “In the last decade or so, we have been drawn to modes of reading that attend to the surfaces of texts rather than plumb their depths. Perhaps this is because, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, so much seems to be on the surface.”⁵⁹ Felski, too, concludes that the work of the critic is “a less muscular and macho affair than it is often made out to be, and that “we do not need to throw out interpretation but to revitalize and reimagine it.”⁶⁰ As several theorists since have taken pains to announce, and as many close readings in this book will demonstrate, the postcritical is not a rejection of symptomatic reading, but an invitation to expand the work of literary analysis; that is, to simply recall, enfold, and imagine other ways to read. In her examination of *Beloved*, entitled “Close But Not Deep,” Heather Love explores the combinatory possibilities of systems theory, distant reading, close reading, affect theory, reparative reading, and surface reading, concluding that “while reparative reading...is primarily an ethical category for Sedgwick, Best and Marcus’ surface reading represents an important attempt to develop a mode of reading that departs from a depth hermeneutics and is primarily descriptive in its orientation.”⁶¹ Since, from our current perspective, postmodernism is both overdetermined and undervalued, we limit our readings by equating its sheen and sparkle with irony, paranoia, and superficiality. Faceting, as a form of the postcritical, invites the reader to make sense of the text in a pleasurable act of construction.

Postmodern fictions posit multiple alternative or subjunctive narratives, structured along the complex intersections of their many surfaces. Lyotard’s descriptive account of postmodernism accurately depicts postmodernism’s disorienting aesthetics as more akin to the Kantian sublime than the beautiful, for the postmodern “artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*,” a combination of proleptic and analeptic movement that recalls Kristeva’s so-called “future perfect,” where “*Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the

future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).”⁶² Such uncertain possibilities are also escapes for the reader/critic from what Best and Marcus see as the Jamesonian binary between “strong” (ideologically resistant) and “weak” (ideologically complicit) critics, a choice that only reproduces the very gendered, binary axis of texture as well.⁶³ In faceting, the desiring reader and the fictional subject interface between, among, and through the aesthetic surfaces of fiction, in what Anne Cheng might call a “mutual pedagogy of erotics.” As Best and Marcus describe it, “the critic inhabits and is inhabited by what she studies, and embraces the loss of critical certainty and the gain in intimacy that result.”⁶⁴

For at its best, Felski reminds us, “reading is neither a matter of digging below resistant ground nor an equanimous tracing out of textual surfaces. Rather, it is a cocreation between actors that leaves neither party unchanged.”⁶⁵ In “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Leo Bersani considers George Bataille’s erotics of “self-shattering,” a term that aptly reflects the many fragmented subjects of postmodern literature, as well as the “shattering” of social norms that, in Shulamith Firestone’s estimation, second-wave feminism effected.⁶⁶ For Bersani, it is not the sexual act itself that generates troubling power relations, but the discourses of the self that enter into the framing of self and other in the continued binary of a (male-female) relationship. In this reproduction of power structures, “the self which the sexual shatters provides the basis on which sexuality is associated with power.”⁶⁷ Bersani here draws out not repression, but instead displacement, which he argues is “endemic to sexuality,” since “sexual desire initiates, indeed can be recognized by, an agitated fantasmatic activity in which original (but, from the start, unlocatable) objects of desire get lost in the images they generate.”⁶⁸ Repression and displacement, as it happens, correspond to metaphor and metonymy, and it is the relinquishment of the solid sense of self over to this metonymic proliferation that Bersani advocates:

Phallogentrism is exactly that: not primarily the denial of power to women (although it has obviously also led to that, everywhere and at all times), but above all the denial of the *value* of powerlessness in both men and women... a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self... when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes.⁶⁹

Allowing oneself to be swept away, or, in Felski’s terms, ‘enchanted,’ by a text, rather than seeking to dominate it completely, involves a certain humility. Just as Bersani’s proposed erotics evades the power struggle of one person ‘demeaning’ another, so I consider that faceting, rather than overpowering the text or overwhelming readerly agency, would actually structure a reading process with many more visible sites of meaning-making and connection. Exploring the reticulations of both accession and control that we experience as we read, I mark faceting as an alternative, feminist interpretive mode, where the thing examined is, like the erotic subject, neither precisely our imagination of it nor coterminous with our will to understand it.

Film criticism has much to offer such an erotics of reading, not least because visual and verbal fictions have so consistently informed one another in the postmodern period. I turn to Vivian Sobchack’s “Carnal Thoughts,” where the author follows Linda Williams’ impulse to consider the embodied (initially female) cinematic viewer in describing a “cinesthetic subject.”⁷⁰ As Sobchack notes, while film criticism has focused on the limitations of film’s sensory effects (as visual and auditory), Benjamin himself “speaks of cinematic

intelligibility in terms of ‘tactile appropriation’ and elsewhere he speaks to the viewer’s ‘mimetic faculty,’ a sensuous and bodily form of perception.”⁷¹ For Sobchack, “movies provoke in us the ‘carnal thoughts’ that ground and inform more conscious analysis,” meaning that “we need to alter the binary and bifurcated structures of the film experience suggested by previous formulations,” drawing the “lived body” into “chiasmatic” processes of perception.⁷² In a portrayal of sensation reminiscent of Irigaray’s multiplied ‘sex which is not one,’ Sobchack writes, “Perception is the flesh’s reversibility, the flesh touching, seeing, perceiving itself, one fold (provisionally) catching the other in its own self-embrace.”⁷³ As we watch, we experience a particular, sensory erotics of those surfaces we encounter: “I will reflexively turn toward my own carnal, sensual, and sensible being to touch myself touching, smell myself smelling, taste myself tasting, and in sum, sense my own sensuality.”⁷⁴

Faceting embraces, rather than disavows, the pleasures of interpretive and interconnective work, emphasizing the possibilities of juxtaposition and interrelation among the vast networks of surfaces so often deemed excessive in postmodern visual and literary culture. Scholar Laura U. Marks names “haptic visuality” as that which “requires the viewer to work to constitute the image, to bring it forth from latency” in *The Skin of the Film*, calling it “an intersubjective eroticism.”⁷⁵ Echoing the language of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ theory, Marks continues:

The ideal relationship between viewer and image in optical visuality tends to be one of mastery, in which the viewer isolates and comprehends the objects of vision. The ideal relationship between viewer and image in haptic visuality is one of mutuality, in which the viewer is more likely to lose herself in the image, to lose her sense of proportion.⁷⁶

In *The Tactile Eye*, too, Jennifer Barker notes the mutual erotics of the film, which occur, like Taylor’s meditations on ‘hiding,’ at the skin, a site of besideness: “While there is contact and intertwining, there is never a collapse or dissolution of the boundary between us.”⁷⁷ The encounter offers “a fleeting, incomplete kind of access to the other, which is pleasurable in its impermanence and incompleteness,” since skin’s “role at and as the surface of a body, as texture that both reveals and conceals, marks the fundamental affinity between the human skin and the film skin.”⁷⁸ It is from this place that we might begin to link the commodified surfaces of postmodernism, in all their rough and glossy adjacencies, with the material of the human body, a body that, in the texts I will examine, is constantly touching and tasting the world around it. The postmodern novel, rather than distancing itself from the material body, invites the reader into a visceral connection with phenomenological experience and, in the style of the confessional and the melodrama, also threatens to disturb its inside/outside divide with the eruption of tears, gas, vomit, and blood.

The anticipation and experience of these dazzling textual pleasures does not overrun the agency of the reader, but actually activates it. Texture is both proleptic and analeptic: we see a surface (in an image) or construct it (from words), and then remember and imagine how it might feel against our skin. These texts move sensuously through space and time, asking not only how sex becomes gender, but also how our engagement with and performance of binaries proliferates both beside and within those categories, superseding the limitations set upon us. As the surfaces of postmodernism lay bare their devices, coming up against each other in jagged edges, rather than eliding their production, so critics of feminism and

postmodernism have an obligation to ‘show our work.’ If we elide the effort and desire that inhere in the reading process, as Mary K. Holland writes in *Succeeding Postmodernism*, “without making transparent that struggle – the degree to which every act of reading, writing, even thinking and knowing is mediated and remediated, technologically or not – all that is disclosed is power, and the ability invisibly to express/wield it.”⁷⁹

In *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Shulamith Firestone holds that the deep, oppositional complementarity of the sex divide and its attendant power struggle may have been the source for dialectical thinking.⁸⁰ In Firestone’s Marxist-feminist reading, patriarchy is, like capitalism, “a latter-day stage prior to revolution,” with the inevitable synthetic conclusion being the erasure of gender: “more than a marriage, rather an abolition of the cultural categories themselves, a mutual cancellation – a matter-antimatter explosion, ending with a poof!”⁸¹ Firestone usefully dismantles Freudian logic, calling it “the perfect foil for feminism, because, though it struck the same nerve... it never questioned the given reality,” and describing how it was “subverted for a reactionary end – the socialization of men and women to an artificial sex-role system... it flourished at the expense of feminism, to the extent that it acted as a container of its shattering force.”⁸² Women do not experience so-called ‘penis envy,’ Firestone points out; there is a much more understandable “feminist translation: children fantasy being in a position of power over their parent masters, particularly the one who has really got the power: father.”⁸³ Following de Beauvoir’s “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” Firestone labels the process of becoming “by persuasion, artificially, rather than by necessity.”⁸⁴

In *The Feminism of Uncertainty*, Ann Snitow offers a distillation of the tensions within feminism and an insistence on celebrating the proliferating fissures within its discourses. Snitow hopes this vision of feminism “can endure yet be flexible enough to turn and turn about, through the shape-shifting of history, while remaining linked to my early utopian feminist desires, desires which linger even when they seem far to seek.”⁸⁵ Like so many other feminists, Snitow affirms that feminism’s very strength is that it is a “polyglot undertaking.”⁸⁶ Contra Firestone, for Snitow, it is a mistake to see this as a dualistic tension ending, as many Marxist-feminists have predicted, in synthetic resolution. Snitow writes: “No current utopian dream of synthesis (my usual temptation) can collapse what I see as a creative and uneven proliferation of feminist actions and theoretical speculations.”⁸⁷ This is because feminism not only exhibits, but *requires*, an internal contradiction in order to articulate its aims, “between the need to build the identity ‘woman’ and give it solid political meaning and the need to tear down the category ‘woman’ and dismantle its all-too-solid history.”⁸⁸ At times, reading postmodern fictions, the language I find available for close reading feels outdated, even essentialist in its interrogation of the binary. And yet the feminism of these texts already anticipates a proliferation of gender beside and within the binary, an imagination of across and among, rather than a retreat into or a complete erasure of its dualism. Instead of seeking a resolution, a “dream of peace among feminists,” Snitow encourages us to recognize that the ongoing internecine conflict in feminism, “far from being our enemy, is a dynamic force that links very different women” together, and “the electricity of its internal disagreements is part of feminism’s continuing power to shock and involve large numbers of people in a public conversation far beyond the movement itself.”⁸⁹

Like Firestone’s formation of the “dialectic of sex,” Laura Mulvey’s image of “the male gaze” was for years a pervasive phrase in feminist cinematic critique. Linda Williams

offers a counter to this binary in the introduction to *Viewing Positions*, where she argues that what Miriam Hansen calls the “outmodedness” of the male gaze has returned in a kind of “postmodern pastiche”; we might put on and take off of the male gaze as “one among many possible costumes, or roles to be taken on.”⁹⁰ Of Hansen’s work, Williams writes, “The political task of such critique is thus to make connections between isolated fragments of experience – across segregated domains of work and leisure, fiction and fact, and past and present,” reworking the Benjaminian idea that “cinema and mass culture can be catalysts for new forms of community.”⁹¹ Writing in the 1990s, Hansen argues that the aesthetics of “the glance” continue to replace the aesthetics of “the gaze,” and thus a shift in perspective from “what is still to some extent modernist film aesthetics” to an acknowledgement of the postmodern is necessary, even though it “may happen on the terrain of late-capitalist consumption.”⁹² Indeed, as Taylor’s *Hiding* illuminates, “for the pop artist, ornament is not a crime but is the very ‘essence’ of art. The signs that intrigue pop artists are drawn from the very commercial culture that conceptualists and body artists criticize.”⁹³

To examine the affordances of this idea, I want to glance briefly at two popular films of the 1950s that showcase the extravagance and variety of gendered constructions of narrative, readership, and self: Howard Hawks’ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) and Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959).⁹⁴ Sontag’s codification of camp as an aesthetic of “the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration,” of “how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture,” finds its expression here in the figures of both Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe.⁹⁵ Despite the (at times cloyingly) conventional imagery of the film, Lorelai and Dorothy are presented as unlikely best friends, whose exaggerated, opposing personalities and screwball comedy routines make them an odd couple in and of themselves, a sendup not just of heterosexual, but of homosocial, bonds. Lorelai’s absurd overperformance of femininity includes not just Monroe’s peekaboo eyes and baby voice, but the literal objectification of rich old men, transformed into diamond-headed eversions of the male gaze. This reification is turned back upon femininity, however, when Lorelai appears onstage as the centerpiece in a chandelier of human gems in her performance of “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend.” On the flip side, the film exploits Jane Russell’s height, alto voice, and angular features in a poolside performance of “Ain’t There Anyone Here for Love.” As she swaggers around the water’s edge, pushing the thrusting and contorted bodies of scantily clad men into the water, Dorothy drapes one fellow over her lap in a shot that is at once an erotic pietà and a reversal of the penetrating masculine desire of Alfred Eisenstaedt’s famous photograph, “V-J Day in Times Square.” The status of both actresses as stage performers within the diegetic narrative reinforces Felski’s contention that, “rather than latecomers to postmodern culture, [women] are its quintessential representatives, primed for the society of the spectacle by their long-standing familiarity with performance and masquerade.”⁹⁶ Neither Lorelai nor Dorothy belongs to normative femininity; instead, they inhabit the spectrum of “corny flamboyant female-ness” and “exaggerated he-man-ness” of camp, which is to say, not the cancellation of gender, but its proliferation and exaggeration.⁹⁷ The end of the film stages their double-wedding, with a lingering shot of the two brides walking down the aisle and gazing into each other’s eyes – two girls who, in another double negative, “couldn’t be less alike,” queering the notion of female partnership.



For Lauren Berlant, ‘performativity’ often means variations within convention, rather than “dramas of potentially frame-breaking alterity.”⁹⁸ Recalling feminism’s tension between ‘woman’ as an empowering and limiting category, Berlant muses on the way in which gender proliferates, not just outside of sexual norms, but within and among them:

To call an identity like a sexual identity a genre is to think about it as something repeated, detailed, and stretched while retaining its intelligibility, its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations. For femininity to be a genre like an aesthetic one means that it is a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances.⁹⁹

Pursuant to this claim, Felski reminds us that feminism has both suffered and flourished under capitalism, so that “feminists have often been less hasty than Marxists to condemn all aspects of capitalism, arguing that the experience of urban culture and consumerism allowed women to experience new forms of freedom and pleasure denied them by patriarchal constraints.”¹⁰⁰ Thus the double-bind of capitalism unfolds into multiple forms of engagement with its strictures, so that for Berlant, “to love conventionality is not only to love something that constrains someone or some condition of possibility: it is another way of talking about negotiating belonging to a world,” and “to love a thing is not only to embrace its most banal iconic forms, but to work those forms so that individuals and populations can breathe and thrive in them or in proximity to them.”¹⁰¹ Women, then, are situated not only as postmodern consumers, but artists, transforming the inside/outside and surface/depth dualisms that critical formulations of postmodernism so often conjure. The “imagined communities” of Berlant’s proposal come to fruition in the texts of popular culture, sites imbued with nostalgia and emotion, upon which large numbers of women alight and interact. This matters because in Hansen’s argument, if we fail to evaluate films on their aesthetic terms, we are

missing out on the more systematic parameters of subjectivity that set off the viewer’s memory... [in] the context of electronic and global postmodernity... the likelihood that the viewer in the third row, like the one behind her, may usually watch soap operas... the fact that the viewer belongs to the social group of women – differentiated according to class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and generation – which renders her relation to the film shown, probably one version or another of classical cinema, problematic in particular ways.¹⁰²

Turning to Douglas Sirk’s 1959 melodrama *Imitation of Life*, I want to examine its

mesmerizing opening credit sequence, which begins with the high, sweet introductory notes of the eponymous song, ballasted by low, ominous percussives as shining, transparent objects begin to float into our view. At first they look like bubbles, but at their iridescent edges, brilliantly cut facets become visible. They take on weight and heft as we perceive them to be large, dimensionally cut diamonds.

*What is love, without the giving?
Without love you're only living
An imitation, an imitation of life.*

As the song approaches the minute mark, one of these baubles bounces off the bottom of the screen and back up into the black space of the still-falling jewels. Others follow, jangling and stacking at the base of the screen. Despite the satisfying, mosaic-like tightness with which the jewels pack into the frame, they bounce lightly and glitter at their prismatic edges as they fall. Their buoyancy, and the almost tactile sense of their weightless settling, effect a phenomenological reversal; these are not diamonds at all, not crystals or glass beads either, but large and light cuts of plastic, that moldable material of the 1950s.



*Skies above in flaming color,
without love, they're so much duller,
A false creation, an imitation, of life.*

*Would the sound of the lark sound just as sweet?
Would the moon be as bright above?
Every day would be gray and incomplete
Without the one you love.*

Though the lyrics seize on the symbolic iconography of nature, they turn it in the service of phenomenology, suggesting that it is interior existence that imbues the external world of nature with its flaming colors and its sweetness. Reading, then, is a charged act, one that colors our vision of the world. It is the gray, emotionless life that is the imitation, while the one saturated by one's experience is in some sense more authentic than the original it enhances. In the final ten seconds of the credits, the jewels fill the screen and become quiet, gleaming in their stillness, taking on an almost cellular structure, a wall of transparent, glittering edges and seams. What once was empty space between and above the jewels is replaced by the blank, open faces at each jewel's center; through their juxtaposition, inviting our meditation on the closed spaces between them as well as the open spaces within them.

*Lips that kiss can tell you clearly:
Without this our lives are merely,
An imitation, an imitation, of life.*

The song's final lines offer up a truth claim – like the stacking jewels, each of which is faceted, each of which forms a piece of the dazzling, textured illusion of the wall of 'diamonds,' the synecdochic 'lips that kiss' are also the speaking part of the body, the place at which the spaces between those bodies nearly close, and the seams (mouth, vulva) at which a body might be both surface and depth at once. Through its four central characters, their genders inflected by age, race, and class, *Imitation of Life* offers its viewers an emotional extension beside themselves, Berlant suggests. The film “develops a notion of prosthetic subjectivity and prosthetic bodies as vehicles for self-generalization,” for “to identify with someone in mass society is not necessarily to want to be them or to have them, but to be freed from being who you are, with all of its burdensome historical determinations.”¹⁰³ The metonymic extension of meaning and community occurs onscreen as well, as Lora's progress – again, as an actress – from face above the Coney Island sign to disembodied cinematic face to absent face marks the arc of her fame, where “women in the audience mime her look so that projection of her visual image is no longer necessary to transmit to us her dominion in the national/capitalist space of fantasy consumption.”¹⁰⁴

What could be more impenetrable, more meaningless, more reflective of the postmodern aesthetic 'heap' than a stack of transparent plastic jewels toppling over one another against a blank background? If the turn from modernism to postmodernism is partly a shift in the way matter *matters*, then the way that such transitional texts of postmodernism, such as these Hollywood films, investigate detail and texture is one sign of that shift. I am concerned here with the essential 'seaminess' of the texts I have selected – the spaces where, contrary to the smoothness and suture associated with the Hollywood cinema of the era, their excessive, repetitive descriptions are visibly stitched together. As Mark C. Taylor puts it, “the postmodern world of images translates the modernist project of dematerialization from the world of art into sociocultural processes. In this way, the culture of simulacra becomes the ironic realization of the avant-garde's dream of bringing art to life.”¹⁰⁵ In the erasure of aura, postmodern pastiche marks a different realism. As Christina Britzolakis describes, Walter Benjamin's use of the metaphor of prostitution to describe the loss of artistic aura is one in which “the prostitute... deprives *femininity* of its aura, its religious and cultic presence; the woman's body becomes a commodity, made up of dead and petrified fragments.”¹⁰⁶ The aura's erasure, however, merely reveals that it was itself a veil for what was already a commodification of human beings. Benjamin's metaphor idealizes aura, but it demonstrates the necessity of its own destruction; if the aura objectifies the female body, it also reveals the way in which aura itself operates as reification, as a veiling of material and aesthetic truth. As Benjamin's metaphor of prostitution suggests, symptomatic readings, in their impulse to 'draw out,' can reproduce the very discourses of power they seek to evade.

More recently, in a critique of the postcritical turn, Charles Sumner reads aesthetic and erotic experience together as repression, rather than displacement, where, as the “achievement of libidinal satisfaction via engagement with an artwork or similar cultural production,” aesthetics in capitalism are but a “cycle of instinctual repression, aggression, and guilt, followed by consumption and a lessening of guilt.”¹⁰⁷ Sumner refers to this as a

“seductive swindle” and asks, “Why run headlong into the arms of a man whose avowed purpose is to make degradation seem alluring?”¹⁰⁸ Again, the sexualization of aesthetics here puts the gendered reader in the position of battling for power against the text.¹⁰⁹ This is what Sedgwick intends in naming the trap of “an explanatory structure that a reader may see as tautological, in that it can’t help or can’t stop or can’t do anything other than prove the same assumptions with which it began.”¹¹⁰ Exploring new critical approaches such as surface reading and thing theory, Sumner finds that “in their efforts to move beyond or relinquish psychoanalytic and Marxist approaches to literary and cultural studies, they inadvertently demonstrate a continuing and urgent need for these very approaches” and “surface reading often loses sight of the surfaces it seeks to valorize because, like thing theory, it too is insistently un-dialectical.”¹¹¹ Sumner’s process here is an elegant encapsulation of Felski’s claim that critique often “shades into tireless tautology, rediscovering the truth of its bleak prognoses over and over again.”¹¹² This encourages the same strong-versus-weak, male-versus-female binary between readers, ignoring the possibility of the more mutual erotics Bersani proposes. The critic must instead be open, receptive, descriptive, and creative in her interpretations of text, for “to nail one’s colors to the mast of a series of theses about language and power,” Felski observes, “is to know ahead of time what one is going to find.”¹¹³

If critics engage postmodern texts by bending their details to suit a preordained set of principles, rather than arranging the facets of the text as they actually unfold in the reading experience, they give the texts – and themselves – short shrift. “Zooming in to scrutinize the many-sided and multiply determined act of reading,” Felski holds, we find that it is “a two-way transaction,” where “texts pass through densely woven filters of interpretation and affective orientation that both enable and limit their impact.”¹¹⁴ As Hutcheon’s model holds up the pastiche of historiographic metafiction as revisionist narrative, so Felski embraces the readerly process of interpretation across time, locating “interconnections [that] are temporal as well as spatial; woven out of threads crisscrossing through time, they connect us to what comes before, enmeshing us in extended webs of obligation and influence.”¹¹⁵ Unlike the account of history given by postmodernism’s detractors, in the postcritical, “time is not a tidy sequence of partitioned units but a profusion of whirlpools and rapids, eddies and flows, as objects, ideas, images, and texts from different moments swirl, tumble, and collide in ever-changing combinations and constellations.”¹¹⁶ This change in perspective entails a change in the practice of reading, too, which becomes, in Felski’s account, “a matter of attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling – of forging links between things that were previously unconnected.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, it is just this position of openness, uncertainty, and recombination that Best and Marcus advocate – rendering art an experience in “landscapes neither utopian nor dystopian,” and the critic “not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles.”¹¹⁸ Though there are times in the following chapters when I point to two things that make or suggest a third, I want to emphasize that faceting is not merely a ‘third way’ or a synthesis between dialectical opposites. The distinction in faceting is that the reader seeks contiguity and structured multiplicity, between and among, rather than simply beyond, the binaries that form metonymic parts from the information of a given text. Sometimes this leads to three meanings, sometimes many more; as Nabokov writes of Ada’s word games, there might be a “doubling, tripling, and even nonupling” of connections.¹¹⁹ Faceting aims to rethink our structures of meaning as *more than two*, not through synthesis, which Jameson himself acknowledges as a seeming impossibility in the postmodern text, but through structured

multiplicity.

The features I examine in postmodern fictions are not always unique to the era or the movement, but they are arrayed uniquely. There are also texts which predate the ones in this volume and which are not only postmodern, but readily available to the readerly work of faceting. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), for instance, the narrator's fragmented self and multiple personas engage a radical, distinctly postmodern disruption of binary thinking, where a vacuous yet capacious sense of voice and self begs a readership that would stitch together meaning along the jagged seams of the novel's many pieces. Ellison's treatment of the 'invisible' intersections of race and gender also demonstrates how faceting works 'visually' in literature on both a micro level (texture and gloss in close reading) and a macro level (structural narrative pattern). As the publication dates of my core literary texts suggest – *The Bell Jar* (1963), *A Single Man* (1964), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Ada, or Ardor* (1969), and *The Woman Warrior* (1976), I am examining a rather narrow timespan that marks the crystallization of the postmodern aesthetic alongside the thunderous emergence of second wave feminism. I present these readings under the impression that, once established, faceting should map clearly onto the high postmodernist novels of the later decades of the twentieth century. In this later period, postmodernism reaches an absolute apex, at which point it becomes sheer transparency, so that, to recall Avrum Stroll's formulation, there is no way to read by looking 'behind' or 'beyond' surfaces – there is only a looking 'through' and 'among.' I spend some time at the end of the fifth chapter examining Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997), but one could as easily consider the work of Gayl Jones, Don DeLillo, Kathy Acker, David Foster Wallace, Edmund White, Fran Ross, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jeffrey Eugenides, to name a few.

The first two chapters consider Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* (1964) as early instantiations of literary postmodernism, where, through *alternation*, a series of seeming dualities centering upon the gendered body build towards a multiplicity of meaning. Both novels are *roman à clefs* – imitations not just of life, but of the particular sexed and gendered lives of their authors. In "Autobiography as De-facement," Paul de Man relates Genette's interest in the tension between metonymy and metaphor to the difficult enmeshment of the fictive and the real in autobiography: "The distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity... it is undecidable," and "to remain... *within* that undecidable situation... is certainly most uncomfortable... since this whirligig is capable of infinite acceleration and is, in fact, not successive but simultaneous."¹²⁰ It is precisely this undecidability that animates Isherwood's and Plath's novels. If we have long read *The Bell Jar* and *A Single Man* through the predominant critical lenses of biography and psychoanalysis, examining their 'symptoms' of 'madness' and 'queerness,' we have discovered some things and ignored others, collapsing, for instance, the structured, multiplicatory aesthetic qualities that come with each novel's engagement of binaries, and of both metaphor and metonymy as figurative modes. As transitional texts of postmodernism, Plath and Isherwood signal an artistic movement away from 'hidden meaning,' as they investigate detail and texture and construct episodic narratives visibly stitched together at the seams.

In Chapter 1, I argue that Plath's anachronous deployment of kennings and other compound words disrupts the distinction between metaphor and metonymy, as well as their concomitant interpretive modes. Attending to Plath's inventive use of figuration opens the

reader to an extensive network of ‘pairs which are not two,’ countering the binary aesthetic and working as feminist epistemology, a way of knowing that is both metaphoric (substitutive) and metonymic (constitutive) of the novel’s diegetic world. Here, a metonymic reading of some of the novel’s talismanic objects, both organic and artificial, such as Esther’s blood and her patent-leather shoes, offers a means of overcoming seeming dualities and constructing limited pluralities in their place. In Plath’s confessional narrative, the will to expose a wound alternates between the melodramatic spillage that makes the interior exterior and the gaucheness of making the exterior interior. The novel’s pairs, which are not two, become a means of resisting the objectification imposed upon the female body from the outside.

In Chapter 2, I address how *A Single Man* compounds, and thereby disrupts, the skeptical divisions between the material life of the body and the collective transcendence of the mind, locating gender and sexuality as the site of that undoing. Isherwood persistently allies the symbolic with the experience of the sensory world upon which it is based, posing language itself as the bridge between surface and symbol and forming larger, conglomerative associations across the novel that point away from such binaries altogether. The *cogito* of the opening sections invites the reader into the sensations of the body beside the construction of gender. Like the objects he sees and aestheticizes, adding dimension to all that appears flat or stagnant, George himself is a sort of wallflower, a gay man ‘passing’ by virtue of his flat, ‘straight’ surface, despite the tangible availability of his ‘true color’ (emphatically violet in the symbolic order of the novel). *A Single Man* elucidates the quagmire of queer life under capitalism, a system which both provides the material conditions for alternatives to the heterosexual family unit at the same time that it operates under the ideological condemnation of those possibilities. George’s uneasy experience of the phenomenology of modern capitalism, which alternates between containment and transcendence, builds beside and among these dualities, even as it insists upon their presence as part of the structural integrity of lived experience.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I turn to the concept of *eversion* in two texts more squarely in the embrace of the postmodern: Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Ada, or Ardor* (1969). Both are political novels, I argue, which turn capitalism’s ideological assumptions inside out, engage questions of alternative political possibilities, and yet recognize and exploit capitalism’s affordances for pleasure and for change. The high postmodernism of the sixties neither fully eschews binaries nor engages in limitless excess, as has often been claimed, but rather adds modernism’s dialectical structures together until they form limited, but multiple, configurations of meaning. *Lot 49* and *Ada* explicitly engage the potent, if uncertain, political climate of the decade, specifically by modeling reading and writing as sites of personal, and in particular, gendered, politics and paranoia. If Oedipa is “executrix” of Pierce’s will, then Ada is “editrix” of Van’s manuscript. Both novels use eversion as a mode of figuration, presenting an either/or, inside/out relationship between alternatives, a seeming binary that actually builds, through faceting, towards a limited multiplicity of meaning. Both use the incest trope to confront the way in which patriarchal familial structures represent a world of linguistic production in which men are the writers (of wills, of memoirs) and women are the readers (of clues, of manuscripts). And yet, I contend, both seek to divest those binary structures of their symbolic and categorizing power. The eversion of dualisms renders binaries little more than the spaces from which multiplicity might be built. Though bound in some way to perform a version of reproductive, rather than

productive, labor, Ada is barren and Oedipa childless. Everting patriarchal mythology, Pynchon and Nabokov demonstrate how easily such Freudian codes can be switched: Oedipus can be Oedipa, Van can be Ada. The texts imagine these reversals and their potential to multiply through the figure of the ‘difficult woman’ at the center of each text, a woman whose labors birth not a child, but a new history of America.

Chapter 3 explores *The Crying of Lot 49*, not just as a text that encourages a paranoid reading, but whose fragmented pieces offer a way of reading against, or at least beside, that assimilationist either/or logic. Taking up *Lot 49*’s baroque, fragmented iterations of doubled objects and referents, I argue for the world-making possibilities of that very excess. A product of her 1950s education, Oedipa evinces a highly paranoid mode of close reading, in which everything must *either* be assimilated to a system of belief *or* the opposite must be true. Oedipa rattles over and again through a number of binary interpretations before postulating, “Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of true paranoia, or a real Tristero.”¹²¹ At the same time, she recognizes herself as “a rare creature indeed, unfit perhaps for marches and sit-ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts.”¹²² In this sense, Oedipa models and even encourages paranoid reading, since, in Sedgwick’s words, “paranoia seems to require being imitated to be understood.”¹²³ Faceting, however, yields larger aesthetic patterns across the text that counteract, rather than reinforce, the supposedly dominant paradigm of paranoia. Through puns and periods, *Lot 49* multiplies perceived dualities of language and gender beyond recognition through a metonymic chain of subjunctive possibilities, putting us in touch with the multiple surfaces of a world turned ‘inside out.’¹²⁴

In Chapter 4, I trace the implications of narrative eversion in *Ada, or Ardor*. Through a proliferation of synonyms (as differentiated repetition) and antonyms (words like ‘husk,’ which mean both one thing and its opposite), *Ada* registers the false dualisms of Cold War ideology, dismantling any legible polarity of binaries through the imminent reversibility of objects, genders, and paradigms. *Ada*’s speculative realism borrows from science fiction, constantly adding to the parts of a world that is similar to, but distinct from, our own. Pointing to the ‘symptoms’ of Cold War anxiety in *Ada*, I treat its aesthetic complexities as fictional escapes from the ideological paradigm of paranoia itself. With its uncomfortable treading of the tenuous boundaries between surface and depth, eversion frames *Ada*, whose name means ‘ornament’ or ‘decoration,’ as both a manifestation of feminine aesthetic perfection, but also an agentic eversion of femininity’s supposed frailty, sensitivity, and fecundity. Like Oedipa, *Ada* proves a ‘difficult’ woman, inhabiting – and imaginatively escaping – a paranoid textual world constantly refigured by images of invagination.

In the final two chapters, I consider *projection*, with its implications of ‘suggestion,’ ‘prophecy,’ and ‘screening,’ across three postmodern novels, as well as in the resurgence of the postmodern aesthetic in serial television of the twenty-first century. I offer the juxtaposition of these texts as a way of looking back, but also forward, a suggestion of how faceting might be read across the later texts of the postmodern period and into the contemporary moment. In Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), as well as Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997), history is open to revisionist narrative, and time becomes a space of subjunctive play. The serial television show *Mad Men* (2007-2015) performs a similar, metafictional projection into the past, chronicling feminism’s interaction with consumerist advertising and rewriting women’s history as fiction. As all of these texts demonstrate,

postmodern time is in the round: the time of the talk-story, the almanac, the map, and the slide carousel deposes linear constraints. To ‘project a world,’ then, is not only to look into the future, but back in time as well, finding a way to reclaim and reassemble its untold stories.

Chapter 5 considers projections into the past and future in *The Woman Warrior*, where Kingston jarringly moves through time, creating imaginative narrative possibilities for herself, her family members, mythical characters, and historical figures in order to supersede the many sets of binaries that have structured her life. Kingston’s unsettled sense of history underscores the blank spaces of the past and articulates them not only as sites of loss, but of possibility. What Kingston assembles from the broken pieces of narrative she has inherited is a visibly textured, conglomerate whole. Two decades later, *Almanac of the Dead* and *Mason & Dixon* continue this project of subjunctive history, mapping the disruption of cultural and geographical boundaries and revising a national past through historical projection. All three texts insistently rearrange the formal tropes of the postmodern novel, asking the reader to assemble its disparate parts in demanding and unpredictable formations. If, as Toni Morrison writes, these prophecies “look back, behind themselves, post, after, what has gone on before,” the postmodern aesthetic is not so much ‘ahistorical,’ but multidirectional in its profound disruption of historical narrative.¹²⁵

The epilogue addresses the persistence of the postmodern aesthetic – and the value of faceting as a mode of readership – across the ninety-two episodes of the serial television show *Mad Men*. The recent ‘golden age of television,’ so named even as it was happening, implies a nostalgic attitude, reviving the postmodern aesthetic and its interest in episodic narrative structure. Yet if *Mad Men* cycles back to the 1960s to prophesy the changes to come in women’s history, in the fashion of historiographic metafiction, it also critiques and attends to the continued presence of sexism in the twenty-first century, a ‘postnostalgia’ that engages the sixties not only through their surfaces, but their attendant political fantasies as well. The projection of static, receptive, feminized, and photographic surfaces in *Mad Men* calls attention to the status of television and its advertising as melodrama, cycling back to the start of the postmodern period to explore women’s history as a fiction rich in possibility and ripe for revision.

“How can one be a feminist,” Ann Snitow asks, “when one has learned about the movement’s past and present gross over-simplifications, about all the blinkered feminist moments – of racism, of positivism, of collusion with neoliberalism and neocolonialism?”¹²⁶ We must accept, with some humility, the impossibility of “a monolithic, coherent model,” since feminism itself asks us to “becom[e] so sophisticated about the patchwork of all consciousness.”¹²⁷ Although even feminism’s most practical objectives can feel like “distant utopian wishes,” Snitow reminds us that “feminism has the power to create new cultures where people can live – partially, precariously, for a time,” and that “feminism has great longevity, but only if it is a continuous shape-changer, capable of responding to new conditions and expectations.”¹²⁸ This willingness to abide in uncertainty represents an alternative not only to the symbolic binary and the endless rhizome, but to the synthetic resolution of the ‘third way’ as well. Uncertainty is more the insistence upon continuing efforts of assemblage than it is a practice of “anything goes,” for “it puts extra stress on the need to define – in each situation – what one is doing.”¹²⁹

To situate, to arrange, to assemble – this is the work of faceting, which is proliferative but constructive, self-editing but not self-cancelling. Feminism and postmodernism, after all,

are terms that have been cast in myriad positions over time and are in need of constant revision themselves. Feminists have been called, at turns, radical and reactionary, shocking and dour, but our labors, whatever shape they take, are yet unfinished. For Snitow, feminism's "stigma is exactly [the] point of entry, [the] starting place for provocation."¹³⁰ As for postmodernism, rather than a cynical, detached position defined solely by whiteness or masculinity, it has been integrally shaped by feminism and identity work, and it has left its own ambitious vision on the world.¹³¹ The work of feminism – and of faceting – is not resolution, but renovation, for "utopia is as much a site of agonistic forces as any.... One needs to improvise. Then one needs to confront.... Then one imagines again."¹³²

NOTES:

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- ¹ Eleanor Wachtel, "A.S. Byatt," in *Writers & Company* (Toronto: Knopf, 1993) 88.
- ² Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) 3.
- ³ Ibid. 18.
- ⁴ Ibid. 15.
- ⁵ Ibid. 16.
- ⁶ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 157.
- ⁷ Ibid. 72.
- ⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *One Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, edited by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 7.
- ⁹ Ibid. 5. Deleuze and Guattari recognize contemporary American literature as particularly apt for rhizomatic critique, since it "already... know[s] how to move between things, establish a logic of the *and*, overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings" ii.
- ¹⁰ Brian Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari, xv.
- ¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari 4.
- ¹² Somer Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(T)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism* (New York: NYU Press, 1992) 21, ix.
- ¹³ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 69.
- ¹⁴ Jameson 25, 37.
- ¹⁵ Hutcheon 59.
- ¹⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 81.
- ¹⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 125.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. 8.
- ¹⁹ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015) 131.
- ²⁰ Hutcheon 71, 66.
- ²¹ Ibid. x.
- ²² Ibid. xii, x.
- ²³ Ibid. 5.
- ²⁴ Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 2.
- ²⁵ Renu Bora, "Outing Texture," in *Novel Gazing*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997) 104, 106. Bora distinguishes between "texture" as "the surface resonance or quality of an object or material... that can usually be anticipated by looking" and "texxture," which refers "not really to surface or even depth," but "an intimately pragmatic, medium, inner level... of the stuff of material structure" (99). While he relates texxture to Sartre's concept of the shaping of "the flesh of objects" through touch (their impressibility), texture, on the other hand, can constitute a manufactured fabric, a handmade good, or the fractals of organic flora and fauna.
- ²⁶ Pansy Duncan, "Taking the Smooth with the Rough: Texture, Emotion, and the Other Postmodernism," *PMLA* 129, no. 2 (2014) 205.
- ²⁷ Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) 13.
- ²⁸ Duncan 208.
- ²⁹ Ibid. 206.
- ³⁰ Sedgwick 15.
- ³¹ Ibid. 8.
- ³² Mark C. Taylor, *Hiding* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998) 188.
- ³³ Ibid. 105.
- ³⁴ Stroll, Avrum. *Surfaces* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 11.
- ³⁵ Ibid. 16-17.
- ³⁶ Ibid. 12.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Mathias Kiss, *Sans 90 Degrés*, 2008 and *Froissé Mirror*, 2012. Creased mirror. www.mathiaskiss.com.

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- ³⁹ Sadeq Rahimi, "The Unconscious: Metaphor and Metonymy," *Somatosphere* 2 (2009) 2.
- ⁴⁰ Lodge, David. *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 290, 298.
- ⁴¹ Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) 90-1.
- ⁴² Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, transl. Michael Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 179.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.* 130-1.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 150.
- ⁴⁵ Lodge 104-5.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 250.
- ⁴⁷ Felski, *Doing Time* 22.
- ⁴⁸ Sedgwick 149.
- ⁴⁹ Sedgwick 149, 8. See also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Sedgwick "invoke[s] a Deleuzian interest in planar relations, the irreducibly spatial positionality of beside" as a potential structural alternative to 'behind' and 'beyond' (8). In theorizing gender, too, Judith Butler looks to "an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure" (22). If, for Butler, "gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time," Sedgwick departs from Butler in emphasizing the vitality of space, not just time, to gender performance (22). As Sedgwick highlights, Butler's persistent use of "reveal," "denaturalize," and "expose" signifies a "loss of dimension," reducing gender into "simplification and reification" (9).
- ⁵⁰ Sedgwick 146.
- ⁵¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) 7.
- ⁵² Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001) 6.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.* 13.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 14.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music Text*, transl. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 147.
- ⁵⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, transl. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 64.
- ⁵⁸ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations*, Vol. 108, No. 1 (Fall 2009) 18. Best and Marcus suggest three extant and three potential approaches to surface reading: 1. "Surface as materiality" (what Elaine Scarry calls "the surfaces on which the images will get made"); 2. "The intricate verbal structure of literary language" (with origins in New Critical and New Formalist close readings); 3. The "embrace of the surface as an affective and ethical stance" (following the "acceptance" of texts as modeled by Sontag, Sedgwick, and Gallup); 4. "Attention to surface as a practice of critical description"; 5. "Surface as the location of patterns that exist within and across texts"; 6. "Surface as literal meaning."
- ⁵⁹ Best and Marcus 1-2.
- ⁶⁰ Felski *The Limits of Critique* 10.
- ⁶¹ Heather Love, "Close But Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010) 382.
- ⁶² Lyotard 81.
- ⁶³ Best and Marcus 5.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 5.
- ⁶⁵ Felski *The Limits of Critique* 84.
- ⁶⁶ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987) 218 and Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970) 64.
- ⁶⁷ Bersani 218.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 221.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 217.
- ⁷⁰ Vivian Sobchack, "Carnal Thoughts," in Linda Williams, ed., *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994) 84.

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- 71 Ibid. 55.
- 72 Ibid. 60.
- 73 Ibid. 66.
- 74 Ibid. 77.
- 75 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000) 183.
- 76 Ibid. 184.
- 77 Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) 30.
- 78 Ibid.
- 79 Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) 201.
- 80 Firestone 4.
- 81 Ibid. 163, 174.
- 82 Ibid. 64.
- 83 Ibid. 50
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Ann Snitow, *The Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. 2.
- 86 Ibid. 7.
- 87 Ibid. 12. In an echo of Hutcheon's assertion that critique must come from both the inside and the outside, Snitow pinpoints that the proliferation happens not just *across* the divide in feminism, but *among* the supposed adherents of each half: "Nor will a model that goes like this work: *thesis* (essentialism, cultural feminism), *antithesis* (post-structuralism, deconstruction, Laconian psychoanalysis), *synthesis* (some stable amalgam of women's solidarity that includes radical doubts about the formation, cohesion, and potential power of the group). Instead, the divide keeps forming *inside* each of these categories" (30).
- 88 Ibid. 21. Following Catherine Stimpson: "The minimizers are feminists who want to undermine the category 'woman,' to minimize the meaning of sex difference... The maximizers want to keep the category (or feel they can't do otherwise), but they want to change its meaning, to reclaim and elaborate the social being 'woman,' and to empower her" (27). See also Catherine R. Stimpson, "The New Scholarship about Women: The State of the Art," *Annals of Scholarship* 1, no. 2 (1980) 2-14.
- 89 Ibid. 45.
- 90 Williams 3.
- 91 Ibid. 13.
- 92 Hansen in Williams 145, 156.
- 93 Taylor 113.
- 94 Howard Hawks, dir., *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 1953) and Douglas Sirk, dir. and Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (Hollywood: Universal Pictures, 1959).
- 95 Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001) 275, 289.
- 96 Felski, *Doing Time* 27.
- 97 Sontag 279.
- 98 Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) 4.
- 99 Ibid. 4.
- 100 Felski, *Doing Time* 203-4.
- 101 Berlant 3.
- 102 Hansen in Williams 146.
- 103 Berlant 29.
- 104 Ibid. 133.
- 105 Taylor 127.
- 106 Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (London: Clarendon Press, 1999) 152-3.
- 107 Charles Sumner, "The Turn Away from Marxism, or Why We Read the Way We Read Now," *Diacritics* 40, no. 3 (2012) 29.
- 108 Sumner 37.

¹⁰⁹ The same gendered critique echoes in James Wood's assessment of later postmodern novels, as in his coinage of the term "hysterical realism" in a 2001 review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* to describe the "glamorous congestion" of this "overworked" subgenre. See James Wood, "Human, All Too Inhuman" (July 24, 2000) and "Tell me how does it feel?" (October 5, 2001), both in *The Guardian*.

¹¹⁰ Sedgwick 135.

¹¹¹ Sumner 27, 28.

¹¹² Felski, *The Limits of Critique* 35.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 79.

¹¹⁴ Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008) 18.

¹¹⁵ Felski, *The Limits of Critique* 158.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* See also Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 5. Felski's account draws upon Latour's assertion of the social as "the tracing of associations" – not "a thing among other things... but a *type of connection* between things that are themselves not social" (5). In the face of excess, Latour argues, "to regain some sense of order, the best solution is to trace connections *between*... The search for order, rigor, and pattern is by no means abandoned. It is simply relocated one step further into abstraction so that actors are allowed to unfold their own differing cosmos" (23). Finally, "it does not mean that puppets are controlling their handlers – this would be simply reversing the order of causality – and of course no dialectic will do the trick either. It simply means that the interesting question at this point is not to decide who is acting and how but to shift from a certainty about action to an *uncertainty* about action – to decide what is acting and how" (60).

¹¹⁷ Felski, *The Limits of Critique* 173.

¹¹⁸ Best and Marcus 16, 19.

¹¹⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 223.

¹²⁰ Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," *MLN* 94, no. 5 (1979) 921.

¹²¹ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1999) 150.

¹²² *Ibid.* 83.

¹²³ Sedgwick 131.

¹²⁴ As Deleuze & Guattari write, the U.S. is already "inside-out" in that "America reversed the directions: it put its Orient in the West, as if it were precisely in America that the earth came full circle, its West is the edge of the East" (18).

¹²⁵ Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019) 114.

¹²⁶ Snitow 13.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 13.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 330. For instance, "even equal pay, affordable day care, and easily available abortion seem far to seek," Snitow writes.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 308.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 309.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* As Snitow puts it: "Voila, postmodern Utopia – a place where difference blooms" (329).

¹³² *Ibid.* 333.

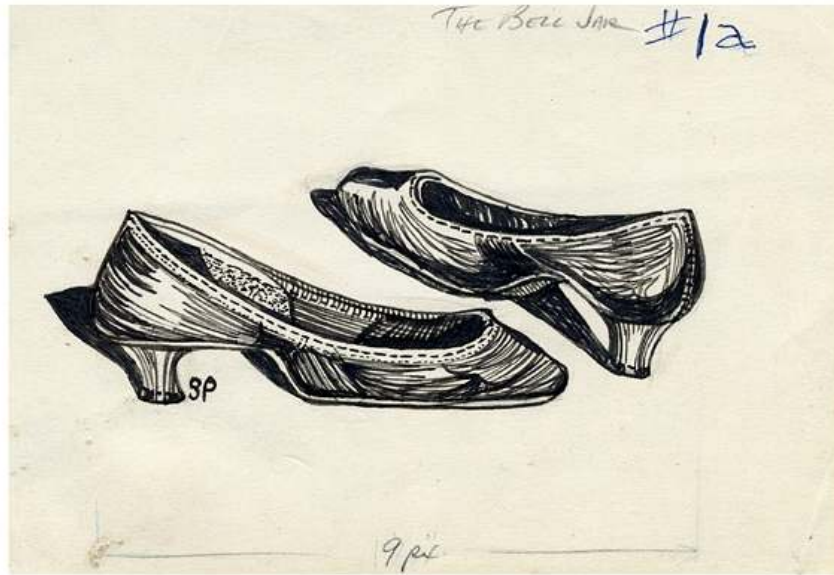
CHAPTER 1

“MAYBE I OUGHT TO SPILL A LITTLE BLOOD”:

SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR*

The Bell Jar is a spill-all in more than one sense: it is a *roman à clef* and a prose confessional, but it is also, and more materially, a novel spilling over with bodily fluids. Esther's tears, vomit, and blood threaten to break the boundaries of her body – and the text – again and again as we read. The recurrence of blood is particularly striking, both because Esther seeks to examine and preserve it, rather than to wash it away, and because, as organic substance, blood consistently appears alongside an object of high artifice – Esther's patent-leather shoes. I want to consider those shoes as one pair among many in *The Bell Jar* that work to destabilize binary sets and to construct meaning as limited plurality instead.

In the autumn following their wedding on Bloomsday 1956, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes lived apart. Plath returned to Newnham College, Cambridge on her own to continue her Fulbright, fearing she would lose her scholarship if anyone learned she had married.¹ She had kept herself occupied on her continental honeymoon sketching everyday objects and street scenes, and she continued to draw throughout the separation. In a letter dated October 7, she writes to Hughes about some recent sketches, “Yesterday I drew a good umbrella and a chianti bottle, better chestnuts, bad shoes and a beaujolais bottle.”² Those “bad shoes,” absent from the initial publication of *The Bell Jar* in England in 1963, went on to appear as a visual epigraph to the biographical note on Plath in the first American edition of 1971.



Plath's Study of Shoes (1956)³

Plath described her writing as attuned to “a visual imagination,” noting, “my inspiration is paintings... when I go to some other art form... I see these things very clearly.”⁴ Hughes recalled that sketching cleared Plath’s mind; she was fascinated by its power to atomize and recombine, breaking the world down into shapes and areas, breaking those down into their component parts and textures, and reassembling them anew.⁵ In recognizing the details of disparate parts and observing their points of adjacency, Plath attempts to shape the seemingly infinite array of sensory experience into a varied but structured set of juxtapositions, a process of writing that, I will argue, reveals an essential similarity with faceting as a feminist practice of reading, especially at the start of the postmodern period. In a journal entry dated February 13, 1959, Plath praises Faulkner’s “absolutely flawless descriptive style: and much description,” and asks herself, “And where are my small incidents, the blood poured from the shoes?”⁶ This exemplary “small incident” does appear in *The Bell Jar*, published in January 1963, shortly before Plath’s suicide, at which point she had permanently separated from Hughes and was living alone in England with her two small children. While it is unlikely that Plath ever intended to include her sketch in *The Bell Jar*, the image matches “those same size-seven patent leather shoes” Esther Greenwood purchases at the very opening of the novel, and which she still wears on its final page.⁷ The shoes appear with regularity, usually at moments of heightened sensory and emotional experience: she buys them on her first day in New York, and they reappear when she gets food poisoning, when she considers sleeping with a man for the first time, when she fends off sexual assault, when she practices cutting herself, when she contemplates drowning herself, when she loses her virginity, and several times during her stay at the mental hospital, including the day she leaves.

Critics who have recognized Esther’s shoes as a leitmotif in the novel have mainly been concerned with them in psycho-symbolic terms, as a repeating emblem of the death drive, as echoes of the black boots “that will not do” from her poem “Daddy,” or as the sign of

Esther's self-construction as simulacrum, her inability to synthesize the alternate alienation and embodiment she experiences as a woman in capitalist culture.⁸ Beyond these patently hermeneutical readings, I want to consider how the shoes figure, through Plath's use of kennings and other compound words, not only as metaphorical (substitutive) within the world of the novel, but also as metonymic (constitutive) of it. Rather than regarding the novel's objects as transparently paired with one symbolic meaning or, alternatively, with an infinite number of possible meanings, I will demonstrate how Esther's shoes are related by aggregation to a limited but multiple set of other meanings, and hence come to structure the dimensional, if hollow, aesthetic and feminist whole that is the narrative of *The Bell Jar*.

Plath consistently juxtaposes the patent-leather shoes with the imagery of blood. If blood is a natural substance in contrast to the artifice of the shoes, it is also one to which strongly gendered binary imagery is traditionally attached – generative femininity on the one hand, and violent masculinity on the other. The first bloody scene of the novel occurs when Esther visits Buddy at college and he takes her “to see a baby born” (64). The scene predictably connects blood to childbirth, but also emphasizes how, in modern society, the process is entirely managed and medicalized by men. “You oughtn't to see this,” Buddy's friend says to Esther. “You'll never want to have a baby if you do. They oughtn't to let women watch. It'll be the end of the human race” (64). Plath figures women here as alienated from the means of reproduction, from the labor of their own childbirths. Esther describes the pain of labor in the same terms she will later use for the bell jar – a closed corridor, a claustrophobic space:

Buddy told me the woman was on a drug that would make her forget she'd had any pain... she was in a kind of twilight sleep. I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it... and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget... when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again.
(66)

In contrast, Esther fantasizes that her own first experience of childbirth might entail an ownership over her body, its sensations, and its emissions:

I thought if you had to have all that pain anyway you might just as well stay awake. I had always imagined myself hitching up on to my elbows on the delivery table... dead white... from the awful ordeal, but smiling and radiant, with my hair down to my waist, and reaching out for my first little squirmy child and saying its name, whatever it was.
(67)

Esther envisions the birthing body, lain down and partly shrouded, in parts. She describes the woman's protruding belly with a compound adjective, “an enormous spider-fat stomach,” and the sound of her wails as an “unhuman whooping noise” (65). And she is cognizant of the woman's flesh being sliced, sewn, and re-formed by the men in charge of delivering the child. The vagina itself is both seam and opening: “through the split, shaven place between her legs, lurid with disinfectant, I saw a dark fuzzy thing appear” (66). The man then opens the seam further: “I heard the scissors close on the woman's skin like cloth and the blood began to run down – a fierce, bright red. Then all at once the baby seemed to pop out into Will's hands,

the color of a blue plum and floured with white stuff and streaked with blood, and Will kept saying, “I’m going to drop it, I’m going to drop it, I’m going to drop it,” in a terrified voice” (66). Last comes the suture, binding the fabric of the woman’s body together again: “the doctor and Will started sewing up the woman’s cut with a needle and a long thread. I think somebody said, “it’s a boy, Mrs. Tomolillo,” but the woman didn’t answer or raise her head” (67).

A *roman à clef* written in midcentury by a female poet, *The Bell Jar* forms a literary hinge between established binaries of genre, period, subjectivity, and gender, as Plath’s recurrent imagery of shoes stresses. When we encounter Esther’s shoes for the first time, just a few paragraphs into the novel, they are simultaneously extensions of her individual subjecthood and representatives of a universalized imagination: “I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size-seven patent leather shoes I’d bought in Bloomingdale’s one lunch hour with a black patent leather belt and black patent leather pocketbook to match” (2). By putting other girls in her shoes, Esther makes the accessories simultaneously metonymic of her own embodied, sensory experience and metaphoric of American opportunity itself; imagining the magazine readers who will see the photo of her in her new clothes, Esther thinks, “Look what can happen in this country, they’d say” (2). In Luce Irigaray’s terms, “woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity,” and therefore “she remains the guardian of material substance.”⁹ As decorative, material objects accessory to the body and symbolic of the fetish, women’s shoes in particular are highly feminized. Yonic in shape, they are vessels like the female body itself, which Plath comprehends in describing her blood as it is “poured” from their cavities. Irigaray characterizes female genitalia as *not one*, as not so much an absence as a multiple presence, geometrical and textural, shifting and planar: “the ‘thickness’ of that ‘form,’ the layering of its volume, its expansions and contractions and even the spacing of the moments in which it produces itself as form – all this the feminine keeps secret.”¹⁰ If the hermeneutics of fetishism depends on pairing, Irigaray’s math points away from that binary altogether. Rather, her imaging of gender is constructed by juxtaposition: “It is contiguous. *It touches (upon)*.”¹¹ Where some accounts of feminine difference embrace excess as aesthetic disarray, Irigaray recuperates the power of a dimensional hollowness, a delimited multiplicity that is *not one*:

Must this multiplicity of female desire and female language be understood as shards, scattered remnants of a violated sexuality?... if the female imaginary were to deploy itself, if it could bring itself into play otherwise than as scraps, uncollected debris, would it represent itself, even so, in the form of *one* universe? Would it even be volume instead of surface? No... By closing herself off as volume, she renounces the pleasure that she gets from the *non suture of her lips*.¹²

The word *suture* here evokes not only the medical language of the wound, but the unity of so-called “classical” Hollywood cinema, in which subtle transitions between shots and scenes create the illusion of a seamless, “natural” world.¹³ As in her sketch of the shoes, with its stitched seams running down the heel, around the openings, and along the sole, Plath highlights the points of suture between the episodic segments of her narrative, rather than eliding them, refusing to relinquish the textural pleasures of that dimensional artifice, even as

she rejects its smoothing tendencies. Like the pair of words representing Esther's heartbeat, "I am," repeated three times in the novel, doubles in *The Bell Jar* are a starting point, touching the same place over and again to build outward from pairs which are not two.

The Bell Jar's most prominent form of figuration, the compound, provides the means by which Plath builds multiplicity along the appearance of pairs, sometimes in the shape of the kenning, which renames a thing by combining two other words to describe it.¹⁴ Some of Plath's kennings follow the traditional noun-noun formation, echoing the structure of Old English poetry (as in *whale-road* for sea) – the striking "soul-compass" to name Esther's pair of shoes is one example (151). More often, Plath deploys a compound adjective-adjective or adjective-noun form (the *wine-dark* sea in the opening lines of *The Odyssey* is perhaps the most famous example).¹⁵ Esther's noun-noun kennings are often basic lexical compounds, such as "eye-shadow," "terry-cloth," or "fingerbowl."¹⁶ Plath refers, using commonplace compound adjectival forms, to "old-style" immigrants, "cut-glass" bowls, "double-page" spreads, "three-dimensional" lace, the "ninety-odd elements" of the periodic table, "rosy-cheeked young men," a "split-rail" fence, "semi-precious" stones, and a "white-haired doctor."¹⁷ Yet Esther also coins her own compounds for "pine-paneled" walls, her "smudgy-eyed reflection" in the elevator of the "for-women-only" hotel, "bad-mannered" guests, a "gray-faced man," "semi-opaque" waters, and her "blown-up" face with "black-shadowed eyes" in the newspaper.¹⁸

These stitched-together words destabilize the traditional opposition between metaphor and metonymy and between the reading practices long associated with each. Roman Jakobson illustrates the opposition of metaphor and metonymy through the privations of two aphasic language disorders, where "metaphor is alien to the similarity disorder" (patients who cannot substitute one concept for another) and "metonymy to the contiguity disorder" (patients who cannot concatenate one concept with another).¹⁹ Jakobson argues that our demonstrable inclination toward metaphor means "the actual bipolarity" of metaphor and metonymy "has been artificially replaced... by an amputated, unipolar scheme" that prioritizes metaphoric, or hermeneutic, interpretation. In light of these two figurative poles, the current humanistic debate over "how we read now," figured as an opposition between "depth" versus "surface" reading, becomes an epistemological one. In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski contends that both "digging down" (the hermeneutics of suspicion) and "standing back" (poststructuralist readings) exert the same *type of logic* over the text, and it is worth considering how metaphor and metonymy entrench these two reading practices.²⁰ In pointing us towards metonymy, Jakobson offers a more expansive sense of interconnection that is apposite to the excesses of the postmodern aesthetic. Still, as Martin Joos points out, Jakobson's "polar discussion automatically entrains phrasings that imply mutual exclusion, and thereby it runs the risk of overlooking or failing to look for literary devices that combine metaphor and metonymy."²¹ The novelist and critic David Lodge takes up Jakobson's assertion that poetry tends to the metaphoric pole, while prose tends to the metonymic. Lodge complicates this schema, suggesting that the history of the novel alternates between more metonymic, contiguous forms of figuration (the realist novel) and more metaphoric, symbolic forms (the modernist novel). One of the distinguishing features of the postmodern novel, he claims, is that it attempts to do both to a greater degree than prior iterations of the novel: "it would seem that we can best define the formal character of postmodernist writing by examining its efforts to deploy both metaphoric and metonymic

devices in radically new ways, and to defy (even if such defiance is ultimately vain) the obligation to choose between these two principles of connecting one topic with another.”²²

Plath’s compound words, hyphenated phrases, and kennings combine and exceed Jakobson’s two poles of figuration without reconciling them, standing in for the object (like metaphor) but situating it as part of a whole, in relation to its surroundings (like metonymy). The compound word juxtaposes two distinct terms, not in opposition or in synthesis, but rather as a conglomeration that points away from the very pair that structures it. If, in the hermeneutics of suspicion, meaning is restricted by a homology of symbol to correlative significance, in poststructuralism, the sign is so endlessly, rhizomatically connective that no reading yields a definitive interpretation. Certainly, Plath’s compounds lean towards metonymy, working to exceed the duality of metaphor in favor of a limited plurality of meaning. Discussing the selection disorder, which encourages metonymic speech, Jakobson writes, “Aphasics of this type tend to supplant the contextual variants of one word [*knife*] by different terms, each of them specific for the given environment... according to its use and surroundings... *pencil-sharpener, apple-parer*... changed from a free form capable of occurring alone, into a bound form.”²³ Though not always wholly figurative, like traditional kennings, Plath’s compound adjectival constructions condense action and telegraph emotion, and they are insistently hyphenated and partially figurative in form. Notably, they also underline, in Jakobson’s words, “the relation between the use of an object... and the means of its production.”²⁴ As the female sex is, for Irigaray, both no-thing and many things, so these compounds are pairs which are not two; their seeming binaries are simultaneously forms of circumlocution that refuse to name directly, but also the structural basis for a limited aggregate of related meanings that rest upon very the binary they exceed. Just as feminist theory relies upon the very binaries it ultimately works to overcome, so Plath’s kennings build beyond themselves toward a limited plurality of meaning, affording a new approach to the postmodern aesthetic. The patent leather shoes in *The Bell Jar* are, like sex and gender, a pair which is not two, accruing a limited but multiple set of meanings beyond that binary as they recur in the narrative as talismans, as vessels, as ornaments, and as weapons. We construe meaning between and among the (paired) fragments of the text, as well as through our own phenomenological experience; the assemblage of narrative shapes into a dimensional whole constitutes the work and the pleasure of faceting.

The sensuousness of the kenning as material figure is immediately evident in *The Bell Jar*’s first lines:

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York. I’m stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that’s all there was to read about in the papers – goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. (1)

Placing her own electro-shock therapy (itself a compound) conceptually and syntactically adjacent to the death of the Rosenbergs (‘along all your nerves’), the narrative opens with language that troubles any clear separation between Esther’s own raw individual experience of madness and her eager participation in popular culture, colloquial language, and national history. Esther’s original adjectival kennings, “goggle-eyed” and “peanut-smelling,” followed

closely by “country-wet” and “mirage-gray,” bind the particularity of personal expression to the experience of shared phenomena (1). Later in the novel, Esther describes her first session of electro-shock therapy as though “something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled... and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done” (143). The phrases “shook me like the end of the world” and “what terrible thing I had done” recall the execution of the Rosenbergs, lending epistemological conviction to the description of their death that Esther remembers having merely to imagine on the first page of the novel. The moment recalls the first instance of blood, too; during the childbirth Esther is “struck by the sight of the table where they were lifting the woman,” which “looked like some awful torture table” (65). Like the “Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee” of the electro-shock table, Esther observes that the laboring woman “never stopped making this unhuman whooping noise” (66). Esther’s surname, Greenwood, is a compound as well, the Americanization of Plath’s maternal grandmother’s maiden name, Grünwald. It is also an archaic kenning for a wood in the leaf of spring.²⁵ The image of the sap flying from her center represents a splitting of Esther’s very self, her name, and the extraction of her lifeblood, as if the kenning Greenwood were sundered into its component parts. A treatment administered three times as often to women, the practice of electro-shock therapy and its sensation of being “sapped” conjures the eruptions from Esther’s body elsewhere in the novel – by cutting, vomiting, stomach-pumping, assault, and intercourse.

Just as the shoes reappear at crucial points in the narrative, Esther’s compounds and kennings, themselves condensed figures, multiply in high-intensity moments, such as instances of madness, her time in the mental hospital, and experiences of sexual threat and desire. One morning in the hospital, Esther realizes that the arrival of an “empty-handed” nurse signifies she will not receive her meds that day, but will instead experience her first electro-shock treatment. The passage that ensues is packed with compounds and kennings; Esther follows the doctor’s “dark-jacketed back” onto “garnet-colored carpet,” where she glimpses another electro-shock patient with “waist-length hair” and confronts a “wall-eyed nurse” with a “smudge-fronted uniform” (142). It is as if these double-barreled words reach to communicate the panicked urgency of quick, condensed impression, even as the pairs multiply beyond themselves and into fuller, more dimensional structures: “The wall-eyed nurse wore such thick spectacles that four eyes peered out at me from behind the round, twin panes of glass. I was trying to tell which eyes were the real and which the false eyes, and which of the real eyes was the wall-eye and which the straight eye” (142). The doubles in *The Bell Jar* can neither be reduced to the binaries from which they stem, nor can they be expanded by limitless proliferation. They are, like the kennings that image them, both specific and multiple; they stand in for and they point away from. Because Plath uses kennings anachronously (a postmodern bricolage that aggregates older literary forms) and to an unusual degree, they are as epithetic as they are cliché. While the kenning works towards defamiliarization by circumlocution, when successful, it also invites repetition, paradoxically lending itself to platitude.²⁶

Plath’s repeated use of colloquial kennings accesses a linguistic zeitgeist, and a number of her compounds are themselves condensations of idiomatic figurative phrases: the canapés at the *Ladies Home Journal* lunch are “chock-full of ptomaine,” the sanatorium is “chock-full of crazy people,” Betsy sings of “a true-blue gal” from Kansas, and Esther refers to “up-and-

coming young men,” “red-blooded intelligent” men, “out-of-the way countries,” and “down-at-heel seaside resorts.”²⁷ Esther’s kennings also draw attention to midcentury brand nomenclature; in a booming capitalist culture, where new products are constantly being patented and manufactured, brand names practically demand construction as kennings. They figuratively rename an object for copyright law, as the “Band-Aids” forming a cross over the split in Esther’s skin after her experiments with cutting attest (148). Such hackneyed figurations are kennings that have entered the midcentury American lexicon; they veer between metaphorical (*true-blue*, *up-and-coming*, *Band-Aid*) and metonymic (*red-blooded*, *down-at-heel*), but all combine the functions of standing-in-for and pointing-away-from.

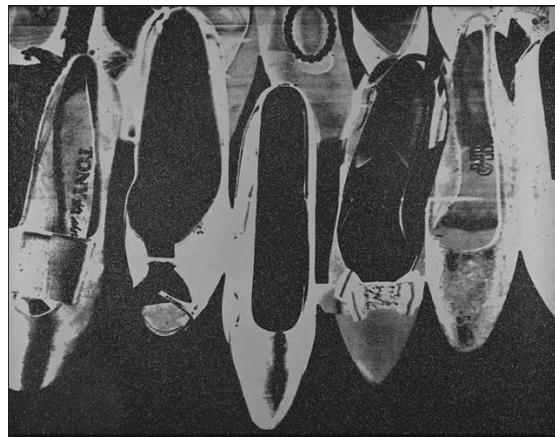
The novel’s title, *The Bell Jar*, itself an open kenning, represents an isolating, smoothing, solipsizing view of the world, in opposition to the panicky fragmentation of madness that immediately precedes it, as in “the glittery splinters” of a mirror Esther shatters in anger after struggling to reconcile the different parts of her face into a discernable whole (175). Jakobson’s characterization of aphasia as a disorder foregrounds the association of madness with imaginative language, and Linda Wagner-Martin describes the connection between figurative language and Plath’s personal experience of madness as a struggle to assemble:

On arriving at McLean, Sylvia could neither read nor write. The one person she asked to see... her high school English teacher, then began visiting her at least once a week, bringing with him an anagram game. At first, Sylvia could hardly recognize any letters. He would begin with *a* and *n*; some days Sylvia could add a *d* to make the word *and*. Some days she could not. Crockett’s patient work, even to helping Sylvia move her hand to pick out letters, was a crucial part of...her recovery.²⁸

Before the numbing, periodic descent of the bell jar, Esther’s madness takes the form of total fragmentation, the loss of any unifying phenomenological framework. Returning home after her time in the city, Esther observes the passing view in the train: “Like a colossal junkyard, the swamps and back lots of Connecticut flashed past, one broken-down fragment bearing no relation to another. What a hotchpotch the world was! I glanced down at my unfamiliar skirt and blouse” (112). It is Esther’s ongoing effort to relate the fragments of experience, without succumbing to the bell jar’s erasure of their points of suture, that ultimately suggests her process of meaning-making. The faceting of the novel hews neither to the metaphor of the bell jar nor the metonym of the broken glass shards alone – both are aphasic in their extremity. Rather, the readerly work of assemblage lends texture to the smoothing, suturing, blurring view of the world and structure to its total, heap-like fragmentation. The meaning of *The Bell Jar* lies not in the dominance of one, nor in their synthetic resolution, but in the shifting, assiduously stitched-together structure of meaning that Esther assembles over and through such binary concepts. The novel accedes to neither side, but rather forms a jagged, vacuous, and episodic narrative that capitalizes on – even as it undoes – the binary itself.

In the opening pages of *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1982), Fredric Jameson sets Van Gogh’s *A Pair of Shoes* (1886), “one of the canonical works of high modernism,” in opposition to *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980), by “the central figure in contemporary visual art,” Andy Warhol.²⁹ For Jameson, the pairing underscores the “hermeneutical” reading he can perform on Van Gogh, “in which the work in its inert, objectal form is taken as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its

ultimate truth,” in this case, “the whole object world of agricultural misery,” transformed “into the most glorious materialization of pure color in oil paint... an act of compensation which ends up producing a whole new Utopian realm of the senses.”³⁰ Jameson’s language of “hermeneutics” and “replacement” fixes on the shoes as metaphor, representative of the material and historical peasant toil they represent, whereas the Warhol resists such a reading; Jameson calls the piece “a random collection of dead objects” that “no longer speaks to us at all.”³¹ Indeed, the Warhol image affects us as excess, as contiguity; it would be difficult to say what it “means,” though it connects the glitter of its surface to the endless variation of inutile, mass-produced, feminized shoes. Though his focus is on the dyad of Warhol and Van Gogh, Jameson briefly considers shoes by Magritte and Walker Evans as well, “expand[ing] this foot fetishism into a fourfold image” and drawing attention to shoes as particularly emblematic modernist and postmodernist *objets d’art*.³² As Jameson notes several times, twentieth-century shoes invite meditations on the fetish; in his dialectical thinking, the priority is on the pair of opposing paintings, but also on the “heterosexual pair” of boots Van Gogh depicts, “which allows neither for perversion nor for fetishization,” in contrast to the Warhol, “where we have to do with what are now far more clearly fetishes, in both the Freudian and the Marxian senses” – that is, the sexual fetish and the commodity fetish.³³ For Freud, the sexual fetish represents unnatural substitution, a stunting of sexual maturity, just as the commodity fetish is an irrational stand-in for mysticism and religion; in Barbara Johnson’s words, Marx “likens the ‘fetishism of the commodity’ to the false worship of things, and to the desire for magic and mystery that mature human beings should outgrow.”³⁴



Vincent Van Gogh’s *A Pair of Shoes* (1886) and Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980).³⁵

As representations of the object world, shoes hold a privileged place. Heidegger takes them as the paradigmatic intersection of art and equipment, gesturing to the same Van Gogh painting to argue that “the piece of equipment is half-thing, because characterized by thingliness, and yet it is something more; at the same time it is half art-work and yet something less, because lacking the self-sufficiency of the art work.”³⁶ Heidegger’s primary distinction here centers on mimesis and figuration – “Equipment extends me, while art encompasses me. Equipment *is*; art represents.”³⁷ In Van Gogh’s painting, art represents, but it represents equipment, while in Warhol, the shoes have become the commodity fetish – multiple, decoupled, reflective of the viewer in their glint. They neither represent the labor it took to create them nor are they fit for labor themselves. Rather, they expose the artifice of

gendered “equipment,” where high heels (and by extension, the women who wear them) are illegible as symbols of concrete labor. Instead, women become vessels for a separate sphere of (re)production and labor (birth). When woman is transformed figuratively by artistic representation, she, like the paintings of shoes or Heidegger’s proverbial jug, bridges for man the experience of equipment as extension (holding what you fill her with) and art as encompassment (taking you in and sheathing you, as the etymology of *vagina* suggests). What strikes Jameson as the essential aesthetic difference between modernism and postmodernism is the latter’s tendency towards pastiche in sheer volume: the “heap” of unmatched objects that represent “superficiality in the most literal sense... the inversion of Van Gogh’s Utopian gesture.”³⁸ Through inversion, itself a metaphor of invagination, Jameson laments the destabilization of the hermeneutic as the breakdown of “a whole metaphysics of the inside and outside.”³⁹ Further, the legible, modernist “alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter’s fragmentation,” where the unified interior/exterior of the male psyche is subsumed into a feminized set of fragmentations. This is also a loss of the modernist concept of madness: Warhol’s Marilyns and Edies (and indeed, Plath’s Esther) are no longer related to “the [female] hysterics and neurotics of Freud’s own day or with those canonical [male] experiences of radical isolation and solitude... which dominated the period of high modernism.”⁴⁰ Such “waning of affect” signals “the end of the bourgeois ego, or monad,” but also, as Jameson anxiously registers, the potential impotence of modernism’s particular, excavatory forms of interpretation.⁴¹ To press this model, I borrow Jameson’s own words: “We need to look at some shoes of a different kind, and it is pleasant to be able to draw for such an image” from Sylvia Plath’s own work.⁴²

Plath’s shoes are among the many pairs in the novel which, to borrow from Irigaray, are not one, but *at least two*. For Jameson, the fetish of the shoe derives from a binary order of representation, whether synthetic (thesis-antithesis), metaphorical (object-representation), or metonymic (part-whole); in the symbolic order, objects point to one other thing: an opposite, a substitute, or a whole. For the reader of *The Bell Jar*, the reading experience is arranged around pairs, like Esther’s shoes, that serve as sites of contiguous meaning, places where seeming binaries lead away to a (limited but multiple) array of other things. Rather than yielding to an unfettered plurality of meaning or engaging synthetic thinking, Plath has it both ways – she indulges the “feminized,” “excessive,” “decadent,” and “hysterical” aspects of text that might become rhizomatic, yet structures her language along the very dialectical binaries she wishes to point beyond. In this sense, the texture of Plath’s writing imitates and invites a particularly postmodern, feminist mode of interpretation – akin to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “reparative reading,” with its primacy on connectedness, the “the irreducibly spatial positionality of beside” as a potential structural alternative to what she terms the more paranoid positionalities of “behind” and “beyond.”⁴³ Faceting also emphasizes reading as process, restoring the feel of thought before it is forcefully ordered and sequenced; Hannah Arendt argues that while we consider thought directional, “in order to create such a line of thought we must transform the *juxtaposition* in which experiences are given to us into a *succession* of soundless words – the only medium in which we can think – which means we not only de-sense but de-spatialize the original experience.”⁴⁴ Reparative reading has an essential connection to feminism; its appeal to assemblage and adjacency recalls Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson’s call to a “nonuniversalist” feminism, suited to “analyzing sexism in all its endless variety and monotonous similiarity” by “a practice made up of a patchwork of

overlapping alliances.”⁴⁵ Rita Felski folds the political slant of feminism towards the aesthetic, appealing to a similar model of assemblage through David Carroll’s concept of paraesthetics, “an aesthetics turned against itself, pushed beyond or beside itself, a faulty, irregular, disordered, improper aesthetic.”⁴⁶ In linking Carroll’s distinctly postmodern paraesthetics to feminist theory, Rita Felski points to art as “the place where identity fails, where the fictions of separate, unitary, and complementary male and female selves are revealed as fictions.”⁴⁷ Working against essentialism, Felski asserts that while a paraesthetics “is ‘feminine’ in a metaphorical sense, in embracing everything that is elided and repressed by the binary logic of a patriarchal culture,” nevertheless “feminism cannot afford to align itself with a single aesthetic strategy.”⁴⁸ For this reason, feminism cannot reject symptomatic reading, only to limit itself to the poststructuralist view that “fragmented, chaotic, polysemic forms of experimental art” necessarily and always “have a close affinity with women’s bodies and women’s psyches.”⁴⁹ Rather, it must build upon the very binary systems of interpretation it seeks to supersede.

Plath’s project, verbally and visually, is to image the structure of the variegated world; she writes, “I would paint the geometric shutters patterned against the oblongs of yellow wood, the trapezoids and slouching angles of the roof, the angled jutting of the drain pipes – I would paint in a bleak and geometric tension of color and form.”⁵⁰ Plath here articulates what Avrum Stroll calls “informal geometry,” a phenomenological process by which a number of small, densely textured areas delineate form, precisely by emphasizing adjacency and seaminess.⁵¹ The style of the sketch of “bad shoes” offers a visualization of this informal geometry, and of the work her reader must perform to make meaning from *The Bell Jar*’s narrative, presented in distinct segments or slices of time. The exterior surface of the shoes appears uninterrupted in its shine, even as it breaks down visually into a number of distinct geometrical planes differentiated by the direction of Plath’s pen strokes. The two small kitten-heels seem carven, fixed to the body of the shoe at the continuous, sturdy, angular layer of the sole. The interior texture of the shoes changes from smooth siding at the front, darkly shadowed by cross-hatching within the caves of the toes, to variegated punched-leather reinforcement at the heel. All around the mouth of the shoe are ambiguous markings that appear to be either stitches or perforations – that is, either positive or negative space – and a series of visible stitches runs down the outer heel, binding two pieces of leather at the seam. Standing askew and facing the viewer, as if carelessly cast off, the shoes invite us to slip into them; absent any markers of background, the shadows they cast are the only indicators of depth in the sketch. Their solidity and structure derive from our assembly of the textured areas that comprise them, and from the visible points of suture that hold their disparate parts together. Esther’s shoes of black patent leather would have been made by coating hide with a shiny sealant, a process developed and patented (hence the name) by various manufacturers in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but perfected and popularized by Seth Boyden in Newark in 1818, though he never patented it himself.⁵² The process of treating the leather – with lampblack, white lead, and Prussian blue pigment mixed with turpentine for color, overlain with about a dozen layers of linseed oil for varnish – closely mimics the material progress of an oil painting. In Jameson’s terms, then, the shoes of the sketch and of the novel retain a material history that bridges the production of the modernist object (leather of the boots, linseed oils of Van Gogh’s paint) with the aesthetics of the Warhol painting (shiny, glinting, depthless). The name “patent leather,” used to describe

the shoes several times in the novel, dually highlights ownership within capitalism (the act of *patenting* something) as well as its superficial nature – we say something is *patent* when it is obvious and clear, and often in negative terms resembling Jameson’s critique of postmodernism (*patently superficial, patently false*). It is the very insufficiency of the binary as such that enables Esther to work beyond it, yet the dual structure is vital not only to the moments of depth reading and synthesis in the novel, but to the more uncertain and proliferative structures of ambiguity and multiplicity as well.

In a letter to her mother, Plath described writing *The Bell Jar* as “throw[ing] together events from my own life” and “fictionalizing to add color – it’s a pot boiler really.”⁵³ In two later letters written around her last birthday in October 1962, Plath repeated this descriptor, this time hyphenating it “(this is a secret; it is a pot-boiler and no one must read it!),” and “it’s a pot-boiler and just practice.”⁵⁴ Diminishing the novel’s literariness, the “pot-boiler” epithet suggests *The Bell Jar* was written to be sold rather than scrutinized. Unpublished in the U.S. until 1971, *The Bell Jar* was subject upon its eventual release to the critical convergence of feminism and psychoanalysis, as well as the retroactive narrative lens of Plath’s suicide. Christina Britzolakis describes the image of Plath that crystallized after her death: “Diagnostic criticism... tended to see her writing as symptomatic of a diseased age. She became something other than a writer – an oracular priestess, a hysterical patient, a sacrificial victim – and the materiality of her writing was brushed aside as merely epiphenomenal.”⁵⁵ As a novel concerned with the emergence of madness, *The Bell Jar* is ripe for the sort of substitutive, psychoanalytic interpretation that Jakobson aligns with metaphoric reading. In this mode, Esther correlates with Sylvia, the bell jar transparently represents madness, and suicide is a symbolic response to the twin oppressions of capitalism and patriarchy. The kenning, as a device that transcends, rather than reconciles, two figurative poles, offers an alternative model for reading Plath. Indeed, it is precisely as a kenning linking metaphor and metonymy that Plath’s description of the novel as “pot-boiler” merits further consideration. An eighteenth century word, it derives from the older “pot-waller,” a British legal term for “a male householder or lodger with his own separate fireplace on which a pot could be boiled, which qualified him to vote in a parliamentary election” by proving he could “furnish his own sustenance.”⁵⁶ It only later developed the anthropological dimension of “a stone heated in a fire and then placed in a container to boil it.” These two meanings are themselves both metonymic in figuration, since “pot-boiler” either means the catalytic stone placed in the pot or the man’s place within the body politic. The term acquired its metaphoric implications for narrative in the late eighteenth century, as “an artistic, literary, or other creative work produced solely to make the originator a living by catering to popular taste, without regard to artistic quality; esp. such a work produced by an artist, writer, etc., of otherwise recognized merit,” and like its previous iteration soon came to signify the subject of that writing too: “an artist, writer, etc., who produces such works.” “Pot-boiler” is an apt label for Plath to apply to her first novel, which was to be the catalyst for her career, a practical financial step towards “living from her writing.”⁵⁷ Yet it is also a highly domestic image from a woman who felt the pressure to provide for her family against the whims of writing grants – the few her husband had won and the many she had not, a situation she describes elsewhere, in another lexical kenning, as life “on a shoestring.”⁵⁸ The image of the “pot-boiler” accesses a rich network of material concerns across Plath’s papers, from her passion for the small, material pleasures of everyday life to her desire to meet the

ideal standards of wife and mother to which she had been acculturated in her American childhood. Even as “pot-boiler” highlights the “feminized” qualities of the novel (its “melodramatic” and “angst-ridden” tones), its resonance with male genre fiction and with the project of making a living also render it a feminist staking of place in a literary world dominated by male authors.

Esther makes early, if oblique, reference to marriage and motherhood in *The Bell Jar*. Recalling her month in New York years later, Esther tells us, “I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with” (3). Across Plath’s journals, poetry, and fiction, the reproductive female body becomes a sign for the operation of metonymy as metaphor and metaphor as metonymy, a vehicle of meaning which has its own logic and impetus.⁵⁹ Exceeding symbol (metaphor, art) and vessel (metonymy, equipment), pregnancy pushes the limits of figurative language by emphasizing, the space where the mother’s body becomes the baby’s, and where the creation of life threatens death. In the hospital, a dead fetus is a “curled-up body,” a pregnant woman is represented by her “spider-fat stomach,” and the cadavers are “inhuman-looking” with their “purple-black skin,” the same color as the baby born that day, “a blue plum... floured with white stuff and streaked with blood.”⁶⁰ Plath thus stages a means of overcoming the objectification imposed upon the female body from outside. Binding sexuality to madness, Esther declares that, while committed, “I just grew fatter and fatter... just as if I were going to have a baby,” and describes how, “when Mrs. Bannister held the cup to my lips, I fanned the hot milk out on my tongue as it went down, tasting it luxuriously, the way a baby tastes its mother.”⁶¹

We never learn whether Esther goes on to become a writer (though we might assume the text we are reading is in fact her novel), but the mention of her baby at the start of *The Bell Jar* underscores what Tillie Olsen calls “the growing acceptance that going on will threaten other needs, to love and be loved”; as Plath herself wrote in her journal, “a woman has to sacrifice all claims to femininity and family to be a writer.”⁶² For female authors of Plath’s generation, there is an absurdity, Olsen notes, in the

agony – peculiarly mid-century, escaped by their sisters of pre-Freudian, pre-Jungian times – that ‘creation and femininity are incompatible’... the acceptance – against one’s experienced reality – of the sexist notion that the act of creation is not as inherently natural to a woman as to a man, but rooted instead in unnatural aggression, rivalry, envy, or thwarted sexuality... And indeed, in our century as in the last... almost all distinguished achievement has come from childless women.⁶³

Jacqueline Rose reconsiders Plath’s use of “pot-boiler” in light of her gender, suggesting we “take Plath at her word, instead of reading her remark as the sign of moral evasion or guilt.”⁶⁴ Plath’s engagement with popular culture, Rose reminds us, should be a cause célèbre for her feminist critics, rather than a source of discomfort, since “feminists have been among the first to point out that the denigration of popular culture carries with it a specific denigration of women.”⁶⁵ Indeed, when Plath writes in her journal of her desire to publish stories in “the slicks” or muses over the glossy recipes her mother clipped for her from the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, we are invited to see her not as an ideologue, but as a simultaneous participant in and skeptic of her own culture. Just as, in Rose’s words, “these magazines were only partially able – even assuming this was their fully conscious intention – to paper over the

cracks, the internal strain, of the very ideology they were attempting to promote,” so Plath’s own narrative, like her drawing of the shoes, emphasizes the seams and cracks in the surface of her own experience and recovery.⁶⁶ Plath, as Rose points out, “is not consistent... [she] is neither one identity, nor multiple identities simply dispersing themselves... but the contours of their opposing elements never completely lose their shape.”⁶⁷ What I call *faceting* in Plath entails a readerly assemblage of dual forms like the compound and the kenning, without reconciling them or accepting their opposition. Combining and multiplying these binary structures is what allows Plath and the reader to build and assemble those pairs which are not two.

Figuration always requires a cognitive leap of its audience: in metaphor, the substitution of one thing with another, and in metonymy, the abstraction of one part into the whole. That cognitive leap is, of course, premised on some common understanding of linguistic signifiers. In the case of kennings, two leaps occur, so that the metonym is metaphorized, the metaphor metonymized. Such leaps are clear in Plath’s more inventive adjectival compounds, gnomic descriptions of her environment which begin with those opening lines and occur with greater frequency as Esther grapples with her gendered experiences of sexuality and madness throughout the novel. These metonymic pairs, adjacent geometrical bits that she stitches together with hyphens, act as a defamiliarizing shorthand for the intensity of sensual experience. A drink rises to “lasso-level,” a letter is “scrawled-over,” and the tub at the Amazon is “griffin-legged” and “coffin-shaped.”⁶⁸ Esther replaces her phone in a “bone-colored cradle,” fears the “barbed-wire letters” of German and the “scorpion-lettered formulas” of Chemistry.⁶⁹ She encounters men in “open-throated” shirts, an “ape-shaped law student,” and drives through a “duck-ponded wilderness.”⁷⁰ An appellation like “radio-alarm clock” uses a compound descriptor to highlight the (at least) triple function of an object (86). Esther imagines Christmas as “gilt-ribboned presents” and “birch-log fires,” and describes the suburbs as an “escape-proof cage” of “fresh-cut grass,” alternating between “sun-saturated road” and the “deep-sea shade of the elms.”⁷¹ Melding visual, haptic, olfactory, and gustatory imagery, Esther gives us a “fern-scented nurse,” “burnt-brown leather chairs,” a “liver-colored corridor,” “turtle-green palms,” the “mist-shrouded sun,” “sea-polished pebbles,” and a “strawberry-marble slab” in the *Mademoiselle* entryway.⁷² Through the “screwed-up nozzles” of Esther’s mad eyes, the human body is variously “sweaty-handed,” “pink-uniformed,” and “khaki-jacketed,” with a chauffeur’s “Spam-colored expanse” of neck “sandwiched” between jacket and cap.⁷³ Her friend Valerie has a “snow-maiden face,” and our first image of Joan is her “pebble-colored eyes,” an image that recurs (as “pebble-gray eyes”) shortly before Joan’s suicide.⁷⁴

The accretion of sensory experience by pairs subtly links together the episodic narrative of *The Bell Jar*, enabling repetition to work both metaphorically and metonymically in the reader’s mind. After the *Ladies’ Day* lunch, the magazine interns are ushered along to an afternoon movie, starring “a nice blond girl who looked like June Allyson but was really somebody else, and a sexy black-haired girl who looked like Elizabeth Taylor but was also somebody else, and two big, broad-shouldered boneheads with names like Rick and Gil” (41-2). Esther’s failure of reading here encodes an exhaustion with the conventions of visual metaphor, where any one girl might epithetically stand in for another, while her slangy reference to the “two big, broad-shouldered boneheads” employs alliteration to form a double kenning, in which the first metonym, “broad-shouldered,” is itself metonymic of the

second, “boneheads” (41). These phrases add pairs adjacent to pairs, building multiplicity out of the very binaries that threaten to collapse for Esther as a viewer. She switches from cliché to originality in her kennings as she begins to feel ill and struggles to contain her nausea: “At about this point I began to feel peculiar. I looked round me at all the rows of rapt little heads with the same silver glow on them at the front and the same black shadow on them at the back, and they looked like nothing more or less than a lot of stupid moonbrains. I felt in terrible danger of puking” (42). Esther’s effort to quantify the other moviegoers builds along paired alliterations (point/peculiar, rows/rapt, same/silver), leading to her conclusion that they are “moonbrains,” an invented kenning that counters the cliché “boneheads” at the start of the passage. Bent over the toilet at the Amazon, “the glittering white torture-chamber tiles under my feet and over my head and on all four sides closed in and squeezed me to pieces” (44). The kenning phrase rests on the alliteration of the “t” sounds in “torture” and “tiles,” and of the “ch” sounds in “torture” and “chamber,” mimicking alliterative verse in another nod to Old English poetics and foregrounding such proliferative word pairs as the stiches that bind the disparate episodes of the novel. The metonym, by which the paired tile descriptor grows into the pair of floor and ceiling and the four walls around her, culminates in her self-fragmentation, making of the interior physical space a hyperbolic representation of psychic interiority and illustrating how kennings assist the readerly negotiation of textual surface and depth.

The shoe imagery with which I began continually enacts a movement from duality to limited multiplicity throughout the novel. Waking up on the bathroom floor after vomiting, Esther observes: “The next thing I had a view of was somebody’s shoe. It was a stout shoe of cracked black leather and quite old, with tiny air holes in a scalloped pattern over the toe and a dull polish, and it was pointed at me. It seemed to be placed on a hard green surface that was hurting my right cheekbone” (45). Staring at these shoes, which resemble an older, stouter version of her own, Esther gradually registers the presence of the hotel nurse, who injects her with a sleeping aid, pointing ahead to her stay at the mental hospital later on. The next mention of shoes occurs in a moment of sexual tension for Esther, when Buddy Willard’s mother arranges an outing in New York with a Russian simultaneous interpreter named Constantin. After a rich dinner in a place with “smoke-dark walls,” where “faces floated, flushed and flamelike” over tables set with “thick, dusty bottle-candles” covered in wax like “three-dimensional lace,” Esther contemplates sleeping with him. Fantasizing about shedding her virginity, Esther imagines waking up the next day to “a doll-size Constantin sitting in my eye and smiling out at me” from the mirror, “like a little white Alp at the back of my eye” or “some other monument from a foreign land,” once again deploying a figurative representation that is both substitutive (by simile, rather than metaphor) and constitutive (by synecdoche, rather than metonymy) of her world (82). Though she doesn’t sleep with Constantin in the end, this relation of scale, in which Esther imagines her sexuality shrinking a man to a synecdochic glimmer in her eye, speaks to the anxiety she feels herself in becoming Buddy’s rib, Mrs. Willard’s arrow, or Betsy’s ear of corn – a mere part to another’s whole. When Esther awakens, still a virgin, she sees the illegible, reflective material of her shoes in his eyes: “As I stared down at Constantin the way you stare down at a bright, unattainable pebble at the bottom of a deep well, his eyelids lifted and he looked through me.... a shutter of recognition clicked across the blur of tenderness and the wide pupils went glossy and depthless as patent leather” (85). Layering the material, surface-oriented

homonym “shutter” over the phrase “shudder of recognition,” Esther links the moment to the electroshock therapy that still lies ahead of her, adding that as the two sit “back to back... fumbling with our shoes in the horrid cheerful white light,” Constantin runs his fingers through her hair and “a little electric shock flared through me” (86).

That night, the shoes appear again, this time in the form of a weapon, when Doreen sets Esther up on a blind date with Marco, whose stickpin captivates her: “A great white light seemed to shoot out of it, illuminating the room. Then the light withdrew into itself, leaving a dewdrop on a field of gold... ‘That’s a diamond,’ somebody said, and a lot of people burst out laughing. My nail tapped a glassy facet” (105). What captivates Esther about the diamond is its transparency – a solidity that seems hollow, its adjacent facets constructing and containing a glowing center of light. Marco lets her take it from his coat, promising to earn it back from her through “some small service” over the course of the night. Esther’s epithetic kenning for Marco then enacts and offers another figure for this faceting in prose form:

I had never met a woman-hater before. I could tell Marco was a woman-hater, because in spite of all the models and TV starlets in the room that night he paid attention to nobody but me. Not out of kindness or even curiosity, but because I’d happened to be dealt to him.... I began to see why woman-haters could make such fools of women. Woman-haters were like gods: invulnerable and chock-full of power. (107)

The compound cliché “chock-full,” used elsewhere to describe the state of asylums and the amount of ptomaine in the sickening crabmeat, describes Marco’s dominance, while the kenning “woman-hater,” repeated four times, begins to multiply outward, supplanting the dualism of “man” and “woman.”

Marco takes Esther out to the garden and throws her to the ground. She feels the texture of the wet mud against her dress and recalls how he “set his teeth to the strap at my shoulder and tore my sheath to the waist” (109). The wet earth, the parts of her body (teeth, shoulder, waist), and the vulval sheath of clothing Esther wears come up against each other. Her encounter with Marco literalizes Esther’s fear of “flattening out under a man,” which she had imagined only figuratively through the picture of the housewife that same morning. Though Esther begins “to writhe and bite,” Marco is relentless until she “gouge[s] at his leg with the sharp heel of [her] shoe” (109). Turning her shoe into a weapon, Esther penetrates Marco’s skin, makes him bleed, and attempts to diminish his power over her. “Sluts, all sluts,” he shouts at her, eliding the binary of consent by sneering, “Yes or no, it is all the same” (109). The scene concludes with Marco’s ugly claim that he has “earned [his] diamond [back] with this blood... he wipe[s] his finger under his bloody nose and with two strokes stained my cheeks” (110). Marked with two painterly stitches of blood, Esther leaves Marco “on his hands and knees, scrabbling in the darkness for another, smaller darkness” – her evening bag, which “hid the light of his diamond from his furious eyes” (110). As she goes, Esther again produces an amalgam of earth, body, and commodity as she keeps “to the fringe of the shadows so nobody would notice the grass plastered to my dress and shoes... with my black stole I covered my shoulders and bare breasts” (110). Marco’s attack reifies Esther, leaving her transformed, at the fringes, and covered in dirt, leaves, and grass. The Daphnean metamorphosis by near-escape, which takes place at the midpoint of the novel, tessellates

further meanings out of Esther's surname, "Greenwood," here imagined as the pliant body of a virgin transformed into stiff, impenetrable wood and green leaves.

Leaving New York the next morning, Esther considers her own reflection: "I hadn't, at the last moment, felt like washing off the two diagonal lines of dried blood that marked my cheeks. They seemed touching, and rather spectacular, and I thought I would carry them around with me" (112-13). The words "touching" and "spectacular" bind affective meaning to the haptic and visual experience of material reality. Esther's desire to preserve the stitches of the woman-hater's blood on her face is remarkable, not least because "if I smiled or moved my face much, the blood would flake away in no time, so I kept my face immobile, and when I had to speak I spoke through my teeth, without disturbing my lips" (113). Here, the clamped seam of Esther's lips plays on the yonic meaning of those other lips Irigaray discusses as well. When her mother asks what happened to her face, she says that she cut herself, turning the violence she enacted on Marco inward again, and foreshadowing her own acts of self-harm to come. Shortly after her arrival home, Esther falls into depression and plans to slit her wrists in the bath, imagining an Ophelian death in doubles:

Flush after flush through the clear water, till I sank to sleep under a surface gaudy as poppies.... I thought maybe I ought to spill a little blood for practice.... I felt nothing. Then I felt a small, deep thrill, and a bright seam of red welled up at the lip of the slash. The blood gathered darkly, like fruit, and rolled down my ankle into the cup of my black patent leather shoe. (148)

Disrupting the smooth skin of her leg with a "seam" of blood, Esther imagines the cut as a site of suture, rather than division, and the blood as ripe and productive, rolling into the waiting vessel of her shiny black shoe. She examines "the two flesh-colored Band-Aids forming a cross on the calf" of one of her two legs, at the center of which is another "cut," her female sex, the site of another bloody splitting to come (147). Plath layers the adjectival kenning "flesh-colored" over the brand name "Band-Aid," and, as in the arcane form of alliterative verse, the consonants flesh-colored/forming and cross/calf divide the line into halves. The line's formal qualities divide it in two and then in two again, much as its content names the yonic cut that divides the skin in two. In Plath's highly, but not infinitely, connective world, binaries are destabilized, but not discarded. If sex is the metonymic marker for the body and gender the metaphorical stand-in for the self, these kennings are pairs which are not two; they point both inward (hermeneutically representative) and outward (monadically connective).

Just hours after making practice cuts on her calf, Esther packs her razors into a handbag and takes the subway to Deer Island, where she decides to drown herself. She inverts the initial image in the novel, of the girls "who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size-seven patent leather shoes," thinking instead, "I was the only girl on the beach in a skirt and high heels, and it occurred to me I must stand out" (150?) Her shoes reappear as a sign both metaphoric and metonymic of Esther herself. For a moment it seems they will be discarded like the rest of her New York wardrobe, since they "foundered badly in the sand," but instead Esther positions them carefully, musing, "It pleased me to think they would be perched there on the silver log, pointing out to sea, like a sort of soul-compass, after I was dead" (151). Binding the mystical and the artificial, the odd kenning "soul-compass" multiplies through the pun on "sole." Plath assembles Esther's

surroundings on the beach, piece by piece, beginning with her observation-cum-kenning, “The log I sat on was lead-heavy and smelled of tar.” Even as these pieces come together, Esther’s own body is reduced to its parts and the landscape to personified, synecdochic fragments. She thinks “longingly of the black shoes on the beach” as “a wave drew back, like a hand, then advanced and touched my foot... A second wave collapsed over my feet, lipped with white froth, and the chill gripped my ankles with a mortal ache. My flesh winced...from such a death” (153). Here, the sea’s metaphoric-metonymic body parts lie adjacent and complementary to Esther’s own, and she considers the bodily detritus of “the sea floor itself,” a vision of “blind white fish” and “great polar cold... I saw sharks’ teeth and whales’ ear bones littered about down there like gravestones.” The bits and pieces frighten Esther again with their minimization of her whole, and she turns back from the water, once more forgoing suicide and “start[ing] back over the cold stones to where my shoes kept their vigil in the violet light” (153). The same images, however, suffuse Esther’s most successful suicide attempt later in the novel. She swallows a number of sleeping pills and climbs into the cellar of her family home, where “the silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep” (169). The use of “baring” rather than the homophonic “bearing” highlights how the suicide attempt doubles as exposure and enclosure – as the feminized body itself: the tide both strips away to reveal depth, but also acts as a vessel, carrying innumerable fragments.

The shoes catch Esther’s blood again when she moves to Boston and loses her virginity to a young mathematics professor. Ridding herself of her virginity, which “weigh[s] like a millstone around [her] neck,” she waits “for the miraculous change to make itself felt,” sensing instead “sharp, startlingly bad pain” (228-9). Irwin’s towel, “packed between her thighs like a bandage” recalls the Band-Aid cross on her leg and the “old leg-break” from her skiing accident with Buddy. Hailing a taxi, Esther goes to Joan’s apartment for help. The textural spectacle of blood links the incident to her earlier “practice” for suicide, and the scene includes the most concentrated descriptions of the shoes in the novel:

I wondered when Joan would notice the blood trickling down my legs and oozing, stickily, into each black patent leather shoe. (230)

I made a little bitter grin as another soak of blood let itself through the drenched padding and started the tedious journey into my shoes. (230)

I bent down, with a brief grunt, and slipped off one of my winter-cracked black Bloomingdale shoes. I held the shoe up, before Joan's enlarged, pebbly eyes, tilted it, and watched her take in the stream of blood that cascaded onto the beige rug. (231)

As the material, clotting thickness of the blood makes its “tedious journey” into the vessels of her shoes, Plath’s kenning, “winter-cracked,” modifies the “black Bloomingdale shoes” and highlights the fracturing of their worn surface, the material layers of oil and pigment that comprise the once-smooth gloss of the shoes. As she “tilt[s]” one shoe, savoring the spectacle she is producing for Joan, “the stream of blood that cascade[s] onto the beige rug” transmits the blood to a second absorptive surface and rehearses the emission of bodily fluids throughout the text, which constitute the dramatic literalization of the “spill-all” or “pot-

boiler.” In her diaries, these are the sharp, sensory moments that Plath considers in relation to her praise for Faulkner: “Where are my small incidents, the blood poured from the shoes?”

In a feminist restaging of the birth scene earlier in the novel, a woman (Joan) attends to Esther, laying her down on a couch and elevating her feet before calling the doctor, and staunching the flow of blood rather than causing it:

Like a prompt nurse, she peeled back my blood-wet clothes, drew a quick breath as she arrived at the original royal red towel, and applied a fresh bandage. I lay, trying to slow the beating of my heart, as every beat pushed forth another gush of blood. I remembered a worrisome course in the Victorian novel where woman after woman died, palely and nobly, in torrents of blood, after a difficult childbirth. Perhaps Irwin had injured me in some awful, obscure way, and...I was really dying. (232)

Esther’s alarm at her “blood-wet clothes” and her attempt to slow her heartbeat recall the mantra of her pulse: “I am, I am, I am.” In sharp contrast to Joan’s gentle, if inept care, Esther’s treatment in the doctor’s office repeats both the scene of penetration and the birthing scene once more; like the “cut” woman, she must be sewn up to stem the emission of blood. Esther becomes a medical curiosity as the doctor’s “fingers start to probe... I winced at a particularly bad jab. The doctor whistled. ‘You’re one in a million... I mean it’s one in a million it happens to like this... I can see...exactly where the trouble is coming from.’ ‘But can you fix it?’ The doctor laughed. ‘Oh, I can fix it, all right’” (233). Just as her patent-leather shoes were the placeholder for ‘thousands of other college girls’ who would have loved to be in her place, here Esther’s body is metonymically representative, one in a million, set apart by the luck of her own excessive bleeding, her pain a mild amusement to her doctor.

As the narrative episodes taper, Esther creates a mental collage of herself and her world, recombining the components of kennings and compounds she has employed throughout the novel in a pastiche against her own ruin: “picture of a girl with black-shadowed eyes and black lips spread in a grin... that was what I wore in my spinach-picking summer... a dozen moon-faced people in a wood... a featureless cabbage head into the back of an ambulance... stick them in a scrapbook” (198). Esther reimagines the psychoanalytic figure of the dream in just this faceted, rather than symbolic, fashion as well:

To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream... I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig tree and Marco’s diamond and the sailor on the Common and Doctor Gordon’s wall-eyed nurse and the broken thermometers and the Negro with his two kinds of beans and the twenty pounds I gained on insulin and the rock that bulged between sky and sea like a gray skull. Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind snow, should numb and cover them. But they were part of me. They were my landscape. (237)

Moving beyond symbolic valences, these fragments are made architectural and dimensional by Esther’s work of assembly, her power to break apart and remake the world, to build from binaries but also beyond binaries, making of the “hotchpotch” of experience an ever-changing, dimensional, if hollow, coherent whole. Replacing her shoes for the final time on the last page of the novel, Esther nervously awaits her release from the hospital, describing her self through pairs (like her stockings and shoes) defined by their multiplying seams, cracks, and other assembled points of suture: “My stocking seams were straight, my black

shoes cracked, but polished, and my red wool suit flamboyant as my plans. Something old, something new. . . . But I wasn't getting married. There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice – patched, retreaded and approved for the road” (244). The cliché “something old, something new” applies here not to marriage, but to the metaphorical reproduction and delivery of a newly conglomerated self.

In a moment of clarity, Esther works out the multiplicity of the seeming binary. Walking alongside her friend at the hospital, she observes how “Valerie pushed aside her black bangs and indicated two pale marks, one on either side of her forehead, as if at some time she had started to sprout horns, but cut them off. . . . ‘I’ve had a lobotomy.’ I looked at Valerie in awe, appreciating for the first time her perpetual marble calm” (192). Paralleling the strokes of blood Marco leaves on Esther’s own cheeks when she defends herself from assault, Valerie’s scars mark the neutralization of a treacherous, feminine madness. The operation, which severs the links between the two hemispheres of the brain at the frontal lobe, leaves Valerie incapable of anger, but, in Jameson’s phrasing, incapable of all other feelings as well. It is the rich network of connections across such binaries and among categorical sets that ultimately affords Esther’s own process of meaning-making, and the reader’s as well. What the passage suggests is that the very structures we establish in order to make sense of the overwhelming data of experience are themselves ontologically unstable, and are necessarily subject to constant revision and reconstruction in order to accommodate our growing contextual understanding. This is the work of tension that theories of readership insistently describe, but it is also that informal geometry vital to phenomenological experience, what Plath termed, in her diaries, that “geometric tension of color and form. . . . the ugliness which by man’s sense of wishful thinking becomes a beauty touching us all.”⁷⁵ In readerly fashion, Esther must actively assemble the aggregate sense data of her world and transform them into an ever-changing structure of meaning, a dimensional whole that, while vacuous and fictive as narrative itself, effectively mediates our experience and allows for expansion. Plath’s repeated use of the compound signals an aesthetics of figuration that etymologically, either to *know* or to *birth* – the kenning serves as a feminist way of knowing in *The Bell Jar*, disrupting the gender binary and infusing epistemology with phenomenology through the readerly work of faceting. By joining the various, textured, episodic segments of this early postmodern text into a dimensional, if hollow, structure, *The Bell Jar* comes to mean – through its pairs which are not two.

NOTES:

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- ¹ Linda W. Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987) 134.
- ² Frieda Hughes, *Sylvia Plath: Drawings* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013) 4.
- ³ *Ibid.* 19. Sylvia Plath, *Study of Shoes*, 1956. Pen and ink on paper.
- ⁴ *Ibid.* viii. Interview with Lee Anderson, Springfield, MA (April 18, 1958).
- ⁵ *Ibid.* vii. According to Frieda, Ted Hughes relayed how “the very act calmed my mother, and how she became focused and still, and how, as the hours burned away the objects she rendered were tortured into their last position, and the whole scene was imprisoned, for ever.”
- ⁶ Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000) 458.
- ⁷ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 2. Quotations from the novel will hereafter be cited parenthetically, except where multiple pages are referenced.
- ⁸ See David Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (London: AC Black, 2014) 94-6 and Nóra Séllei, “The Fig Tree and the Black Patent Leather Shoes: The Body and its Representation in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*,” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 9, no. 2 (2003) 127-154.
- ⁹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985) 31.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* 27.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* 29.
- ¹² *Ibid.* 30.
- ¹³ See Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Cinema & Suture,” *Screen* 18 (1977-8) 35-47.
- ¹⁴ “Kenning” comes from the Icelandic for the poetic term and is related to the Germanic verb “ken,” to know or to learn. The verb “ken” survives in English in the verb “can” and in “(un)canny” (Freud’s *unheimlich*), in which that which is familiar returns, defamiliarized. Over the centuries, a kenning has also referred to a measure of grain, a range of sight, a perceptible portion of something, or even the node within an egg yolk from which the embryo grows. It can imply carnal knowledge, as in the closely related “cunning,” one of Chaucer’s favorite sexual euphemisms. As a term, then, it is suffused by concepts of epistemology, sexuality, pregnancy, figuration, and growth. See the Oxford English Dictionary (oed.com).
- ¹⁵ The three traditional forms of the kenning in Old English are the noun-noun kenning (*whale-road*), the possessive kenning (*whale’s road*), and the prepositional kenning (*road of whales*). A fourth, less noticeable form is the open kenning, formed from a noun and an adjective, sometimes hyphenated, but more often not (*wakeful sleeper*), and resembling an epithet. The fifth type is the compound adjectival kenning. Strictly speaking, compound adjectives are not kennings, but skaldic scholars believe they developed as arbiters of more elaborate kennings, so that a “sea-steed” might become “foamy-throated sea-steed,” with the compound adjectives evolving and appearing outside the original kennings thereafter. Probably because of that potential for “kenning” to describe any part of a long chain of modifying terms in Old Norse, Old English, and Germanic poetry, English speakers count figurative compound adjectives themselves, especially from other language traditions, in the class of kennings. See Michael Lapidge’s note on kennings and poetic technique in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).
- ¹⁶ Plath, *The Bell Jar* 3, 5, 5, 8, 40.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.* 21, 24, 25, 35, 88, 97, 161, 187.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* 14, 18, 20, 27, 78, 141, 158, 198.
- ¹⁹ Roman Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” *On Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 115-33.
- ²⁰ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) 3.
- ²¹ Martin Joos, “Review: *Fundamentals of Language* by Roman Jakobson, Morris Halle,” *Language* 33, no. 3 (1957) 410. Joos writes, “There has been at least one type of trope which characteristically combined metaphor and metonymy in perfect condensation. That was the KENNING in old Germanic literature, which was the dominant trope of skaldic poetry... it is Jakobson in this essay who made me see the possibility of such a definition – without himself mentioning anything like a kenning.” Gerard Genette takes up this concern in “Metonymy in Proust,” where, also without describing kennings, he explores the necessity of both metaphor and metonymy to Jakobson’s theory of literary figuration. See Gerard Genette, “Metonymy in Proust,” transl. Margaret J. Flynn, in Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014) 448.

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- ²² David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 280.
- ²³ Jakobson 122.
- ²⁴ Ibid. 125.
- ²⁵ In an earlier poem, “Virgin in a Tree,” Plath melds Daphne with Ophelia, punning on “chased girls who get them to a tree/And put on bark’s nun-black,” reversing the dynamic of sexual penetration. Recalling Irigaray’s deconstruction of the vagina as utile sleeve for the phallic sword, here the female form is sheathed *from*, rather than sheath *to*.
- ²⁶ In skaldic poetry, too, the demands of alliteration meant that successful, legible kennings were used again and again, becoming idiomatic, if not cliché (see Lapidge).
- ²⁷ Plath, *The Bell Jar* 48, 140, 15, 76, 81, 76, 141.
- ²⁸ Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* 107.
- ²⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1991) 8.
- ³⁰ Ibid. 7.
- ³¹ Ibid. 8. See also Marjorie Perloff, *Poetry On & Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004) 19-20. Perloff restates Jameson’s logic of the boots as metonymic, rather than metaphoric, since “the part ipso facto stands for the whole,” pointing out a monadic chain of relation between object, genre, and even nation.
- ³² Jameson 10.
- ³³ Ibid. 8.
- ³⁴ Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) 22.
- ³⁵ In Jameson 11, 12. Vincent Van Gogh, *A Pair of Shoes*, 1886, oil on Canvas and Andy Warhol, *Diamond Dust Shoes*, 1980, screenprint with diamond dust on paper.
- ³⁶ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 29.
- ³⁷ Ibid. 63.
- ³⁸ Jameson 9.
- ³⁹ Ibid. 11-12.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid. 12.
- ⁴¹ Ibid. 15.
- ⁴² Ibid. 8.
- ⁴³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 8.
- ⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1971) 202.
- ⁴⁵ Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson, “Social Criticisms Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism,” in Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 34-35.
- ⁴⁶ David Carroll, *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (New York: Methuen, 1987) xiv.
- ⁴⁷ Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 184.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid. 189, 184.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid. 184.
- ⁵⁰ Plath *Journals* 35.
- ⁵¹ Avrum Stroll, *Surfaces* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 12. “This system of informal geometry is [a]... nontechnical view of the world that virtually all of us share.... that aspect of it that human beings employ for organizing and structuring the world in quasi-geometric terms... relates to scientific and mathematical conceptions in certain cases where they impinge upon one another, in particular where and why they are at odds.”
- ⁵² Harding, Archibald B. and Miljo Chemical Company, Inc., assignee. Patent US3298856 A (January 17, 1967). With the rise of plastics, polyurethane coatings were developed for commercial use in the 1950s; a U.S. patent from 1965 (published 1967) details the replacement of oil and pigment, which had been more prone to cracking; indeed, Esther’s shoes crack and require repair before the end of the narrative. Thus, between the

novel's initial publication and its posthumous appearance in America, the manufacture of patent leather changed from organic to synthetic.

⁵³ Linda Wagner-Martin, ed., *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Company, 1984) 107. (See also 103-6).

⁵⁴ Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home by Sylvia Plath: Correspondence 1950-1963*, Aurelia Plath, ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992) 472, 476.

⁵⁵ Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath & the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 3.

⁵⁶ Oxford English Dictionary (oed.com).

⁵⁷ Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* 212.

⁵⁸ Plath writes that she and Ted were living "on a shoestring for a year in Boston writing to see what we could do." See Lois Ames, "Notes Towards a Biography," in Charles Newman, *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970) 167-8.

⁵⁹ Britzolakis 162.

⁶⁰ Plath, *The Bell Jar* 63 65 63 66.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 192, 200.

⁶² Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (London: Virago, 1980) 30-31.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 30-31.

⁶⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) 184-5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 167.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 175.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 9-10.

⁶⁸ Plath, *The Bell Jar* 16, 19, 20, 20.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 30, 33, 35.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 28, 146, 30.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 87, 87, 114, 140, 157, 135.

⁷² *Ibid.* 47, 89, 90, 92, 130, 96-7, 99.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 149, 200, 210, 238, 184.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 240, 59, 200.

⁷⁵ Plath, *Journals*, 35.

CHAPTER 2

“SO YOU MAY THINK OF A ROCK POOL”: CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD’S *A SINGLE MAN*

In the midst of Christopher Isherwood’s 1964 novel *A Single Man*, Kenny, George’s undergraduate student, asks his middle-aged professor, “Did you ever take mescaline, sir? . . . And did it make you see things – like mystical visions and stuff?”¹ George replies that he did take mescaline once, years ago, before it was illegal, musing:

At first I felt seasick . . . everything becomes more and more three-dimensional: Curtains get heavy and sculptured-looking, and wood is very grainy . . . it’s as if the walls of the room and everything around you are breathing, and the grain in the woodwork begins to flow, as though it were a liquid . . . Afterwards I felt fine. I ate a huge supper. (77-8)

George’s descriptive loop – which begins with the physical sensation of ‘seasickness,’ drifts into a fluid perception of environmental interchangeability, and then returns to the shore of the material body – cycles through, in miniature, the tidal structure of the novel itself. In proffering material surfaces as probable spaces of mental depth, too, *A Single Man* presents an osmotic boundary between the sensory and the symbolic. The flow between the material and the mental forms a quiet tension that threads the backbone of the novel, ultimately suggesting narrative itself as a connective nerve between the two interdependent realms. In this chapter,

I take up Isherwood's interest in the spatial, the textural, and the sculptural to consider how *A Single Man* reverses and remakes the binary through its multiplication and disintegration.

Like the sequence in George's brief description of mescaline hallucination, the opening and closing passages of *A Single Man* closely attend to the physical body. The novel's first lines describe the sensation of waking, even as they elide an automatic identification or gendering of the self:

Waking up begins with saying *am* and *now*. That which has awoken then lies for a while staring up at the ceiling and down into itself until it has recognized *I*, and therefrom deduced *I am*, *I am now*. *Here* comes next, and is at least negatively reassuring; because *here*, this morning, is where it has expected to find itself: what's called *at home*. (9)

In drawing attention to the body as a physical object ('that which has awoken') and the constitution of the self as a daily exercise, Isherwood elongates and problematizes the Cartesian *cogito* – it is not simply *I think, therefore I am*, but rather that '*am*' and '*now*' precede a recognition of *I*, followed by the sensory awareness of an *itself*, spatially and temporally situated *here* and *now*.² Though Isherwood's practice of Vedantism might entail a sharp, skeptical division similar to Descartes' between the material life of the individual (*Maya*) and the collective transcendence of the mind (*Brahman*), *A Single Man* instead suggests from its inception that the mental world is never entirely separable from that of the senses, and that even the bodily self cannot be wholly isolated by categories of rational thought.³ Like the wax Descartes himself employs to metaphorize the unreliability of perception, *A Single Man* implies the shifting status of the self and the reliance of all symbolic language on actual, material objects.⁴ Indeed, the subject's gender appears only in the bathroom mirror, with a recognition of "the face of the child, the boy, the young man, the not-so-young man – all present still, preserved like fossils on superimposed layers, and, like fossils, dead" (9-10).

This process continues toward a narrowed identity, for the "living dying creature," so that "by the time it has gotten dressed, it has become *he*; has become more or less George – though still not the whole George they demand and are prepared to recognize" (11). The schism between George's progressive, if reluctant, *self*-recognition and the still more drastically gendered, 'heterosexual' self he must yet prepare for the world draws attention to the way materiality underpins processes of identification. Before he dons his cultural mask, George is just a "three-quarters-human thing," a fraction that resonates eerily with his anxiety about devaluation and censure across the novel (12). His morning routine is nothing if not "a performance that is *repeated*" within the bounds of compulsory heterosexuality, and his ebbing, attenuated 'selves' enact Judith Butler's assertion that "the body is not a 'being,' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated."⁵ It is George's own awareness that these versions of the self are "instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous" and exist within "a constituted *social temporality*" that gives color, throughout the story, to his various self-fashionings, as this "perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization."⁶

The novel's title, too, toys suggestively with the flux of meanings a single word might carry: *A Single Man* is at once an insistence on the uniqueness of the individual, an anonymous umbrella term for an entire cultural demographic, a euphemism for his 'bachelor' lifestyle as

a gay man, and a constant label of his loneliness after the death of his partner. The novel's first 'episode' (it has no chapters, but is loosely broken up into blocks of text), ends with the revelation: "It knows its name. It is called George," highlighting, once again, the place of external recognition in the passive composition of the self (11). This deferral of identification functions both to objectify George physically and to universalize him mentally, and the first real indicator of his individuality establishes a nervous link between mind and matter: he feels a "spasm" of grief at the daily thought of his late partner Jim, which passes with "relief merely, like getting over an attack of cramp" (13). George's initial sensory perception upon waking is also affectively bound, as "fear tweaks the vagus nerve" (9). One of twelve 'cranial' nerves, the vagus nerve connects the brain and the viscera, including the stomach and lungs, via the jugular. From the Latin for 'wandering,' the vagus is almost entirely composed of afferent receptors – that is, it *receives* sensory information rather than controlling motor functions. In a letter, Isherwood himself described the narrator's voice in *A Single Man* as

a non-personal, seemingly disembodied narrator who never says 'I' and addresses the reader with the air of a surgeon lecturing to medical students during an operation... The narrator knows everything that George feels and thinks... But he is not a part of George. Indeed it *will be possible* for George to die while the narrator looks on and describes his death to the reader.⁷

Of course, as Claude J. Summers writes, if "the novel presents George with what at first appears to be clinical detachment, as a kind of biological exhibit," during its course, "the distance between [the narrator] and George gradually narrows," circling back to the tone of distanced physicality only at the end, a structure which "unobtrusively underlines the novel's body-spirit dichotomy" for Summers and serves to "establish the book's double vision, its simultaneous concern with the mundane and the transcendent."⁸

The linguistic interplay of *A Single Man* persistently allies the symbolic with the sensory world upon which it is based. As John William Miller contends in *The Definition of the Thing*, "all symbols, being also part of the region of objects, assure the actuality of that region by their own actuality."⁹ For Miller, the problem of 'linguistic regressus' inheres in language because language itself is known in terms of other language and "does not bear the relation of part-whole to things."¹⁰ Nevertheless, "we know both other minds and nature through symbolic artifacts," so that the linguistic mediation of the sensory and the symbolic acts as the "means of self-revelation, of influence, of the disclosure of other minds... Language of all sorts is not the *means* of communication, but the *actuality* of communion."¹¹ Peter Hallward has described the importance of language in flux to Alain Badiou's concept of truth, where the acceptance of "an essential uncertainty principle" allows truth to "continue as an infinite or unending process" that "can never be reincorporated into the realm of knowledge and objectivity."¹² For Badiou himself, "a truth works in the retroaction of an almost nothing and the anticipation of an almost everything," a process by which the symbolic 'unnamable' serves as "a genuinely unforceable term."¹³ Like the ongoing, shifting construction of George's selves, the process of the narrative act represents some portion of that 'unnamable truth' precisely in its incompleteness, in its continuation, as narrative, to attempt the accommodation of both the symbolic and the sensory as dialectical elements.

Critics of *A Single Man* have often interpreted the novel's expansive representations of fluidity, especially the final image of the rock pools, as Isherwood's Vedantic prioritization of the spiritual mind over and above the physical body:

Up the coast a few miles north, in a lava reef under the cliffs, there are a lot of rock pools. You can visit them when the tide is out... Just as George and the others are thought of, for convenience, as individual entities, so you may think of a rock pool as an entity... And, just as the waters of the ocean come flooding, darkening over the pools, so over George and the others in sleep come the waters of that other ocean – that consciousness which is no one in particular but which contains everyone and everything, past, present and future and extends unbroken beyond the uttermost stars. (183-4)

Brian Finney, for instance, writes that a major difference between *A Single Man* and Isherwood's Berlin work "is the elementary presupposition which the Vedantist shares with anyone who believes that life of some sort continues after death – that the everyday conception of the self is an illusion... a deceptive nature of personality."¹⁴ Lisa M. Schwerdt holds that George "finds his Atman and glimpses eternal reality" in the final pages, and that "having thus achieved and demonstrated man's goal in life in George, Isherwood has no further need of him as a character, and we are asked to imagine his death and union with the universe."¹⁵ Claude J. Summers adds nuance to this view by acknowledging that the novel's lens is "complex, even double: the assertions of individual uniqueness and of minority consciousness are regarded as indispensable worldly goals."¹⁶ However, Summers ultimately triages the Vedantic reading as well, arguing that "for all George's fierce insistence on his individuality, the *Maya* of personal identity finally yields to the *Brahman* of impersonal universality."¹⁷ In *My Guru and His Disciple*, however, Isherwood himself articulates a more complex relationship between his spiritual and physical selves, recalling that

despite my love for Swami, I used to draw a breath of relief when I left his room... like a child escaping from the presence of an elder, simply... to feel himself free to chatter and be silly... my life is still beautiful to me... because of Don [Bachardy], because of the enduring fascination of my efforts to describe my life experience in my writing, because of my interest in the various predicaments of my fellow travelers on this journey.¹⁸

For Isherwood, writing offered the most powerful means of mediating these two core forms of experience, and in fact, he was partially drawn to Vedanta by another writer, Aldous Huxley, whose ideology "certainly informs the view that George is a 'live dying' creature" in *A Single Man*.¹⁹ When Isherwood visited Huxley on his deathbed in 1963, his diaries register confusion about the entangled nature of mind and body: "Aldous is dying... his mind seems to be as good as ever – that marvelous instrument, about to be swallowed up in the ruins and shattered."²⁰ Penning *A Single Man* was not so much an opportunity for a straightforwardly dogmatic representation of Vedantic spirituality, but, in Isherwood's words, "an attempt to study this individual (George) in depth, as a sort of *constellation of impulses* which only jells into a 'personality' at certain times of the day and in the presence of other people."²¹

Indeed, as David Bergman writes in "Isherwood and the Violet Quill," "George is remarkable as "a representation of gay men not because he is typical but because he is

individual,” depicting “the complex and often ambivalent ways gay men deal with spirituality” and providing one of the first examples of gay literature that demonstrated how “one could combine both spiritual and sexual concerns.”²² In John McFarland’s “‘Always Dance’: Sex and Salvation in Isherwood’s Vedantism,” the author makes the case for “that fluid and tenuous balance between the spiritual and the worldly” in *A Single Man*, vital to Isherwood, whose “need to personalize everything did not stop when it came to spiritual matters.”²³ Fellow novelist Edmund White, too, writes of Isherwood as a “man who had accumulated decades of extraordinary experience but lived entirely in the moment,” explaining his interest in the nexus between the individual experience and the spiritual ideal by noting, “He had been a member of the gentry in England, had lived in Berlin in the 1930s, then had worked for Hollywood. A friend of W. H. Auden and Spender, he was a Hindu convert who translated the *Bhagavad Gita*.”²⁴ For McFarland, this multiplicity of the self makes *A Single Man* at once “personal, objective, and mindful of the larger spiritual dimension at the same time that it is wise, artful, and unapologetically carnal,” so that “Isherwood’s conclusion about how we live and love in our mortal body emerges from his two lasting profound loves – for the Swami and for Bachardy.”²⁵

This carnal-spiritual dynamic is evident in George’s description of the mescaline trip, where his symbolic language is tied to a number of specific, material objects. George refers to a literary example of mind-body transmogrification from Robert Louis Stevenson, saying that in addition to feeling ‘seasick,’ he was “scared a bit, of course. Like Dr. Jekyll might have felt after he’d taken his drug for the first time” (77). The Stevenson reference also encodes the Victorian public/private sexual hermeneutic of homosexuality, and George makes a further reference to secret sexuality in *Anna Karenina* as he continues: “And then certain colors began to get very bright and stand out. You couldn’t think why everybody didn’t notice them. I remember a woman’s red purse lying on a table in a restaurant – it was like a public scandal!” (77) Finally, after describing the liquid, breathing walls of the room and the ‘three-dimensional’ curtains, George recalls, “And flowers and plants are quite obviously alive. I remember a pot of violets – they weren’t moving, but you knew they could move. Each one was like a snake reared up motionless on its coils” (78). The taut energy of these ‘violet snakes’ further charges George’s language with sexual innuendo. Thus the drug, the purse, and the violets function materially – as physical objects with which George actually interacts – and as symbolic, extradiegetic references to two literary works and to his own covertly scandalous sexuality. Like the colors George incredulously ‘can’t think why everybody didn’t notice,’ George himself is a sort of wallflower who ‘passes’ by virtue of his flat, ‘straight’ surface, despite the tangible availability of his ‘true color’ (violet) in the symbolic dimension just beneath the surface of his discourse.

Even in ‘passing,’ George frequently imagines himself surveilled, positioning himself, in Foucauldian terms, as a body that has incorporated the law into its self-presentation. Just as George emphasizes to Kenny that the mescaline was *legal* when he took it, he avoids speeding on his way to work in the morning because

like everyone with an acute criminal complex, George is hyperconscious of all bylaws, city ordinances, rules, and petty regulations. Think of how many Public Enemies have been caught just because they neglected to pay a parking ticket! Never once has he seen his passport stamped at a frontier, his driver’s license accepted by a post-office

clerk as evidence of identity, without whispering gleefully to himself, *Idiots – fooled them again!* (33)

As Jaime Harker notes in *Middlebrow Queer: Christopher Isherwood in America*, “secret agents must be talented actors; multiple identities are a tool of the trade, a conscious transformation of the (queer) self to protect and operate undetected in a hostile environment” (120). From within his own home, George engages the specter of espionage, imagining himself not as the spy, but as the surveilled subject, and envisioning

the brief visit of an observer from another country who is permitted to peep in for a moment from the vast outdoors of his freedom and see, at a distance, through glass, this figure who sits solitary at the small table in the narrow room, eating his poached eggs humbly and dully, a prisoner for life. (15)

In a perverse enactment of religious reformation, too, the neighborhood children “had been beating on the door of the house with a hammer,” and George imagines how his neighbor, “Mr. Strunk, George supposes, tries to nail him down with a word. *Queer*, he doubtless growls” (21, 27). Yet the private space of the home, from which George imagines himself being panoptically observed, is also a bellwether of his integration into mainstream American life. George, like his heterosexual suburban neighbors, is a homeowner, and as such, “even the least among them is a co-owner of the American utopia, the kingdom of the good life upon earth – crudely aped by the Russians, hated by the Chinese – who are nonetheless ready to purge and starve themselves for generations, in the hopeless hope of inheriting it” (26). The house, too, is a physical retreat; he once told Jim it was “as good as being on our own island,” since “you could only get to it by the bridge across the creek” (20). Like the rock pools on the shore, George imagines the ‘island’ house as a separate entity, protected from the rest of the neighborhood by its creek. Beyond its little moat, George’s castle also has a garage defensively “covered with a vast humped growth of ivy, half dead, half alive, which made it twice as big as itself,” and unlike the other houses, which “face the street frontally, wide-openly,” George’s is marked by “sidewise privacy,” making it “just the lair you’d choose for a mean old storybook monster.”²⁶

In their introduction to *Homoconomics* (1997), Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed celebrate ad campaigns from the 1990s directed at the gay community as a kind of late induction into popular American culture: “it was just a century ago that medical textbooks, rather than glossy magazines, detailed the nature of gay life.”²⁷ Yet in tracking the supposed transition in treatment from clinical to capital, the authors acknowledge that “gay men and lesbians have long been entangled in a contradictory relationship with capitalism,” not least because “the ways in which the U.S. economy has shaped modern gay life remain virtually unexplored.”²⁸ Foucault describes ‘the homosexual’ as a nineteenth-century construct of Victorian culture:

a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality... a certain way of *inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself*... a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.²⁹

In his 1983 piece “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” John D’Emilio builds on the economic vein in Foucault’s historical account, arguing that “in divesting the household of economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex.”³⁰ For D’Emilio, capitalism itself operates as a “constant interplay between exploitation and some measure of autonomy,” as well as a mode of relating the material commodity to its symbolic value.³¹ Like Foucault, D’Emilio cites the nineteenth century as a historical shift for gay life in the West, since the rise of wage labor, investment, and the decline of home production entailed the possibility of non-reproductive social units: “only when *individuals* began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity.”³² At the same time, however, capitalism has continued to emphasize the centrality of the nuclear unit, since “the privatized family fits well with capitalist relations of production.”³³ Thus the quagmire of queer life under capitalism is that it both provides the material conditions for alternatives to the heterosexual family unit at the same time that it operates under the ideological condemnation of those alternatives. This makes for a “contradictory relationship,” where, despite capitalism’s select affordances for independent gay life, “in the most profound sense, capitalism is the problem” for queer liberation.³⁴ D’Emilio continues:

Materially, capitalism weakens the bonds that once kept families together so that their members experience a growing instability... while capitalism has knocked the material foundation away from family life, lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual feminists have become the scapegoats for the social instability of the system.³⁵

In sketching the establishment of American queer communities, D’Emilio stresses the importance of the wartime 1940s, especially in coastal California, to the expansion and development of the gay movement through bars and other queer businesses. George corroborates this in his nostalgic fondness for the old days at his local bar, The Starboard Side, in “that summer of 1945! The war as good as over. The blackout no more than an excuse for keeping the lights out at a gangbang... in the complete privacy of the din and the crowd, you and your pickup yelled the preliminary sex advances at each other” (147). The following summer, as the queer culture of Santa Monica blossoms, George meets Jim:

And then the beach-months of 1946. The magic squalor of those hot nights, when the whole shore was alive with tongues of flame, the watchfires of a vast naked barbarian tribe... coupling without shame on the sand. George and Jim (who had just met) were out there among them, evening after evening, yet not enough to satisfy the sad fierce appetite of memory, as it looks back hungrily on that glorious Indian summer of lust. (148)

Yet even as the war permits the existence of this utopian community, George also remembers it as the catalyst of “the Great Change,” when the veterans came to the coast “in search of new and better breeding grounds,” pushing out the original “rear-guard individualists... tacky and cheerful and defiantly bohemian,” so that “the cottages which used to reek of bathtub gin and reverberate with the poetry of Hart Crane have fallen to the occupying army of Coke-drinking television watchers” (17, 18).

D'Emilio's account, too, couples the population boom with containment-era cultural crackdown: "as the subculture expanded and grew more visible in the post-World War II era, oppression by the state intensified, becoming more systematic and inclusive," ushering gay men and women back into the closet as they were purged from military and government positions.³⁶ Thus, as Summers observes, when the novel opens, "George's singleness is particularly underscored by his alienation from a homosexual community," after the halcyon days and 'tribal nights' of 1940s Southern California and "before the Stonewall riots and the gay activist movements."³⁷ Like Foucault's sense of homosexuality as a psychologically-defined role, D'Emilio writes that in midcentury America, "the popularization of the medical model... affected the consciousness of the women and men who experienced homosexual desire, so that they came to define themselves through their erotic life."³⁸ Indeed, in Summers' assessment of George, "homosexuality is the characteristic that most pervasively defines [his] life," and he is "constantly aware of being gay in a straight world."³⁹

Simultaneously, as Miriam G. Reumann suggests in *American Sexual Character: Sex, Gender, and National Identity in the Kinsey Reports*, American popular culture of the time was uncomfortably aware that "although theories about the cause of homosexuality varied widely, they shared one distressing similarity: nearly all implicated the nation itself in the development of homosexuality."⁴⁰ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. decried the moral equivocation of the country and said it was "no accident that homosexuality, that incarnation of sexual ambiguity, should be enjoying a cultural boom new in our history."⁴¹ Linked to the pleasurable, amoral culture of consumption, homosexuality was demoted to a 'role' or 'lifestyle' made possible because, in Julie Matthaei's terms, "advanced capitalism constructs an individuated, consumption-oriented, self-seeking person."⁴² As Reumann puts it,

In an ironic twist, many of the factors repeatedly implicated in the increase of homosexuality were the very same features of modern American life of which social scientists were proudest – leisure, affluence, an efficient war machine that had triumphed in a world war, increasing specialization in work, intimate family bonds – in short, modern American life itself.⁴³

The complex tension between capitalism as both a facilitator and an inhibitor of gay life bears interesting weight for George's defense of American culture in his lunchtime conversation in the university cafeteria. Faced with the almost scripted liberal intellectualism of Cynthia Leach, "a handsome young New Yorker, Sarah Lawrence-trained, the daughter of a rich family," George argues for the potential relation of U.S. material culture and spiritual life (88). Cynthia expounds on the lives of American children:

They're being cheated out of their childhood... They're being turned into *junior consumers!* All those dreadful dainty little creatures, wearing lipstick! I was down in Mexico last month. It was like a breath of fresh air. Oh, I can't tell you! Their children are so real. No anxiety. No other-direction. They just bloom. (89)

Cynthia goes on to describe the "ghastly" experience of returning across the border to the "zombie busboys" and fake waitresses of an "unreal" American diner resembling a "factory," attempting a performance of mental depth by affecting distance from her own culture and the conveniences of modern life (89-90). Cynthia's attempt to probe her surrounding surfaces, however, does not entail a revelation of 'true colors' or the sensation of 'liquid,

breathing walls' as it does for George; rather, it is an altogether alienating experience. In response, George, who takes it for granted that "eating is regarded as a sacrament" and strictly monitors his own diet, fuses appetite and acumen as he "takes a big drink of his coffee, feels the kick of it in his nearly empty stomach, and finds himself suddenly high. 'Really, Cynthia, my dear!' he hears himself exclaim. 'How can you talk such incredible nonsense?'" (90) He then transforms himself into that midcentury symbol of everyday American luxury and takes off: "George feels himself racing down the runway, becoming smoothly, exhilaratingly airborne" (90). He accuses Cynthia of "sound[ing] like some dreary French intellectual who's just set foot in New York for the first time," because

That's exactly the way they talk! *Unreal!* American motels are unreal! My good girl – you know and I know that our motels are deliberately designed to be unreal, if you must use that idiotic jargon, for the very simple reason that an American motel room isn't a room in *an* hotel, it's *the* room, definitively, period. There is only one: *The Room*. And it's a symbol – an advertisement in three dimensions, if you like – for our way of life. And what's our way of life? A building code which demands certain measurements, certain utilities and the use of certain apt materials; no more and no less. Everything else you've got to supply for yourself. (90-1)

In scorning the fashionable Sartrean 'unreal,' George articulates the complex way in which life under and against capitalism might be not just materially rich, but also spiritually fecund. Here again he applies the descriptor of three-dimensionality to surfaces (as he does earlier to the curtains), dismissing Cynthia's simplistic anti-consumerism in favor of a model of material equanimity that might foster spiritual realization:

We've reduced the things of the material plane to mere symbolic conveniences... Until the material plane has been defined and relegated to its proper place, the mind can't ever be truly free.... we've renounced their world of individual differences and romantic inefficiency and objects-for-the-sake-of-objects... *That's* the kind of subversion the Un-American Activities Committee *ought* to be investigating. The Europeans hate us because we've retired to live inside our advertisements, like hermits going into caves to contemplate. We sleep in symbolic bedrooms, eat symbolic meals, are symbolically entertained... Essentially we're creatures of spirit. Our life is all in the mind. That's why we're completely at home with symbols like the American motel room. Whereas the European has a horror of symbols because he's such a groveling little materialist. (91-2)

George's appropriation of the airplane as personal symbology and his treatment of the material elements of 'The Room' as the continuous sensory extensions of the body suit the aims of the 'International Modern Design' movement of the time. Furthermore, the space left for individualization in George's assertion, 'everything else you've got to supply for yourself' echoes D'Emilio's argument that "even as capitalism exerted a homogenizing influence by gradually transforming more individuals into wage laborers and separating them from traditional communities," it also allowed for the parallel growth of independent 'lifestyles.'⁴⁴ For George, a gay man of English birth, whose position as an intellectual of the American upper-middle class affords him relative freedom at the price of surface conformity, it seems there are aspects of this lifestyle worth praising. This at least partially explains why George's

experience of the material world of modern capitalism is not necessarily an inhibitor to transcendence, but in fact the very facilitator of ‘the life of the mind,’ necessarily linked to its bodily vehicle.

By the end of “this wild word-flight ...already George has felt his engines cut out, felt himself losing thrust. So now, with the skill of a veteran pilot, he swoops down to a perfect landing” (92). The arc of George’s airborne monologue lifts his colleagues and the reader out of the material surroundings of the cafeteria and into the discourse of the symbolic before returning to the lunch table once again. As such, it is a linguistic exercise, positioned just at the midpoint of the novel, in the capacity of narrative itself to mediate the distance between the mental and the material. As George leaves the university, he too is fully returned to his physicality, as he “feels a fatigue come over him which is not disagreeable... his steps actually shuffle... His face takes on a dull dreamy placid look. He hums *queerly* to himself, with a sound like bees around a hive. From time to time, as he walks, he emits quite loud, prolonged farts” (93).

As Jaime Harker writes, George defends “consumer capitalism in terms that echo the arguments of pop art,” a postmodern sensibility about the material world that “enshrine[s] the artifacts of capitalism at the center of artistic creation.”⁴⁵ In his speech, in a typical juxtaposition of the visceral and the transcendent, George indicates “these commodities are deeply spiritual,” rendering late capitalism’s superficial aesthetic superior to European modernism, which George dismisses as “that dead old cult of cathedrals and first editions and Paris models and vintage wines” (91).⁴⁶ It is perhaps as a spy – to recall Harker’s terms, an actor who inhabits multiple identities – that George delivers this endorsement of American life. As Harker documents, Isherwood was disinclined to adopt the American “obsession with productivity,” echoed in George’s assertion in the novel that, as a professor, he feels he is hopelessly “selling a real diamond for a nickel.” Consumer culture, while it may allow the existence of gay life outside the bounds of the nuclear family, nonetheless will not protect George from homophobia, nor does it create a politically activated populace, for “serious world events are no more than a spur to conspicuous consumption, a sign of [the] vacuity and the fear”⁴⁷ of that earlier ‘occupying army of Coke-drinking television watchers.’ Containment culture stifles proliferation, encourages stifling conformity, and breeds ignorance and fear; George’s neighbors

are afraid of what they know is somewhere in the darkness around them... The fiend that won’t fit into their statistics, the Gorgon that refuses their plastic surgery... the bad-smelling beast that doesn’t use their deodorants, the unspeakable that insists, despite all their shushing on speaking its name. Among many other kinds of monster, George says, they are afraid of little me. (26-7)

George’s relationship with his closest friend Charlotte, a divorcée, is a mixed bag of tender, mutual support and the erupting tensions of misunderstanding. As ‘a single man’ and ‘a single mother,’ the two are bound by their common struggles and losses. George says that “like him, she is a survivor. She has the survivor’s typical battered doggedness... she hasn’t given up” (121). Joining her for dinner, George draws attention to the gendered, yet platonic, nature of their love: “he begins to feel this utterly mysterious unsensational thing – not bliss, not ecstasy, not joy – just plain happiness. *Das Glueck, le Bonheur, la felicidad* – they have given it all three genders, but one has to admit... it is usually feminine, that’s to say, woman-created.

Charley creates it astonishingly often” (123). In return, George tells her stories when she is agitated; “To please Charley, he has started to make magic; and now the magic is taking hold of him,” letting down his guard in imagery that recalls his mescaline trip: “It’s fun. It adds a new dimension to being drunk. Just as long as there’s no one to hear him but Charley!” (134).

While George the spy remains completely stoic when he receives the phone call that Jim has died, he immediately seeks Charley out in “his blundering gasping run up the hill in the dark, his blind stumbling on the steps, banging at Charley’s door, crying blubbering howling on her shoulder, in her lap, all over her” (126). He resents being subsumed into the refuge of her maternal comforts, however, which reproduce too closely the dynamic of the heterosexual nuclear family. He chides himself in misogynist language: “I betrayed you, Jim; I betrayed our life together; I made you into a sob story for a skirt” (126). Telling himself “that was just hysteria” and “it soon passed,” George feminizes his own emotional release as temporary madness in order to excuse it (126). As Charley speaks about her divorce and worries over her son, she, like George, engages essentialist assumptions that diminish George’s experience, which is itself marked by the challenges of sex and gender. “You’ve never had any children of your own,” Charley points out unnecessarily, and “even if you had had children, it wouldn’t really be the same” because “this mother and son thing” is so complex, particularly, she reminds him, because she is doing it on her own (125). George frames Charley’s grievances as legitimate, and yet her heterosexist assumptions reproduce his more general marginalization and underscore his isolation from a queer community; she even tries to kiss him as he leaves her house, “one of those drunken long shots which just might, at least theoretically, once in ten thousand tries, throw a relationship right out of its orbit and send it whizzing off on another. Do women ever stop trying? No. But, because they never stop, they learn to be good losers” (145). The complex interstices of George and Charley’s friendship sketch out a tenuous intersectional understanding of common injuries, but they also delineate gaps in comprehension between their lived experiences. George’s investment in his queer identity, as well as his grief over Jim’s past unfaithfulness with a woman come to a head when he visits Jim’s ex-lover, Doris, in the hospital. Now a “yellow shriveled mannequin,” he recalls the magnetic and revolting power of her body in youth: “that body which sprawled stark naked, gaping wide in shameless demand, underneath Jim’s naked body” (95). George can only see Doris in symbolic parts, projecting onto her body the enemy and the inversion of his own hard-won identity:

Gross insucking vulva, sly ruthless greedy flesh, all in the bloom and gloss and arrogant resilience of youth, demanding that George shall step aside, bow down and yield to the female prerogative, hide his unnatural head in shame. I am Doris. I am Woman. I am Bitch-Mother Nature. The Church and the Law and the State exist to support me. I claim my biological rights. I demand Jim. (95-6)

George’s construction of Doris as archetypal Woman situates her seamlessly within the hegemony of compulsory heterosexuality, eliding the way that this system not only ‘supports,’ but also subjects her. His disgusted reification of her body everts the sexual objectification of the straight male gaze; he locates his own desire in his rejection of the ‘natural’ object of desire. With his raw portrait of George’s internal thoughts, Isherwood delineates the tensions and gaps that undergird relationships between gay men and straight women, otherwise potential allies in the struggle for sexual equality.

Journalist John McPartland saw homosexuality as a kind of death knell for Western culture: “The homosexual is the prototype of the an individual-centered culture. Sterile, sensual, urban and tragic, the homosexual has always appeared to keen over a dying society.”⁴⁸ At the same time, McPartland acknowledges self-doubt as the fearful underbelly of the topic: “the subject of homosexuality is unpleasant and repulsive to most of us chiefly *because* we’ve had those disturbing periods of uncertainty about ourselves.”⁴⁹ For Marynia Farnham, writing in *Cosmopolitan* in 1949, the problem was one of American health and (re)productivity; for her, “homosexual members are dead cells.”⁵⁰ Farnham thus situates homosexuality synecdochically within the biological metaphor of the national body – as a sickly part within the whole, largely undetectable. The increase, in the decades following the Kinsey reports, of scientific and pseudoscientific discourse on the topic of homosexuality ratcheted up this anxiety about categorization. Bruce Bliven writes in *The New Yorker* that the Kinsey reports were “more dynamite than any other scientific document since Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*,” and Reumann holds that “information on how to identify gay men and lesbians, on whether they posed a security problem, on where they congregated, and on how they dressed, lived their lives, and had sex – were to be found virtually everywhere, from mass-market fiction to social science and medical journals.”⁵¹

Reinterpretations of Kinsey’s work in the sixties, such as Mary McIntosh’s 1968 “The Homosexual Role,” call attention to the way that “lay people... will discuss whether a certain person is ‘queer’ in much the same way as they might question whether a certain pain indicated cancer.”⁵² Instead, McIntosh argues, Kinsey’s results suggest a sliding scale of more fluid sexual identity, in which “the homosexual should be seen as playing a social role rather than having a condition” and whose activities might form just part of a “variegated sexual pattern.”⁵³ Reumann refers to Kinsey’s study in contending that “the line between hetero- and homosexuality seemed dangerously blurred and often threatened to collapse altogether,” not least because of the fact that while only 3% of men had engaged exclusively in sexual activity with other men, 37% of American men had experienced homosexual contact to orgasm.⁵⁴ In *A Single Man*, Jim himself has a significant affair with a woman, the indefinability of which disgusts George, as we learn during his visit to Doris in the hospital during the course of his day. Thus, it is plausible, to Reumann, that “boundaries between hetero- and homosexuality were policed so rigorously precisely because of the nagging fear that they were breaking down altogether.”⁵⁵

Contemporaneous reviews of Isherwood’s novel suggest a subscription to this ideology, as well as an engagement with this crisis of sexual categorization. Most of the reviews are utterly suffused with an anxiety over the abject nature of George as a protagonist and his physical life, like Stanley Weintraub’s piece for *Books Abroad*:

A Single Man – albeit with great sensitivity – details a day in the increasingly pathetic life of a lonely homosexual. Reader empathy is sought, but the subject cannot rise to it, as – with sympathetic wryness Isherwood develops a ‘romantic’ conception of a homosexual relationship... the idyll – for the relationship is presented as such – is developed through flashbacks of nostalgic memory, interspersed among the episodes of the hero’s melancholy living-out of his day.⁵⁶

Even in the leftist *Daily Worker*, an anonymous reviewer advises, “To flaunt a human abnormality is not the best way to gain the true sympathy of understanding,” so the author

must “doubt the wisdom of writing a novel in which the principal character pines for his dead boy friend, has a flirtation with a male student, drinks heavily, and dies after a masturbatory orgasm.”⁵⁷

In the “Fiction Chronicle” of *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, Robert E. Kuehn criticizes “the necessity of re-defining the self each morning [a]s part of the ‘hero’s’ condition,” mocking the protagonist’s status as ‘hero’ and questioning the continual self-construction which marks George’s textured social and characterological malleability.⁵⁸ The problem, for Kuehn, is also one of credibility, since George and Jim’s “homosexual attachment is taken for granted and George’s reminiscences of their happy life together are neither more nor less sentimental than a heterosexual’s would be.”⁵⁹ In *A Single Man*’s single day, Kuehn argues, “nothing of any significance happens,” and at the end, George is “not happier or wiser or more contented, just older. Joyce’s example made this book possible, but *A Single Man* has neither the richness nor the robust gaiety of *Ulysses*.”⁶⁰ In pursuing the comparison of *A Single Man* to another ‘day-in-the-life’ novel, however, Kuehn misses its potential link to the other great modernist novel of that kind, *Mrs. Dalloway*, which is laced with homosexual undertones, featuring both a Clarissa haunted by Sally’s kiss thirty-four years earlier, “the most exquisite moment of her whole life,” and a Septimus who is “undemonstrative in the company of women,” but becomes, with his friend Evans, like a unit of “two dogs playing on a hearth-rug... snapping, giving a pinch... they had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other.”⁶¹ Indeed, biographer Brian Finney writes that Isherwood wrote *A Single Man* while composing *Ramakrishna* and “under the remote influence of Virginia Woolf, whom he was re-reading at this time; it was to be a study of middle age and its extraordinary variety of behavior patterns.”⁶² Writing that same summer, Isherwood compared the two novels explicitly: “Woolf’s use of the reverie is quite different from Joyce’s stream of consciousness. Beside her Joyce seems tricky and vulgar and cheap, as she herself thought.”⁶³ Kuehn, however, focuses only on *A Single Man*’s surfaces as manifestations of superficiality, a judgment he extends to George himself, whom he describes as “fussy, domestic, anxious, mildly self-amused, growing old day by day but fighting it by exercising regularly and watching his diet.”⁶⁴ In so doing, Kuehn captures only George’s mask, eviscerating him, not to mention catering to the most vicious midcentury stereotypes of the vain homosexual.⁶⁵ It is this attention to the material which ultimately impoverishes the novel, in Kuehn’s opinion:

George’s life is mere quotidian existence unrelieved by any real hope. He has only his memories of Jim, his little suburban house, and his lust to authenticate his state of being – it is little wonder that he performs a ceremony of self-identification each morning. The emphasis upon biological determinism, reduction, and extinction in the final paragraphs of the novel heightens the mood of despair which emanates from its core.⁶⁶

In focusing *only* on the material elements of George’s life, Kuehn and other early reviewers thus treat the text as a desolate commentary on the surface existence of a depraved and lonely protagonist, an inversion of the later critical trend toward attributing its meaning entirely to the symbolic spiritualism of Vedanta.

In 1964, Isherwood wrote in his diary: “Despite the sour reception of *A Single Man* in this country, I still feel very good about it. I feel: I spoke the truth, and now let them swallow

it or not as they see fit. That's a very good feeling, and this is the first time that I have really felt it."⁶⁷ Indeed, as the first of Isherwood's novels to feature an openly gay man, *A Single Man* marks a milestone in Isherwood's 'outing' as a public persona, which he writes of in the third person in his 'autobiography,' *Christopher and His Kind*: "As a homosexual he had been wavering between embarrassment and defiance."⁶⁸ Critic Jonathan Fryer, in his 1972 essay "Sexuality in Isherwood," traces a gradual 'coming out' of sexuality in the author's work, claiming Isherwood not as a "trailblazer" in his progressively more open treatment of sexuality, but rather a man

swimming with the current of enlightened public opinion rather than leading it... presenting in his fiction characters and situations with which [the bourgeoisie] can identify, or at least accept, thus purging themselves of their own hang-ups, yet still remain on speaking terms with their families.⁶⁹

For Joseph Bristow, more radical interpretations of Isherwood's work "erroneously impl[y] that his novels fixated their gaze upon an emancipating future, one filled with the spirit of queer revolution," long before that revolution historically took place.⁷⁰ Instead, for Bristow, Isherwood's novels "make same-sex desire legible in a rather different set of terms" than "inside or outside the doors of the closet."⁷¹ Rather, Isherwood's is a more fluid fiction of the self, reflecting "the mutable – even chimerical – form of his narrators' identities."⁷²

The shifting nature of George's 'true colors' emerges in his trip to the campus bookstore with Kenny after their conversation about the violets and the wood-grain of the mescaline trip. The scene weds symbolic beauty to the material object in Kenny's mundane consumer decision "to buy a pencil sharpener. They have them in plastic covers, red or green or blue or yellow. Kenny takes a red one" (81). When he turns to George to offer him one as thanks for the company, "George is actually blushing a little. It's as if he has been offered a rose. He chooses a yellow sharpener" (81). In this articulation of 'choice' among commodities, Kenny plays knowingly with the symbolic value of selection. He has chosen red, as he says, for "rage and lust," and continues, "I kind of expected you'd pick blue... Isn't blue supposed to be spiritual?" "What makes you think I want to be spiritual?" George responds (81). Gluckman and Reed elucidate the effects of the erasure of sexual orientation from consumer research in writing that "while the debilitating effects of the closet on the personal lives of gay men and lesbians have been well explored, the closet's impact on gay social and economic life has not," so that "the preferences consumers express in markets are assumed to represent their 'true' tastes," but "people's tastes are in fact subject to intricate and imperfect sculpting by society. The choices they make do not necessarily reflect their genuine tastes."⁷³ In choosing neither red nor blue, George's consumerist mode masks his 'rage and lust,' congruent with the face he puts on each morning, but it also marks a retreat from the spiritual intimacy of his conversation with Kenny about transcendent experience. As Gluckman and Reed hold, gay and lesbian consumer choice has often been ruled by the "'invisible stigma,' whose bearers must constantly manage information about themselves."⁷⁴ In the place of rage, lust, or spirituality, George chooses the yellow sharpener, 'as if it had been a rose,' its color symbolizing happiness and friendship.

But George's resistance to being categorized as 'spiritual' also indicates his interest in remaining playful and physical in Kenny's presence. Later in the evening, when they meet at The Starboard Side, the bar becomes a vessel for George's youthful memories and carries

him out of his campus role and into a new, ‘Socratic’ dialogue with his student. He tells Kenny that rather than being ‘wise,’ as the boy assumes one is by middle age, he has “gotten steadily sillier and sillier and sillier – and that’s a fact” (160). For Bristow, “George certainly resists the idea that he might have grown to maturity... since George resents the everyday pressure to pass as an acceptable – implicitly heterosexual – grown-up man.”⁷⁵ Thus it is precisely in the tension of his material and mental lives that George experiences the paradox of his ‘contained freedom.’ He tells Kenny warmly, “I’ve still got my pencil sharpener,” and “bringing it out of his pocket, he tosses it down on the table, as though shooting craps,” to which Kenny responds, in a perfect example of George’s theory of a ‘spiritual’ American easiness about material objects, “I already lost mine!” (153) The two leave the bar and run into the ocean, where “the electric field of the dialogue is broken. Their relationship, whatever it now is, is no longer symbolic” (161). While Kenny glides by, “a water-creature absorbed in his element,” George drifts both physically and mentally “way out, almost out of his depths,” feeling the pulls of both physical terror and mental liberation:

As for George, these waves are much too big for him. They seem truly tremendous, towering up, blackness unrolling itself out of blackness, mysteriously and awfully sparkling, then curling over in a thundering slap of foam which is sparked with phosphorous. George has sparks of it all over his body, and he laughs with delight to find himself bejeweled. Laughing, gasping, choking, he is too drunk to be afraid; the salt water he swallows seems as intoxicating as whiskey... Intent upon his own rites of purification, George staggers out once more, wide-open-armed, to receive the stunning baptism of the surf. Giving himself to it utterly, he washes away thought, speech, mood, desire, whole selves, entire lifetimes; again and again he returns, becoming always cleaner, freer, less. (162-3)

Even as the passage returns attention to the material – “no more than two hundred yards distant, the lights shine from the shore and the cars flick past up and down the highway” – George dives back into the symbolic sea, imagining himself with Kenny as “refugees from dryness; they have escaped across the border into the water-world, leaving their clothes behind them” (163).

George invites the soaking Kenny in, dissolving the status of his house as an island, and fixes tuna sandwiches, attending to their appetites as he recalls doing to his own, years ago, after the liquid state of the mescaline wore off. He tells Kenny that “things are quite bad enough anyhow, nowadays – we’re in quite enough of a mess, semantically and every other way – without getting ourselves entangled in... dreary categories”; rather, he desires “to exchange *some* kind of a signal, however garbled, before it’s too late... Don’t you have a glimmering of how I must feel – longing to speak?” (174) He variously becomes, during their conversation, “a formidable George,” “an inquisitorial George,” and “an oracular George” in his desire to commune with Kenny (173). He sighs,

You want me to tell you *what I know*... I want *like hell* to tell you. But I can’t. I quite literally can’t. Because, don’t you see, *what I know is what I am?* And I can’t tell you that. You have to find it out for yourself. I’m like a book you have to read. A book can’t read itself to you. It doesn’t even know what it’s about. I don’t know what I’m about. (176)

In representing himself as a book whose spiritual dimensions are consubstantial with his body, the passage recalls George's thought on the toilet that morning that his own "books have not made [him] nobler or better or more truly wise. It is just that he likes listening to their voices" (16). Nevertheless, George's *attempted* narration of his incommunicable experience is *itself* a sort of bridge between himself and Kenny, just as the material book in the reader's hands bridges the experiential world with George's represented world. Wolfgang Iser, building on Roman Ingarden's notion of the readerly *Konkretisation* of text in his 1972 essay "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," argues that "the virtual dimension of the text... is the coming together of text and imagination."⁷⁶ Iser holds that the dynamic interplay of text, author, and reader "compel[s] us to conduct a creative examination not only of the text, but also of ourselves."⁷⁷ If Iser's model, while it accounts for interpretive change over time, has been critiqued for its impossibly unified, ungendered, and idealized components, the fictional, flawed, specific, and human interaction between George as text and Kenny as reader offers a galvanizing complication of this model.

George awakens shortly after to find that Kenny has put him in bed and left a note: *Thought maybe I'd better split, after all. I like to wander around at night... Let's do it again, shall we? Or don't you believe in repeating things?... Thanks for everything, -KENNETH'* (177-8). As he did upon waking in the morning, George "empties his bladder" but "doesn't glance in the mirror," heading straight back to bed, where he masturbates before falling asleep (178). His onanastic fantasy begins with Lois and Kenny, but they morph into the Mexican and blonde male tennis players from the college campus, and soon George imagines himself sliding in and out of their physical bodies, both embodying them and copulating with them: "he begins passing in and out of their writhing, panting bodies. He is either. He is both at once... His hand feels for a handkerchief from under the pillow, wipes his belly dry" (180). In "Homosexual Liberation: A Socialism of the Skin," Tony Kushner writes of the interrelated sensory and symbolic forms of freedom: "honoring the true desire of the skin, and the connections between the skin and heart and mind and soul, is what homosexual liberation is all about... Our unhappiness as scared queer children doesn't only isolate us, it also politicizes us."⁷⁸ George's tessellated evening fantasies enact both high and low forms of identification with others, and as in the morning, his strange statement of conscience compromises the necessary 'sanity' integral to Cartesian rationality as he thinks, "Yes, I *am* crazy; he thinks. That is my secret; my strength" (180).

In the final pages, sleep "begins to wash lightly over him," punctuated by "partial surfacings... partial emergings, just barely breaking the sheeted calm of the water," but still leaving "most of George remaining submerged in sleep" (181). As George returns, in the sea of sleep, to an ungendered unconsciousness, the novel offers a final instantiation of the interdependence of the material and the mental, as "the dampness of the ocean air affects its sinuses," followed by the striking image of the tidal pools:

Each pool is separate and different, and you can, if you are fanciful, give them names, such as George, Charlotte, Kenny, Mrs. Strunk. Just as George and the others are thought of, for convenience, as individual entities, so you may think of a rock pool as an entity; though, of course, it is not. The waters of its consciousness – so to speak – are swarming with hunted anxieties, grim-jawed greeds, dartingly vivid intuitions, old crusty-shelled rock-gripping obstinacies, deep-down sparkling undiscovered secrets....

The rocks of the pool hold their world together. And, throughout the day of the ebb tide, they know no other. But that long day ends at last; yields to the nighttime of the flood. And, just as the waters of the ocean come flooding, darkening over the pools, so over George and the others in sleep come the waters of that other ocean – that consciousness which is no one in particular but which contains everyone and everything, past, present and future and extends unbroken beyond the uttermost stars. (183-4)

As Summers and others who offer Vedantic readings of *A Single Man* hold, the ocean washes the contents of the pools together and George is “no longer a single man, in any of that term’s many senses.”⁷⁹ However, the tide ebbs out again, and in the constant shift between the self and the collective, as the same passage reminds us, “You can [only] visit [the pools] when the tide is out” (183).

In his possible death during the final episode, George is rendered as material and as static as the rocks bounding the pools themselves, for though “you could bet thousands of dollars against its happening,” the machine of the body fails: “throttled out of its oxygen, the heart clenches and stops. The lungs go dead, their power line cut” (185-6). The stuff that was George becomes trash, “cousin to the garbage in the container on the back porch,” it “will have to be carted away and disposed of, before too long” (186). For Bristow, “going back to the nothingness from which he assembles his identity at the beginning of the book, the novel therefore achieves a circular – nonprogressive – structure.”⁸⁰ To regard the novel’s tidal cycle as ‘nonprogressive,’ however, is to ignore the vital nerve of mediation between surface and symbol that the narrative attempt activates. In Miller’s and Badiou’s formulations, in fact, it is language’s very epistemological incompleteness that accesses some portion of that truth.

This linguistic process is the ‘live dying creature’ of fiction itself. In first telling the reader that, symbolically, “so you may think of a rock pool,” and then engaging with George’s material death subjunctively, through the repetition of phrases such as “just let us suppose,” the novel draws attention to its own status as fiction, as well as to the work of faceting, through which the reader constructs and rearranges its various possibilities. In Iser’s formulation, the reader is a multifaceted subject operating over time, one who must constantly reevaluate the narrative strains of the book and the vision of the self as and through that process, which “entails the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness.”⁸¹ The act of reading, as our ultimate complicity in George’s fate suggests, somehow allows us to partake in both the quotidian realm of the material book in our hands and the multiplicity of consciousness constituted by the text – its author, its characters, and its readers. If fiction, as a structure of belief, is itself a bridge between surface and symbol, *A Single Man* renders this dynamic, in George’s terms, particularly ‘three-dimensional’ for the reader. As Edmund White writes, “that paradox – between the impersonal forces of cosmic energy and the patterns, unique as a fingerprint, through which that energy flows and that constitute what we call the individual – is the fertile contradiction that animates both Isherwood’s fiction and the drawings of Don Bachardy.”⁸² Trading the boundless transcendence of the mind and the structure and stimulation of the body in its process, *A Single Man* proffers the narrative act itself as that gushing force in flux, neither entirely sensual nor wholly symbolic.

NOTES:

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- ¹ Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 77. Quotations from the novel will hereafter be cited parenthetically, except where multiple pages are referenced.
 - ² See René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, transl. John Veitch (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2008) 31.
 - ³ See Claude J. Summers, *Christopher Isherwood* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980) 119.
 - ⁴ See Descartes 82-3.
 - ⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 178, 179, 177.
 - ⁶ *Ibid.* 179.
 - ⁷ Isherwood in Lisa M. Schwerdt, *Isherwood's Fiction: The Self and Technique* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 164.
 - ⁸ Summers 109.
 - ⁹ John William Miller, *The Definition of the Thing, with Some Notes on Language* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1980) 189.
 - ¹⁰ *Ibid.* 171.
 - ¹¹ *Ibid.* 187, 189.
 - ¹² Peter Hallward, *A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 259.
 - ¹³ Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, transl. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2008) 138, 141.
 - ¹⁴ Brian Finney, *Christopher Isherwood: A Critical Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) 251, 252.
 - ¹⁵ Schwerdt 167.
 - ¹⁶ Summers 117.
 - ¹⁷ Summers 119.
 - ¹⁸ Christopher Isherwood, *My Guru and His Disciple* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 337.
 - ¹⁹ Finney 160.
 - ²⁰ Christopher Isherwood, *The Sixties: Diaries, Vol. 2 (1960-1969)*, Katherine Bucknell, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2010) 294.
 - ²¹ Finney 251.
 - ²² David Bergman, "Isherwood and the Violet Quill," in James J. Berg and Chris Freeman, eds., *The Isherwood Century: Essays on the Life and Work of Christopher Isherwood* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000) 214.
 - ²³ John McFarland, "'Always Dance': Sex and Salvation in Isherwood's Vedantism," in Berg and Freeman, eds. 245, 246.
 - ²⁴ Edmund White, "Pool in Rocks by the Sea: Isherwood and Bachardy," in Berg and Freeman, eds. 123.
 - ²⁵ McFarland 246.
 - ²⁶ Isherwood, *A Single Man*. 20, 24, 21.
 - ²⁷ Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed, eds., *Homoconomics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997) xi.
 - ²⁸ *Ibid.* xii.
 - ²⁹ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, transl. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990) 43.
 - ³⁰ John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983) 107.
 - ³¹ *Ibid.*, 102.
 - ³² *Ibid.*, 104-5.
 - ³³ *Ibid.*, 109.
 - ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 111, 110.
 - ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.
 - ³⁶ D'Emilio 108.
 - ³⁷ Summers 114.
 - ³⁸ D'Emilio 105.
 - ³⁹ Summers 111.

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- ⁴⁰ Miriam G. Reumann, *American Sexual Character: Sex, Gender, and National Identity in the Kinsey Reports* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 188.
- ⁴¹ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Crisis of American Masculinity," *Esquire* (November 1958) 64.
- ⁴² Julie Matthaei, "The Sexual Division of Labor, Sexuality, and Lesbian/Gay Liberation: Toward a Marxist-Feminist Analysis of Sexuality in U.S. Capitalism," in Gluckman and Reed, eds. 136.
- ⁴³ Reumann 188.
- ⁴⁴ D'Emilio 106.
- ⁴⁵ Jaime Harker, *Middlebrow Queer: Christopher Isherwood in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) 122.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁸ John McPartland, *Sex in Our Changing World* (New York: Rinehart, 1947) 269.
- ⁴⁹ John McPartland, "For These Are the Bedeviled," *Esquire* (July 1950), 51.
- ⁵⁰ Marynia Farnham, "The Unmentionable Minority," *Cosmopolitan* (May 1949) 116-18.
- ⁵¹ Bliven qtd. in Reumann 185, 170.
- ⁵² Mary McIntosh, "The Homosexual Role," in Stephen Donaldson and Wayne R. Dynes, eds., *Sociology of Homosexuality* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992) 182.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.* 184, 186.
- ⁵⁴ Reumann 173 and 166.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 198.
- ⁵⁶ Stanley Weintraub, [Review of *A Single Man*], *Books Abroad* 39, no. 3 (1965) 351.
- ⁵⁷ Isherwood qtd. in Peter Parker, *Christopher Isherwood: A Life* (London: Picador, 2004) 726-7.
- ⁵⁸ Robert E. Kuehn, "Fiction Chronicle," [Review of *Herzog* by Saul Bellow; *A Single Man* by Christopher Isherwood; *The Italian Girl* by Iris Murdoch; *A Mother's Kisses* by Bruce Friedman; *One Fat Englishman* by Kingsley Amis], *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 6, no. 1 (1965) 135.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 30, 73.
- ⁶² Finney 249.
- ⁶³ Isherwood qtd. in Bucknell, ed. xvii.
- ⁶⁴ Kuehn 135.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.
- ⁶⁷ Isherwood, Bucknell, ed. 341.
- ⁶⁸ Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 333.
- ⁶⁹ Jonathan Fryer, "Sexuality in Isherwood," *Twentieth Century Literature* 22, no. 3 (1976) 344.
- ⁷⁰ Joseph Bristow, "'I am with you, Little Minority Sister': Isherwood's Queer Sixties," in Patricia Juliana Smith, ed., *The Queer Sixties* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 146.
- ⁷¹ Bristow 146.
- ⁷² *Ibid.* 148.
- ⁷³ Gluckman and Reed, eds. xx.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.* xx-xxi.
- ⁷⁵ Bristow 157.
- ⁷⁶ Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (1972) 284.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 295.
- ⁷⁸ Tony Kushner, "Homosexual Liberation: A Socialism of the Skin," in Gluckman and Reed, eds., 191.
- ⁷⁹ Summers 120.
- ⁸⁰ Bristow 160.
- ⁸¹ Iser 299.
- ⁸² White 124.

CHAPTER 3

“LET IT UNFURL”:

THOMAS PYNCHON’S *THE CRYING OF LOT 49*

I am ashamed of my century... but I have to smile.
– Frank O’Hara¹

Much speculation surrounds the coincidence of Pynchon’s career as an undergraduate at Cornell with the years Nabokov taught literature there. Whether Pynchon was a student or an auditor in one of Nabokov’s courses, or whether he never encountered him at all, the many textual parallels with and allusions to Nabokov certainly suggest an indebtedness to the older author. Nabokov’s mark sheets, however, show that while a “Pynchon, Thomas R.” enrolled in his “Masters of European Literature” course in the fall of 1957, he subsequently withdrew; no evidence of his presence in any of Nabokov’s other classes exists.² As scholar James Gourley puts it, “the desire to verify a pedagogical relationship between Nabokov and Pynchon is a quest that will conjure only increasing complexity, rather than unifying meaning,” a statement which, as many readers will attest, could also be made about their fiction.³ The mind’s urge to lay a pattern (as a writer) and to discern a pattern (as a reader) runs through the work of both Nabokov and Pynchon, sometimes as tragedy, alternately as farce. The very “fact that this relationship is so prominently considered,” Gourley writes, “reveals that the questions raised by the biographical quest are part of the particular challenges posed by both authors’ oeuvres.”⁴

I wish to skirt this genealogical line of comparison somewhat, juxtaposing Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) in this chapter with one of Nabokov's later works, *Ada, or Ardor* (1969) in the next. Both *Ada* and *Lot 49* are quest narratives of a sort, featuring female heroines who explore the twin problems of interpretation and narration – that is, of reading and writing. Both are written in resistant anticipation of their own academic reception, incorporating and parodying psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and language theory, and critiquing the advances of twentieth century modernism and its attendant modes of interpretation, from fascism to Freud (Van is a psychiatrist, treating mad Lucette, while Dr. Hilarius tries to prescribe LSD to his female patients, including Oedipa). *Ada* and *Oedipa* are consummate readers, interpreters, and editors, and their shared modeling of 'paranoid' reading has long defined critical approaches to both texts.

It would be difficult to overstate the centrality of *The Crying of Lot 49* to the canon of postmodern American literature; it is the quintessential novel of the genre, perhaps even of the sixties, and it is particularly indicative of postmodernism's so-called 'paranoid' style. In Brian McHale's words, "without Pynchon's fiction," of which *Lot 49* was the seminal success, "there might never have been such a pressing need to develop a theory of literary postmodernism in the first place."⁵ The text invites us into the either/or logic of Oedipa's own burgeoning paranoia as she executes the will of her ex-lover and struggles to account for the many accruing details of the mysterious Trystero, a reading experience one critic characterizes as "a mental prison of binary oppositions."⁶ Accordingly, initial responses to the novel succumbed to the its seemingly systematic logic, as Hanjo Berressem argues, "mak[ing] sense of the novel by organizing [its] complexities and convolutions into meaningful patterns."⁷ But what if, as many readers began to realize by the early 1970s, a paranoid reading moved with, rather than against, the grain of the text? What if *Lot 49* could help us see, rather than succumb to, to the paranoid aesthetic? In the second period of writing on *Lot 49* that accompanied the rise of poststructuralism, Berressem continues, "Pynchon turned into a master deconstructionist whose immensely convoluted plots should make the reader aware of the futility of any search for order. The texts were about the endless dissemination of meaning... complicated metafictional games... zones of grammatical *difference*."⁸ Both critical traditions left their imprint on how we read and teach *Lot 49*, telegraphing an anticipation of its paranoid style and an apprehension about "the very difficulty and apparent unfriendliness of Pynchon's novels."⁹ We vacillate between Jameson's hermeneutic critique, seeing paranoia symptomatically on display, and Foucault's dissemination, seeing the text's own reflexivity about paranoia, while its meaning may eternally elude us.

With distance, Berressem argues, we can see that neither swing of the critical pendulum attends to Oedipa's yearning for the "luminous beauty' of a metaphysical truth," or savors the "affective urgency" of Pynchon's language, saturated with the disappointment "that America's light was no longer the bright light of democracy, but a dim 'prefascist twilight' or, even worse, the tubal glow from within an already realized and implemented fascism."¹⁰ It is only in his later work that critics began to identify Pynchon's efforts "to write a complete counter-history of America."¹¹ This counter-history was an effort "to save the realm of the fictional from the forces of relentless factualization and rationalization"; as the narrator of *Mason & Dixon* has it, to stave the alteration of "all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments."¹² The postmodern novel's deliberate revision of historical narrative occasions some of its detractors' major critiques on

the grounds of depth and realism. Fredric Jameson names the postmodern novel as evidence of a “crisis in historicity,” while Charles Newman expresses dismay at “the illusion that technique can remove itself from history by attacking a concept of objective reality which has already faded from the world.”¹³ As Linda Hutcheon argues in her account of postmodernism, which is decidedly agonistic to both Jameson and Newman, “despite its detractors, the postmodern is not ahistorical or dehistoricized, though it does question our (perhaps unacknowledged) assumptions about what constitutes historical knowledge. Neither is it nostalgic or antiquarian in its critical revising of history.”¹⁴ One of Jameson’s most persistent and mordant critiques of postmodernism is its failure to engage in the dialectical play of binaries that he saw as essential to aesthetic theory. Indeed, Hutcheon writes, “there is no dialectic in the postmodern,” not because it is ahistorical, but because

the self-reflexive remains distinct from its traditionally accepted contrary – the historico-political context in which it is embedded. The result of this deliberate refusal to resolve contradictions is a contesting of what Lyotard calls the totalizing master narratives of our culture, those systems by which we usually unify and order (and smooth over) any process of meaning-making in the production and reception of art.¹⁵

Hutcheon specifically calls attention here to the practice of suture – the smoothing-over of the jagged and uneven pieces of storytelling – so necessary to the creation of ‘totalizing master narratives,’ often figured in binary terms that will resolve into synthetic wholes. By contrast, as Hutcheon writes, the rough pastiche employed by artists and architects of postmodernity is a way of “rethinking modernism’s purist break with history. This is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society, a recalling of a critically shared vocabulary of architectural forms.”¹⁶

Because poststructuralist theory followed on the heels of postmodern aesthetics, as Jeffrey Ebbesen writes, its “extreme epistemological skepticism” has been mapped onto the artistic products and qualities of postmodernism itself. Postmodernist literature becomes synonymous, in our readings, with the poststructuralist theories that were deployed to interpret it. But the texts, I contest, signify against and beyond those theories. On the other hand, postmodernism’s assailants criticize it for being too little like modernism: “While postmodernism is stereotyped as pure surface by writers like Jameson... and thus lacking in the depth and political conviction of modernism,” in fact, “these novels contain elements of political and ideological critique, which are fueled by modernist ethical beliefs... [and] are overflowing with the very historical reference much postmodern theory denies.”¹⁷ Thus, while theories of the postmodern critique the ahistorical split of postmodernism from modernism, the postmodern aesthetic is an outgrowth of modernism that reinvents its politics. For Ebbesen, “The suppression of grounded ethics” in accounts of the postmodern, including Jameson’s, “appears particularly ironic, given that postmodern theory is intimately related to the revolutionary politics of the nineteen sixties.”¹⁸ When academics scorn postmodernism, he argues, we are “practicing a kind of bad faith wherein they support a writer’s political agenda but simultaneously suppress the agenda’s foundation.”¹⁹ The aesthetic choices of the postmodern novel – pastiche, irony, excess, revision, decentering – are not flights from political consciousness, but are undergirded by a concern with the ways in which late capitalism successfully eludes material analysis; they act as both result of and resistance to the particular culture and historical moment in which they are born.

In *Lot 49*, this tension brings textual focus to the gendered figure of the protagonist, Oedipa, who acts as both reader and detective in the narrative. As a woman, however, she thwarts the model of male reason onto which we are accustomed to project ourselves as readers; she both invites and resists our solipsism. We know (only) what she knows, and thus identify with her, and yet she remains mysterious, folded inward in highly gendered ways. Her free indirect discourse (unlike, say, Emma Bovary's), seldom reveals any affective interiority. The novel, if it is difficult, is difficult because *she* is difficult, because women, as the men in *Lot 49* constantly remind us, are difficult. Critics have often perceived Oedipa as a figure lost in poststructuralist language games, unable, at the end of the novel, to solve the mystery she set out to investigate – as, of course, are we. However, this line of critique sidesteps some of the concrete implications of her gender for the novel. As Namwali Serpell notes, Oedipa's femaleness can easily become an excuse for the novel's lack of finality, for “to apply (reductively) the poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories contemporaneous to Pynchon: the absence of a patriarchal center, a Law of the Father that would ideally ground meaning, leads to an endless lateral chain of signifiers.”²⁰ Indeed, in his 1976 “Pynchon's Tapestries on the Western Wall,” Roger Henkle calls Oedipa “too slight a little housewife to lead us out of the labyrinths of paranoid California,” a dismissal of her role as protagonist that Kostas Kaltsas calls “not only staggeringly condescending but additionally problematic in implying that leading readers ‘out of the labyrinths’ is the goal.”²¹

Building beyond gender as antilogy – the eversion of the phallus pointing to the outside-in-ness of the feminine – the enfolded and irresolute narrative structure of *Lot 49* plays with gender from its opening lines:

One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had once host two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary.²²

The first half of the opening sentence invokes the feminine, private sphere – “a Tupperware party” with a “hostess,” a warm “summer afternoon,” and a bit “too much kirsch” characterize the lifestyle of the bored, middle-class midcentury white housewife, while the appendage “Mrs.” emphasizes Oedipa's identity as bound to and formed by her marriage. The second half of the sentence, in contrast, is charged with the language of the male public sphere – a “real estate mogul” who deals in millions of dollars, with “assets numerous and tangled,” marked as singular (“*one* Pierce Inverarity”), rather than named as someone else's spouse. The binary halves of this sentence hinge on the phrase between them: “she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix.” The feminine “Oedipa” draws attention to the eversion of a classical male hero into an ordinary housewife, and the predicate phrase “she, Oedipa” emphasizes her subjectivity, recuperating something of her independence from the preceding “Mrs. Oedipa Maas.” It is also Oedipa *herself*, and not the omniscient narrator, who “supposes” the linguistic change from “executor” to “executrix” via free indirect discourse. Though she spends the afternoon shopping for ricotta and picking basil for lasagna, she also reads “book reviews in the latest *Scientific American*,” gathering knowledge she will never have the opportunity to use. Prying open the symmetrical shell of

the gender binary, the opening sentence presses Oedipa's intellect and education; despite being inebriated and imbricated in the trappings of 'the feminine mystique,' she is perfectly capable of correctly declining the gendered case suffix of a Latin noun.

The transformation from *executor* to *executrix*, then, not only draws attention to the aberration of female power and feminine linguistic suffixes, but its unusual "-trix" ending also lends her a kind of witchy magic, emphasizing her femininity, her uncertain place between agent over and subject to Pierce's will. The narrator tells us early in *Lot 49* that Oedipa "had never executed a will in her life, didn't know where to begin." Here, Pynchon plays with possible puns on "execute" (to kill, to carry out, to accomplish) and "will" (both a document left by the deceased and the volition of an individual). Oedipa has never carried out her own volitions or quashed the wills of others, and she does not know where to begin. Pynchon centers her passivity, a typical woman of a certain class, stymied by a lack of purpose and practical experience, "shuffling back through a fat deckful of days which seemed... more or less identical" (2). When her husband Mucho comes home, she calls out to him "in an access of helplessness" and begins to tell him about the will, only to let him interrupt her: "'Let me tell you,' she also began. But let Mucho go first" (3).

Lot 49 seems continuously intent on interrupting a hermeneutic depth reading of its own language. Immediately following the news that she has become "executor, or she supposed executrix," Oedipa is flooded with a series of sharply juxtaposing images and memories, a filmic montage that acts both as an illegible flashback and a movie trailer of sorts:

a hotel room in Mazatlán whose door had just been slammed, it seemed forever, waking up two hundred birds down in the lobby; a sunrise over the library slope at Cornell University that nobody out on it had seen because the slope faces west; a dry, disconsolate tune from the fourth movement of the Bartók Concerto for Orchestra; a whitewashed bust of Jay Gould that Pierce kept over the bed on a shelf so narrow for it she'd lawyers had the hovering fear it would someday topple on them. Was that how he'd died, she wondered, among dreams, crushed by the only ikon in the house? (1)

The montage calls attention to our readerly desire to stitch these images together, a sort of Freudian dreamwork of Oedipa and Pierce's former relationship. In another instance, the title of the novel contains the number 49, but the "Acts of '45, '47, '51 and '55," a progressive set of laws attached to the postal reform movement, prevents us from finding a satisfying occurrence of that number in its list (39). In the same way, Pynchon selects evocative names for his characters, but makes it difficult for readers to construct coherent meaning from the implications of those names. In Oedipa's eversion of Oedipus, we glimpse the promise of "some sixties version of the Sophoclean protagonist who undertakes a quest involving his own past and a diseased social present."²³ Her nickname, "Oed," a homonym of the masculine "Ed," might stand for O.E.D., the Oxford English Dictionary, a text holding the meaning of hundreds of thousands of words, both current and defunct, but it also means "boring" in German. Her name itself thus poses the question in the binary: either there is no meaning at all, or it is endless. As David Lodge points out, modernism leans to the metaphorical pole of the metaphor-metonymy divide, favoring abstract juxtapositions of similarity, rather than postmodernism's more concrete juxtapositions of contiguity.²⁴ Lodge's five characterizations of the postmodern aesthetic (contradiction, permutation, discontinuity,

excess, and the short circuit) may lean toward the metonymic pole, but Lodge argues that the novels of the period simply “defy... the obligation to choose between these two principles.”²⁵ In *Ulysses*, the novel’s title and Dedalus’ name clue the reader in to a symbolic, metaphoric web of meaning we otherwise might not access. They have an incantatory value, summoning a set of critical readings that might otherwise remain in shadow. Oedipa, San Narciso, and the Echo suites, among others, clearly play off a set of received myths themselves, but only so far as to suggest a kind of blindness to our own reading, and to Oedipa’s.

What satisfaction lies in ‘decoding’ the image of Oedipa as someone who, as we learn by third-person narration, “conned herself into the curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of Kinneret, looking for someone to say hey, let down your hair”? (10) The moment we begin to follow this fairy tale allegory, it becomes more overtly sexual, more tongue-in-cheek, as we learn that Pierce, “using one of his many credit cards for a shim, [had] slipped the lock on her tower door and come up the conchlike stairs” (11). The phallic tower, the yonic stair – we can take no pride in arriving at these Freudian “meanings,” which are not concealed behind anything at all, but spelled out for us in the narration; their symbolic constellation is so dense that we can determine the picture without working to connect the dots. We are, Pynchon reminds us, at the mercy of our own impulse to interpret, just like Oedipa. Far from trying to trap or torture us with difficulty, Berressem holds, Pynchon recognizes that humans are “pattern-creating and pattern-recognition junkies” who “constantly project these images back onto the material world.”²⁶ Indeed, just as we move to process this as a meaningful, if heavy-handed, chain of metaphors, as the narrator or Oedipa herself allegorizing her experience, the next sentence shifts those interpretations again: “In Mexico City they somehow wandered into an exhibition of paintings by the beautiful Spanish exile Remedios Varo” (11). It turns out that this narration is the free indirect discourse of Oedipa herself, a figurative lens she imposes on her life while standing before “the central painting of a triptych,” in which “frail girls” are “prisoners in the top room of a circular tower” (11). The passage is at once Oedipa’s ekphrasis and her projection, and standing before it, she begins to cry.

In the central image of the triptych, six women sit in a tower, weaving the surface texture of the world. The painting is deliberately anachronistic in style; painted in 1961, it thwarts the use of proportion and vanishing perspective, giving its structures and figures the disorienting flatness and disproportion of medieval art: a painting of the fabrication of a tapestry that is itself a surface covering flattened planes of earth. Varo deploys the thick symbolism of surrealism and the sacred towards the refutation of clear symbolic readings. Like Pynchon’s novels, Varo’s paintings are allegories that disorient their audience, clues that do not lead to a simple solution. Just as Oedipa reverses Oedipus by the accepted binary of gender, Remedios’ name is a reversal in two senses: one, the painter is female, though “os” reads, to many an English speaker, as a masculine suffix, and two, her mother named her for the remediation, or healing, which her birth caused after the death of a previous daughter. And yet her surname, Varo, means “run aground,” threatening the remediation of her Christian name.



*Remedios Varo, Embroidering Earth's Mantle (1961).*²⁷

The triptych opens up a limited, but multiple, sense of meaning: are these the same woman, the same fragmented self, or are they different women, identical in form and function only in the eyes of their male controller? Who are the figures wearing the cloak and playing the horn? It is, like the novel, a counter-history of painting, a painting that invites and resists symbolic reading, opening up multiple possible interpretations. While the triptych certainly evinces Jameson's claim that postmodernism's "deathlessness manifests itself through literal flatness (two dimensional screens, flat skyscrapers full of reflecting windows)," it is unclear whether this translates into the so-called "qualitative superficiality" that Jameson extends to our experience of the world, "the postmodern rejection of the belief that one can ever fully move beyond the surface appearances... to some deeper truth" so that "our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural language are today dominated by categories of space rather than categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism."²⁸ While this may be true of the poststructuralist and deconstructionist modes of interpretation *applied* to these novels during the postmodern era, it is not necessarily true of the novels themselves. In fact, *Lot 49* seems determined to rewrite history, not to discard it, to move beyond not just a hermeneutic approach, but also the frustration and resignation of a rhizomatic maze of endless possibility as well.

The puzzle of the triptych is, like Oedipa's disorienting experience, one of both time and space. In the first panel, what looks like a gaggle of medieval nuns ride toward the left edge of the canvas on bicycles (a nineteenth-century invention). Behind them rise the many towers of a castle, painted without regard to post-renaissance attention to scale and perspective. The painting bears historical markers of different centuries; its form medieval, its content modern. In that very pastiche, however, it marks itself as postmodern. In the central panel, one woman embroiders herself and her lover, willing a vision of creativity and resistance into her formation of the world. However, in the final panel, *The Escape*, one

wonders if the lover is part of the establishment, perhaps even the figure who had held her hostage in the first place, or merely an image of what she embroidered. What makes Oedipa cry is the fear that the world beyond the tower is produced from within it, and thus there is no outside. It is in the tearful scene in the museum that we first glimpse a paranoid, systematic logic opening in Oedipa's mind: "She had looked down at her feet and known, then, because of a painting, that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower, was only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there'd been no escape" (11). Art is both an illumination and a trap; it shows us the world anew, but is also conterminous with its boundaries, with its orderly, dialectical pairs. Interestingly, this pivotal moment for Oedipa figures as a first confrontation with or even collapse of her close reading capacities. In tracing her own life as palimpsest over the allegories she encounters, Oedipa sees this symptomatic form of reading break down into a problematic and circular logic. Her initial response upon returning from Mexico is to withdraw – to "take up embroidery" (the reproductive knowledge of the housewife) and "marry a disk jockey" (Mucho Maas), to "fall back on superstition" (the feminine mystique) and to "go mad" (her visits with Dr. Hilarius) (12).

Short as it is, the novel is a study in excess, as its focus on waste (or W.A.S.T.E., writ large) suggests. Like Plath's, Pynchon's text is replete with feminized forms of bodily excess – namely tears and menstruation – that underpin the gendered binaries structuring the novel, but also become the means of building beyond them. Oedipa's tears, materially and metaphorically, offer the first alternative view of the world to that of the tower. Rather like Esther in *The Bell Jar*, Oedipa sees her own tears not as mere effluvia, but productive emissions that she longs to preserve: "She could carry the sadness of the moment with her... see the world refracted through those tears, those specific tears, as if indices as yet unfound varied in important ways from cry to cry" (11). Oedipa recognizes these feminizing, distortive lenses as a possible means of 'projecting a world.' Then again, she chooses to withdraw, applying the allegory directly to herself, trapping herself as a "captive maiden" with "plenty of time to think," where "her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental" (11-12). The start of the novel's second chapter marks a potential break with this life, this numbing mode of reading and interpreting the world, of writing her allegorical narrative in direct parallel, where every symbol corresponds to one clear meaning. Where there had been "the sense of buffering, insulation.... The absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus," in which she "conned herself into the curious Rapunzel-like role," now, the second chapter begins, "She left Kinneret, then, with no idea she was moving toward anything new" (10, 13).

For Maureen Quilligan, *Lot 49*'s status as allegory neither contracts its meaning nor robs it of its affective potential. Allegory "names the fact that language can signify many things at once."²⁹ Further, as Quilligan argues, allegory need not be unified, vertical, or hierarchical in meaning, but instead "meaning accretes serially."³⁰ If the novel is filled with seemingly dualistic choices, reversals, and switchbacks, those pairs nevertheless produce a limited plurality, rather than a stark binary, of possible meanings, since the novel "unfolds and connects meaning across the horizontal surface of the text's words."³¹ Still, those meanings are not limitless; allegory names the structured, if uncertain, multiplicity of language. In *Lot 49*, it is the pun, which reverses, doubles, confuses and multiplies meaning beyond the many either/or binaries the novel insists upon, that offers an ideal mode of

novelistic faceting. As her reading capacity becomes more multiplicative, Oedipa herself recognizes “that there was that high magic to low puns,” which double and then, through interconnection, might even triple or quadruple the meaning of a given word (105).

Pynchon’s puns are invested in the body, politic or otherwise. A mention of “party hats, copied in crepe paper after the fur Chinese communist jobs made popular during the Korean conflict” plays on the valences of ‘popular,’ ‘jobs,’ and ‘party’ evoked by two communist nations (106). Or they call to mind a literary corpus, as when Oedipa asks Emory Bortz about *The Courier’s Tragedy* and, becoming like a manuscript herself, “[keeps] a silence, waiting, as if to be illuminated” (125). Speaking with Gehghis Cohen about the upcoming auction, she tells him “Your fly is open,” then wonders “what she’d do when the bidder revealed himself” (151). Puns blur the line between persons and things, as in Oedipa’s observation of San Narciso’s feverish address numbers: “she had never known [house] numbers to *run* so high. It seemed *unnatural*” (15). Mucho, a used car salesman whose male gaze conflates several orders of desire (“a movie, a woman or car you coveted”), describes broke clients coming to trade in cars that are damaged enough “to depress the value, if not Mucho himself” (5). What disturbs Mucho most are “all the bits and pieces” of the vehicles, covered in “body wastes,” which “made him sick to look, but he had to look” (5). Though “the endless rituals of trade-in, week after week, never got as far as violence or blood,” those cycles are particularly imbued, for Mucho, with puns on the stench of femininity: “inside smelling hopelessly of children” and “rags of old underwear or dresses that already were period costumes” (5).

Numerous critics have noted the preponderance of religious imagery in *Lot 49*’s allusions. Robert D. Newman writes that Calvinism pervades Pynchon’s “exploration of American history and its investment in the sacred,” and that its “polarities of the elect and the damned” are “abstract distinctions that negate the vitality of the fluctuating middle ground that it excludes.”³² The novel’s title echoes the forty-nine days between Easter and Pentecost.³³ In Berkeley, the professor Emory Bortz explicitly links the practice of close reading with worship, telling Oedipa to “remember that Puritans were utterly devoted, like literary critics, to the Word” (128). And questioned by Oedipa, Driblette delivers the negative eversion of the same sentiment: “Don’t drag me into your scholarly disputes... You guys, you’re like Puritans about the Bible. SO hung up with words, words” (61-2). Yet even after Driblette’s word of caution, Oedipa still tries searches for meaning, discerning that “a pattern was beginning to emerge, having to do with the mail and how it was delivered... A cross?” (62?) The narrative famously concludes as “Passerine spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel,” leaving Oedipa, as congregant, “to await the crying of lot 49” (152).

The preponderance of Christian imagery crystallizes Oedipa’s frequently feminized and disempowered position in the novel. While part of Oedipa’s ‘gender-bending’ strangeness as a protagonist is that she displays a range of thoughts and behaviors typically accorded only to male characters, she still moves through the world in an objectified and sexualized female body. Even as she evolves a voice, “Oedipa’s discourse more often sees her hedging than asserting herself,” and we are privy to several moments in the text that lay bare “her entrapment within the social roles she is expected to perform.”³⁴ When Mucho tells Oedipa to go see their lawyer about the will, “Roseman tried to play footsie with her under the table. She was wearing boots, and couldn’t feel much of anything. So, insulated, she decided not to make any fuss” (10). When she offers to put a tape in at Mucho’s radio station

for the Paranoids, the young man assumes she's coming onto him and Oedipa assumes he's about to assault her: "Oedipa picked up the nearest weapon, which happened to be the rabbit-ear antenna off the TV in the corner." Instead, the boy is relieved: "Oh... You hate me too" (17). After she sleeps with Metzger, he eviscerates her plans, saying, "and what next, picket the V.A.? March on Washington? God protect me... from these lib, overeducated broads with the soft heads and bleeding hearts. I am 35 years old, and I should know better," to which she responds, "embarrassed, 'I'm a Young Republican'" (59). When she tries to help strangers in San Francisco, she receives a "Bitch... Why didn't you wait till he was gone?" (104). As her investigation develops, Oedipa is conscious that she will be received, as a woman, not just as paranoid, but as hysterical. Asking someone about his posthorn pin in a bar, she says "quietly, trying not to suggest hysteria, 'Look, you have to help me. Because I really think I am going out of my head'" (90). She worries that "she might well be in the cold and sweatless meathooks of a psychosis," and she wants to see her shrink so he can "tell her she was some kind of a nut and needed a rest" (107). When she arrives at his office, however, she discovers that his own assistant, a woman, "was close to hysterical" (108). She asks the assistant what has driven Hilarius mad, to which the woman replies, "Too many nutty broads, that's what did it. Kinneret is full of nothing but. He couldn't cope" (109). In feminizing Oedipa – and the text itself – Pynchon anticipates and thwarts the inevitable Freudian attempts to decode his novel, but he also draws attention to the dismissal femininity encodes.

Oedipa's visibility as a woman, however, can also be disarmingly effective against the men she interrogates. She seduces Metzger and flirts with Driblette, extracting information from her position in a sexually alluring and physically nonthreatening body, but also, in that same body, frequently subject to their sexual dominance and their dismissal of her intelligence.³⁵ In her meeting at the motel, Metzger proposes a game of "Strip Botticelli," for which Oedipa arms herself with layers and layers of added clothing, as if to insulate herself, as her boots did with Roseman, against his inevitable advances. If, as Roland Barthes holds, "woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked," Pynchon's list of emphatically feminized garments, layered one over the other, creates an absurd picture of feminine gender performance, an eversion of sex appeal by excess:

Six pairs of panties in assorted colors, girdle, three pairs of nylons, three brassieres, two pairs stretch slacks, four half-slips, one black sheath, two summer dresses, half dozen A-line skirts, three sweaters, two blouses, quilted wrapper, baby blue peignoir and an old Orlong muumuu. Bracelets then, scatter pins, earrings, a pendant... she could hardly walk when she was finished. (24)

Oedipa gird(les) her loins for the encounter, each layer an additive pun (a *sheath*, for instance, is not only a type of dress, but, in Latin, *vagina*). The comedic excess of the scene is that the trappings of femininity nearly disable her from walking and are the opposite of the erotic "striptease" we anticipate. Laughing at herself in the mirror, Oedipa knocks over a can of hairspray, which "commenced atomizing, propelling the can swiftly about the bathroom," shattering two walls of glass, not to mention a coherent image of our heroine (25).

The game culminates in a dubiously consensual encounter. Oedipa recalls being "scared but nowhere near sober," and "so weak she couldn't help him undress her; it took him 20 minutes, rolling, arranging her this way and that," like a "Barbie doll" (25, 29).

Ultimately, Oedipa wakes up “to find herself getting laid; she’d come in on a sexual crescendo in progress, like a cut to a scene where the camera’s already moving” (29). Oedipa, breaking out of her old life, is still incapable of “executing a will” here. Her sexual transgression unfolds, without consent, as “a cut to a scene,” a filmic jump that repeats the montage of images of her life with Pierce, in which she is a passive doll. If Oedipa’s name and status as protagonist disrupts the binary of man-woman, her status as housewife and semi-consenting adulteress disrupts a symbolic binary within femininity as well: that of the madonna and the whore. Pynchon lays out for us, from the start, the way in which Oedipa strains against the limitations of this binary. She is educated, desirous, and self-aware, but she is still constrained by gender in Metzger’s eyes, and, after sex, still trapped within her own female shame about what she has done: “‘What did Inverarity tell you about me,’ she asked finally.’ ‘That you wouldn’t be easy.’ She began to cry. ‘Come back,’ said Metzger. ‘Come on.’ After awhile she said, ‘I will.’ And she did” (30). A dull echo of Nabokov sounds through this scene, recalling the last lines of the first half of *Lolita*, when Humbert tells us, “At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go.”³⁶ *Lot 49*, of course, has a lighter touch here; Oedipa is an adult, not a child, though it remains less clear how much she is a willing participant. The twinge the reader feels nevertheless serves as a reminder of Oedipa’s position as female subject *and* female object, particularly in a novel dotted and tinged with pedophilia, hebephilia, and direct references to *Lolita*. Oedipa decides not to tell Mucho about Metzger, thinking of her husband at “a KCUF record hop,” where, “a little awkward opposite any boy heels might make her an inch taller than,” she imagines

a Sharon, Linda or Michele, seventeen and what is known as a hip one, whose velvety eyes ultimately, statistically would meet Mucho’s and respond, and the thing would develop then groovy as it could when you found you couldn’t get statutory rape really out of the back of your law-abiding head. She knew the pattern because it had happened a few times already, though Oedipa had been most scrupulously fair.... (32)

The passage’s “velvety eyes” recall *Lolita*’s own “lovely young velvety delicate delta.”³⁷ Punning again, Oedipa wryly wonders if Mucho isn’t “worried about the *penal* code,” only to hear in his response “something between annoyance and agony” (32). When she arrives in Berkeley, too, Nefastis is watching “a bunch of kids dancing some kind of Watusi” on TV (84). “I like to watch young stuff... There’s something about a little chick that age,” he tells her, to which she responds reassuringly, “So does my husband... I understand” (84). By the end of the novel, The Paranoids are performing a new song with the lyrics “*For me, my baby was a woman, / For him she’s just another nymphet*” and “*I had a date last night with an eight-year-old, / And she’s a swinger just like me... / And it’s as groovy as it can be*” (121). While “Serge, on close questioning, admitted the bit about the eight-year-old was so far only imaginary... he was hanging diligently around playgrounds and should have some news for them any day” (121). Such references pick up not only on the supposed genealogical relationship between *Lolita* and *Lot 49*, but on Pynchon’s interest in the bizarre infantilization of women in midcentury America. In the introduction to *Slow Learner*, he suggests that the avoidance of mature women stems, in part, from widespread male insecurity: “It is no secret nowadays, particularly to women, that many American males, even those of middle-aged appearance, wearing suits and holding down jobs, are in fact, incredible as it sounds, still small boys inside,” meaning

they might find “a woman with the size and demeanor of a child” rather than pay “the price of developing any real life shared with an adult woman.”³⁸ The mature, impregnable body, by contrast, is threatening, and, as *Lot 49* demonstrates, partly for its reproductive capacity.

Oedipa’s appearance is at once alluring and matronly; several characters assume she is a mother at some point in their interactions with her. “You know what mothers like that turn their male children into,” says Metzger knowingly when they first meet (18). Grace Bortz asks after her children, “How did you manage to get away from yours today?” When Oedipa replies that she has none, Grace is surprised. “There’s a certain harassed style... you get to recognize. I thought only kids caused it. I guess not” (124). Oedipa’s status as mature woman bleeds into the repeated images of menstruation, pregnancy, and motherhood in the text. Towards the beginning of her investigation, her female intuition is connected with the lunar cycles, “something tidal” that “began to reach feelers in past eyes and eardrums,” which “you could not hear or even smell... but it was there.” Contemplating Driblette’s suicide, after he walks into “the vast sink of the primal blood of the Pacific,” Oedipa thinks that she “felt briefly penetrated” (134). Driblette’s death not only restages a number of literary women’s deaths (real and fictional), but also brings the imagery of menstruation and insemination to bear on Oedipa’s phantom pregnancy, which follows soon after, and which afflicts her with all of the stereotypical discomforts:

Old fillings in her teeth began to bother her. She would spend nights staring at a ceiling lit by the pink glow of San Narciso’s sky. Other nights she could sleep for eighteen drugged hours and wake, enervated, hardly able to stand. In conferences with the keen, fast-talking old man who was new counsel for the estate, her attention span could often be measured in seconds, and she laughed nervously more than she spoke. Waves of nausea, lasting five to ten minutes, would strike her at random, cause her deep misery, then vanish as if they had never been. There were headaches, nightmares, menstrual pains. (141-2)

Alarmed by her symptoms, Oedipa finds a (female) physician in the phone book and pays her a visit, but aborts (Bortz) the treatment after the first visit:

One day she drove into L.A., picked a doctor at random from the phone book, went to her, told her she thought she was pregnant. They arranged for tests. Oedipa gave her name as Grace Bortz and didn’t show up for her next appointment. (142)

Oedipa continues to be haunted by the ghost of this gravid illness: “The toothaches got worse, she dreamed of disembodied voices from whose malignancy there was no appeal, the soft dusk of mirrors out of which something was about to walk, and empty rooms that waited for her” (144). At this point, the omniscient narrator makes a singular and knowing direct address that breaks the fourth wall of the narrative, enfolding the reader in Oedipa’s predicament: “Your gynecologist has no test for what she was pregnant with” (144).

In *Lot 49*, menstruation forms a cyclical counterpart to linear time, a cycle of ‘waste’ that is nonetheless regenerative. As Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove hold in *The Wise Wound*, the assignation of blood to Christ actually has its origins in female deities: “The blood of Charis preceded the blood of Christ.... The male messiah or Word of God would not have come arrayed in a garment dipped in blood, if blood had not been the feminine manifestor of the Word as Wisdom.”³⁹ In *The Courier’s Tragedy*, a play rife with torture that is given detailed

description within the novel, we see a man of the cloth – a cardinal – “being forced to bleed into a chalice and consecrate his own blood, not to God, but to Satan” (53). In the parallel act of communion that precedes their tryst, Oedipa and Metzger watch a film in which “the sea was red with blood” as they drink wine from the same chalice, since, as Oedipa says, “I only have one glass” (24, 18). It is as if, in *Lot 49*, as Dana Medoro writes,

Oedipa’s bodily interaction with the linguistic clues of her quest... invokes the Christian concept of the Word made flesh... worshipped as a god who bleeds, Christ turns the death of the flesh into the life of the spirit.... This iconography, however, extensively borrows from images drawn from the female body... derived from ancient goddess religious, in which the goddess in her menstrual aspect – for instance, India’s Kali, Grece’s Kore, Egypt’s Isis – is venerated as a eucharistic and resurrection deity.⁴⁰

What *Lot 49* presents is the possibility that the entire patriarchal degradation of femininity is itself a reversal, an invagination, and a switch of codes. To transform the female body’s bleeding from life into waste and the male’s body into a bleeding one which, through death and resurrection, constitutes life, is to radically destabilize the gender binary. Turning holy femininity inside out, making it male, and rendering female life-giving as waste renders gender infinitely mutable. If Christ, as a man, takes on the capacity for reproduction – for new life – anything is possible. A world which takes dignity from reproductive bodies, transfers it to the phallus, and leaves them only with sin and filth is a world in which gender is already confused. Perhaps Oedipa, an eversion of the male hero in her sex and a blurring of the binary in her gender, is not so strange after all.

Indeed, over the course of *Lot 49*, Oedipa takes on a man’s role and interacts with men who have oddly feminized (brand) names: Stanley Koteks, whose name recalls a manufacturer of menstrual hygiene products; the Duke of Squamuglia, combining the derogatory “squaw” with the Italian for “wife”; Bloody Chiclitz, whose surname echoes both a brand of chewing gum and a genre of books (“chick lit”); Emory Bortz, like an emery board, but also an abbreviated abortion; K. Da Chingado, encoding the Spanish for “fucked”; and Mike Fallopian, whose own fertile (*fallow*) and paranoid imagination leads to a number of misunderstandings about women, but whose name bares the most intimate interiors of the female body. Narrative descriptors evert Mucho’s gender as well. He is described as “too sensitive,” to the point that “the sight of sawdust, even pencil shavings, made him wince,” and he cannot bear to “use honey to sweeten his coffee for like all things viscous it distressed him, recalling too poignantly what is often mixed with motor oil to ooze dishonest into gaps between piston and cylinder wall” (4). On one occasion, “he walked out of a party... because somebody used the word ‘creampuff,’ it seemed maliciously, in his hearing.... There was your Mucho: thin-skinned” (4). Mucho’s form of paranoia occurs by simile – the associative quality of one thing being *like* another triggers his overreactions, which are also characteristic of the other male characters in *Lot 49*. As Medoro puts it, “That the phallus has an ahistorical, primary, and transcendent claim to the order of signification and to the symbolic order is a lie, and one which Pynchon cleverly exposes.”⁴¹ This idea of exposure – the body of history stripped down naked, turned inside out, and remade – riffs on how fundamentally sex, gender, and sexuality underpin the structures and assumptions of our rigid narratives of history.

Eversions, remakings, and proliferations of gender span the novel. In a bar in San Francisco, a man pins his nametag on Oedipa, “outboard of one breast,” which reads, “HI! MY NAME IS ARNOLD SNARB! AND I’M LOOKIN’ FOR A GOOD TIME!” (88-9). Oedipa is a drag in San Francisco, merely because she asks Mike Fallopian questions about the posthorn in the “ladies’ john” he does not wish to answer, leading him to dismiss her irritably: “Women... who can tell what goes on with them?” (75). But she is also in drag in the gay bar, as Arnold, an eversion of herself that allows her some freedom. Initially conservative herself, Oedipa’s homophobic dread at being in “a fag joint” shifts slightly as she watches a guide lead gawking tourists through the gay bar, viewing its patrons as curiosities: “Now in here ... you are going to see the members of the third sex, the lavender crowd this city by the Bay is so justly famous for. To some of you the experience may seem a little queer, but remember... if you get propositioned it’ll all be in fun, just part of the gay night life to be found here in famous North Beach” (89). Capitalism’s monetization of the very queerness it punishes and pushes to the margins, Pynchon suggests, runs parallel to other forms of disenfranchisement in the novel. Oedipa turns to the man beside her wearing a posthorn pin and says, “If it’s a homosexual sign or something, that doesn’t bother me” (90). Eversion does not simply reproduce the binary, but can actually build beyond it, as the gay men in the bar become “a third sex,” gesturing again beyond the binary and towards an alternative triad that would include society’s outcast and oppressed.

An eversion of two letters in Pierce’s Christian name makes Peirce, the surname of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. While Ferdinand de Saussure describes a binary code of linguistic signification, Peirce argues, by contrast, that the sign is a trinity, encoding not two, but three factors in the linguistic chain of meaning. For Saussure, the *sign* is a dyadic relationship, made of the *signifier* (a form of the sign – a sound image) and the *signified* (its meaning – the concept), with the relationship motivated by social convention. In Peirce’s triadic relationship, the *sign* is made up of the *sign vehicle* (a form of the sign), a *sign object* (the aspect of the world for which the sign carries meaning), and a *sign interpretant* (the meaning as understood by an interpreter). Building from this triad, Peirce created three further trichotomies of signs, emphasizing the importance of the interpreter, not just the signifier and signified, to the meaning of the sign. Furthermore, “because the three trichotomies are independent of each other, together they yield the abstract possibility that there are 27 distinct kinds of signs. Pierce argued, however, that 17 of these are logically impossible, so that finally only 10 kinds of signs are genuinely possible.”⁴² This structured, limited multiplicity acknowledges the shortcomings of binaries and syntheses to explain the complexities of language, but refuses to resign itself to endless meanings and total linguistic deconstruction. These triads fit with both the repetition of the Christian trinity throughout the text, as well as Pynchon’s desire to destabilize such symbolic orders. Serpell calls attention to the “triple signification” of acronyms like D.E.A.T.H, W.A.S.T.E., and N.A.D.A. in *Lot 49*, as well as what Oedipa calls “the undecipherable FSM’s, YAF’s, VDC’s,” which can “signify random clusters of letters... words... or entire phrases”⁴³ Such ‘triple signification’ “highlights the acronym’s fluid textuality, destabilizing the distinction between the random and the meaningful.”⁴⁴ Oedipa must “look closely to see the periods between the letters,” to pun again, in order to transform these acronyms into other proliferative and possible meanings” (105). The periods here are a generative force, lending liquidity to the meanings of the words, all of which are, like tears and shed blood, forms of W.A.S.T.E. and D.E.A.T.H.⁴⁵

In the world of *Lot 49*, it is possible, Robert D. Newman suggests, to “draw sustenance from the rich vein of metaphors that the system-mongers have labeled waste because it threatens the fixed poles of belief upon which they premise their control.”⁴⁶ (8). Through these binaries that build to shifting, dimensional, and not entirely coherent wholes, Pynchon stresses the import of “shattering the security of simplistic and sterile dualities.”⁴⁷

Oedipa’s readings sustain her investigation in the moments when she dares to work outside of both the binary symbolic order of hermeneutics and the helpless resignation of the rhizome. Arriving in San Narciso early in the novel, Oedipa expects a vertical, phallic representation of Inverarity’s success, since, in metaphorical terms, San Narciso is “Pierce’s domicile, and headquarters: the place he’d begun his land speculating in ten years ago, and so put down the plinth course of capital on which everything afterward had been built, however rickety or grotesque, toward the sky; and that, she supposed, would set the spot apart, give it an aura” (13). However, this depth imagery is flattened when she confronts the spatial reality of the city, “a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth” (14). Still, hermeneutic reader that she is, Oedipa attempts to apply her skills of close reading to this flattened, one-dimensional landscape:

She thought of the time she’d opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There’d seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. (14)

Though there ‘seemed no limit,’ in the metaphor of the circuit, there is in fact a precise limit. The very purpose of the circuit is to specify the information that allows an object to function. In vacillating between the sense that there must be either one meaning or an endless series, Oedipa models for us as readers the problem of the two major strains of literary interpretation in the twentieth century: one, a hermeneutical depth reading of binaries (surface/depth or two opposites in dialectical tension), the other a hopeless rhizome of possible linguistic signifiers, from which little or no meaning can be extracted. The first should have the “aura” the modernists desired, the second is a complete hell of interpretive meaninglessness. Oedipa’s interpretive associations mix metaphors and are bluntly dissimilar, stretching Lodge’s assertion of ‘abstract similarity’ in metaphorical figuration. They play with contiguity, but cannot sustain it. In one moment, Oedipa describes the houses as if they had ‘grown’ like a ‘crop,’ and yet, in the next instant, they are not organic at all, but manufactured, a ‘printed circuit.’ And though she ‘had [never] tried to find out’ the meaning of a circuit, she describes the impression of the subdivision’s pattern as having ‘the same unexpected, astonishing clarity.’ The metaphor of so-called ‘clarity’ thus hinges on a reference to an object she cannot interpret.

What persists in this passage is our apprehension of Oedipa’s *desire* to see ‘a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning’ and ‘an intent to communicate’ in the signs she encounters. To read the novel, then, as being about *her* paranoia or failure to make sense of

her world is to miss that it is also *our* failure, and that the emotional, affective, even feminist dimensions of the novel lie in the recognition of how vulnerable the human mind is to its own need for patterns and signification, over and against the forces that tell that language and meaning are proliferative. Oedipa's frustration at trying to locate a single depth reading derived from a coherent symbolic order resonates with David Lodge's final type of postmodern innovation, the 'short-circuiting' of metaphor in favor of metonymy:

The literary text is always metaphoric in the sense that when we interpret it we apply it to the world as a total metaphor. This process of interpretation assumes a gap between the text and the world, between art and life, which postmodernist writing characteristically tries to short-circuit in order to administer a shock to the reader and thus resist assimilation into conventional categories of the literary... and exposing conventions in the act of using them.⁴⁸

If Oedipa misreads, it is because she has been trained to do so; "she had undergone her own educating at a time of nerves, blandness and retreat among not only her fellow students but also most of the visible structure around and ahead of them" (83). She wonders, "where were Secretaries James and Foster and Senator Joseph," and all "those dear daft numina who'd mothered over Oedipa's so temperate youth?" (83) And yet they – and the symbolic order of reading they taught her – have shaped her mind permanently: "among them they had managed to turn the young Oedipa into a rare creature indeed, unfit perhaps for marches and sit-ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts" (83).

Critic Emily Apter describes this all-encompassing, paranoid form of reading as an American "oneworldedness." Apter claims that both DeLillo and Pynchon "write paranoia theory *as* literature, translating paranoia into an exportable national literary form."⁴⁹ This does not mean, however, that the paranoia of the postmodern novel merely mirrors back the zeitgeist. Indeed, it is capable of critiquing capitalism from within, for theirs is a "paranoid planetarity," a "prophetic realism" that "prompts further critical reflection on the status of 'big' comparative paradigms in the humanities."⁵⁰ Our mistake is to read the paranoia of a novel like *Lot 49* as merely stylistic, though, as Apter notes, even when such literary tropes are "critical of what they represent," they "ironically come to embody national imaginaries that are then imposed on the world at large."⁵¹ Walking around Berkeley's campus, however, Oedipa glimpses something else, "more akin to those Far Eastern or Latin American universities you read about, those autonomous culture media where the most beloved of folklores may be brought into doubt... the sort that bring governments down" (83). And yet, this is America, for "it was English she was hearing as she crossed Bancroft Way... American English" (83). *Lot 49*, in a sense, is Oedipa's slow process of *unlearning* how to read through the lens of patriarchal, Cold War ideology so dominant in her youth, a mode of interpretation still practiced by the likes of professor Emory Bortz and the pseudo-Freudian Dr. Hilarius. Against the symptomatic, even paranoid modes of reading that surround her, and against the alternate despair of an endless, rhizomatic excess of data, Oedipa begins to move against and beyond those codes, and, ultimately, to sit in the discomfort of uncertainty. To interrupt a smooth and sutured 'oneworldedness,' *Lot 49* emphasizes the interpretive miracles of uncertainty, multiplicity, and interruption. The prophetically named anarchist Jesús Arrabal, whom Oedipa met long ago in Mazatlán and finds again in San Francisco, tells her: "You know what a miracle is. Not what Bakunin said. But another world's intrusion into this one"

(94). In rejecting Mikhail Bakunin's concept of a synthetic and unified reality, Arrabal fantasizes "another world," not a Christian heaven, but an anarchist one: "where revolutions break out spontaneous and leaderless, and the soul's talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort, *automatic as the body itself*" (97). Arrabal's statement intriguingly aligns the miraculous with the effortless, regenerative processes of the body.

The closed system of the body, and in particular, the womb, also offers a striking point of comparison to Maxwell's Demon, and John Nefastis's fascination with entropy. As Nefastis explains it to Oedipa, "As the Demon sat and sorted his molecules into hot and cold, the system was said to lose entropy. But somehow the loss was offset by the information the Demon gained about what molecules were where" (98). Frustrated when Oedipa cannot follow, he attempts to frame it in literary terms: "Entropy is a figure of speech, then... a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow. The Machine uses both. The Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true" (98). Nefastis's system requires the passage of data to "the sensitive," who must "receive that staggering set of energies, and feed back something like the same quantity of information" 85. When Oedipa questions whether the Demon only exists because of the coincidence of the metaphor itself, a possible error in hermeneutic reading, Nefastis "smiled; impenetrable, calm, a believer" (85). What Oedipa comes up against in Nefastis is the limit of rationality, subsumed into the assimilationist paranoia of a closed system of binary possibility. As Robert D. Newman writes, Pynchon "creates his characters as extremes... without permitting any synthesis of views," as if to "remind his readers of the limitation of rationalism because they resist fixed interpretations."⁵² Through Nefastis's desperate close reading, "he had made his mere coincidence respectable," but it is obvious to Oedipa that she is "faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts; more than two, anyway" (87).

As she begins to think outside of the method of depth reading in which she has been instructed and towards the possibility of multiple interpretations, Oedipa deploys the language of faceting. "Another reading of that line might help light further the dark face of the word," she muses, seeing herself, as reader and detective, "trapped at the center of some intricate crystal," and exclaiming upon that realization, "My God" (72, 74). Still, the endless, terrifying multiplicity of the rhizome, of excess data, lingers the other way: "Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back...and saw, for the very first time, how far it might be possible to get lost in this" (76). Echoing Jameson's concerns about the death of realism, Oedipa is skeptical of the faceted structure she is compiling, and "wondered if the gemlike 'clues' were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (95).

The paranoid logic of literal incorporation afflicts the night watchman she meets, "who had trained his virtuoso stomach to accept also lotions, air-fresheners, fabrics, tobaccos and waves in a hopeless attempt to assimilate it all, all the promise, productivity, betrayal, ulcers, before it was too late" (100). But as Oedipa wanders the city, locating echoes of the Trystero post horn everywhere, she imagines it specifically via metonymic figurations of the body, which proliferate outward from a mass of small parts towards an uncertain but

dimensional whole. The streets of San Francisco are “branchings, be they *capillaries* too small for more than peering into, or *vessels* mashed together in *shameless* municipal *hickeys*, out on the *skin* for all but tourists to see,” and the “profusion of post horns, this *malignant*, deliberate replication, was their way of beating up... her *pressure points*, and the *ganglia* of her optimism, and one by one, pinch by precision pinch, they were *immobilizing* her.”⁵³ As the novel draws to a close, Oedipa has moved from the binary possibility of either/or to a set of “symmetrical four” possibilities. Talking to herself, she says,

Either you have stumbled indeed... onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream... Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you, so expensive and elaborate... so labyrinthine that it must have meaning... Or you are fantasizing some such plot, in which case you are a nut. (141)

In short, Oedipa can imagine a hermeneutic reading, and its negation, or a rhizomatic reading, and its negation. In constantly listing the possibilities, however, she begins to build beyond those very binaries in spite of herself. Oedipa returns to the image of the circuit at the novel’s close, imagining the act of interpretation as

walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobile right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless. Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth... either some fraction of the truth’s numinous beauty... or only a power spectrum... either an injustice, or the absence of a wind... Ones and zeroes... Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of true paranoia, or a real Tristero. (150)

As Oedipa returns to the two old modes of reading here (hermeneutics or the rhizome), the eversion of ‘zeroes and ones’ and ‘ones and zeroes,’ as well as the length of the run-on sentence, jammed with possibilities, suggests the way in which binary code builds long, metonymic chains of meaning, over and above the binary itself, chains which are not meaningless, but precise and significant.

History, *Lot 49* suggests, is written directly on the gendered body. Oedipa imagines the truth behind the Tristero as a restaging of her own sexual encounter with Metzger:

As if the breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings of historical figuration that would fall away were layered dense as Oedipa’s own street clothes in that game with Metzger in front of the Baby Igor movie; as if a plunge toward dawn indefinite black hours long would indeed be necessary before The Tristero could be revealed in its terrible nakedness. (40)

I intend the corporate here not only in the sense of the body, but in the sense of the capitalist power structure, as Pierce’s legacy pierces the feminized body of the land; it had “conditioned the land to accept any San Narciso among its most tender flesh without a reflex or a *cry*.” As Oedipa begins to internalize the extent of Pierce’s possible control over her investigation, she feels “her viscera hollow, waiting on something truly terrible. OK. It’s unavoidable, isn’t it?” (140). It is in this shattering, in fact, that her hope for reinterpretation lies; all she has left is the possibility of “waiting for a symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew,” so that she might read them anew (150).

Kostas Kaltsas contrasts Oedipa's struggle to find a way out of the oppressive gender binary with Maxine, Pynchon's protagonist in his 2013 novel *Bleeding Edge*. What Oedipa encounters nearly fifty years earlier, Kaltsas argues, is a society that reproduces binary and hierarchical structures of race, class, and gender at every level. Oedipa's quest awakens her sense of ongoing injustices against herself and against other members of society – children, other women, poor people, and people of color – but she is so trapped in her own gender role that she feels she must either inhabit it or reject it entirely. As Kaltsas writes, “the feminine roles she assumes initially assist and eventually hinder her in her investigation, while her attempts to move beyond them are met with resistance and rejection by the men she comes into contact with.”⁵⁴ Oedipa's paranoid mental bind (either/or) is also the gender bind; while we see her struggle against the roles, even violate them, the chance that they will proliferate or be dismantled remains a possibility, rather than a realization. Oedipa cannot yet see her way out of these binaries in the tumult of the 1960s. Her articulations, even as they build, are structured along the lines of either/or: either hermeneutics or the rhizome, either masculine or feminine, either a rejection of a role that oppresses you, or becoming one with the oppressor. When Oedipa cries before the Remedios Varo painting, the sense of entrapment she feels follows her; she will “later hesitate to ‘project a world,’ because the projectionist, like the embroiderer, produces not reality but illusion.”⁵⁵ The concluding phrase – ‘the crying of lot 49’ – recalls Oedipa's tears early on in the novel, as she stares at the Varo painting, crying at her own lot. However, if the entire world is embroidered, then the women, as creators, are no more trapped than anyone else. If all our labor is enfolded, David Cowart points out, “the question is only how freely we do it.”⁵⁶ As Emma Miller asserts more plainly, “The girls in Varos's portrait create the world. Everything that exists is there because they have, in their godlike capacity, made it.”⁵⁷ To recall this ‘godlike capacity’ is also to recover for the feminine something of the symbolic value of that “primal sea of blood” which is the origin of sacred creation. In place of the binary trap in Oedipa's mind, which, even as she tries to order it, proliferates, the women in the Varo painting represent how, in fact and in fiction, “we collectively make the world that makes us.”⁵⁸

Like Lodge, Giorgio Agamben points to synecdoche and metonymy as forms of figuration that form “a parallel for the simultaneously invoked and negated absent object.”⁵⁹ In this sense, as Dana Medoro writes, language's “proliferating components emerge from the bar between signifier and signified, from the deferral or abyss of presence... also the locus of possibility, a glimpse, even, of a ‘god’ who joins together opposites, who simultaneously sutures and lacerates.... a third realm of meaning that emerges in the split nature of the sign.”⁶⁰ Like Peirce's trichotomies and the “third sex” of queer identity, Pynchon builds from a binary towards a dimensional and structured multiplicity beyond it. In *Slow Learner*, he describes, only somewhat critically, “the junkshop or randomly assembled quality” of his own writing, which resembles “the cluttered way that items accumulate in the rooms of memory.” In the images of eversion, reversal, inward foldings, and outward unfoldings lie the fecundity not just of the body, but of the mind as well, which Pynchon telegraphs through the reproductive, pastoral imagery of the fold. After they sleep together, Metzger kisses the palm of her hand, “sending the dry end of his tongue to graze briefly among her fate's furrows, the changeless salt hatchings of her identity” (23). Oedipa considers her attempts at reading and detection to be “a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's plowshare” (104). Anticipating the sensation of clarity, Oedipa blends yonic images of both the sacred and the profane:

The saint whose water can light lamps, the clairvoyant whose laps in recall is the breath of God, the true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself, the dreamer whose puns probe ancient fetid shafts and tunnels of truth all act in the same special relevance to the word, or what ver it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from. The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was. Trembling, unfurrowed, she slipped sidewise, screeching back across grooves of years. (104-5)

Among the dispossessed, too, Oedipa finds a lonely old man in a boarding house and wonders, “Cammed each night out of that safe furrow the bulk of this city’s waking each sunrise again set virtuously to plowing, what rich soils had he turned, what concentric planets uncovered?” (102). Enacting, like a Christian disciple, a test of the materiality of his body, Oedipa “was overcome all at once by a need to touch him, as if she could not believe in him, or would not remember him, without it” (102). Satisfied that he exists and “exhausted, hardly knowing what she was doing, she came the last three steps and sat, took the man in her arms, actually held him... She felt wetness against her breast and saw that he was crying again” (102). In what Catherine Stimpson calls the “slum pietà” of this embrace, Oedipa “releases a suppressed capacity for maternal tenderness,” even “moral growth.”⁶¹ Her maternal embrace, in turn, gives space for the old man to violate the affective norms of his own gender and to cry freely. When she releases him, even as he still “looked up at her,” she is “reluctant as if he were her own child” (103).

Aside from this moment of “psychological motherhood,” however, the trap of the gender binary persists, like the either/or possibilities of paranoid reading, through most of the novel, so that Oedipa ends up “resisting/rejecting motherhood altogether.”⁶² Oedipa glimpses – and even experiments with – more fluid expressions of gender that fall outside the binary. But she cannot yet envision that “a rejection of gendered roles... need not lead to the refusal to play *any* role that would resemble them or a refusal to be motivated by the attributes these roles have been built around (in the same way that refusing to ‘embroider’ the ‘approved version of reality’ does not mean one should refrain from attempting to ‘embroider’ a different one).”⁶³ When she comes across the a group of children playing together at night, she is glimpsing an eversion of childhood based in the power of fiction:

In Golden Gate Park she came on a circle of children in their nightclothes, who told her they were dreaming the gathering. But that the area was really no different from being awake, because in the mornings when they got up they felt tired, as if they’d been up most of the night. When their mothers thought they were out playing they were really curled up in cupboards of neighbor’s houses, in platforms up in trees, in secretly-hollowed nests inside hedges, sleeping, making up for these hours. The night was empty of all terror for them, they had inside their circle an imaginary fire, and needed nothing but their own *unpenetrated* sense of community. (96)

To the children, this communal, imaginative act is sacred, an eversion of normative and familial time. The words and symbols that carry such fearful weight for Oedipa’s patterning mind are merely, for the kids, empty fodder for night games and jump-rope rhymes:

They knew about the post horn, but nothing of the chalked game Oedipa had seen on the

sidewalk. You used only one image and it was a jump-rope game, a little girl explained: you stepped alternately in the loop, the bell, and the mute, while your girlfriend sang: *Tristoe, Tristoe, one two three, / Turning taxi from across the sea...* (96)

As Kaltsas notes, Oedipa embraces the uncertainty of this fiction and, “for a moment only, alas, spontaneously participates in a community that is no less real for having been imagined.”⁶⁴ For Robert D. Newman, this moment “depicts the dangers of overreliance on rationalism and sympathizes with the practitioners of a type of anarchic humanism.”⁶⁵ A moment later, hearing the lyrics to their song, however, Oedipa tries to press them on its meaning by relating it to ‘the real’ Thurn and Taxis, but “they’d never heard it that way” and “went on warming their hands at an invisible fire” (96). In a willful refusal to engage, indeed, to imagine, “Oedipa, to retaliate, stopped believing in them” (96).

The problem, for Kaltsas, is that Oedipa cannot “abandon epistemological certainty and act ‘as if’ in order to create the community based on human decency she has been searching for.”⁶⁶ Like the Varo painting that, in seemingly trapping the weaving women in the tower, makes her cry, Oedipa cannot “admit that she lives in a world that is in part of her own making and that the only identity she can legitimately lay claim to will necessarily come both from *within* and *in opposition* to that world.”⁶⁷ What is demeaned as feminine production – tears, menstruation, embroidery, pregnancy – turns out to signify as the creation of the world, if only she can see it. Further, the human body offers an alternative to the frustrated logic of Nefastis’s machine; as Medoro puts it, the womb itself is “a closed system that resists entropy and that, on a figurative and promising level, lies somewhere in between the tower and the void.”⁶⁸ In *Lot 49*, gender becomes the site of a binary, a furrowing, so divisive to humanity that it is only through its continual eversion, the unfurrowing and remaking of its folds, that we might proliferate its roles and reimagine both historical and future oppression. Oedipa’s quest suggests that, difficult as it may seem, we may trade, elaborate upon, re-weave, and newly embroider what ‘man’ or ‘woman’ or ‘motherhood’ is, over and against sex and gender, in ways that subvert the paranoid, binary intentions of those roles.

As Berressem concludes, “Oedipa’s fictional problem – “*Shall I project a world?*” is also the reader’s factual problem,” and “if [Pynchon’s] poetics oscillate between pure aesthetic play on the one hand and a deeply felt political and cultural concern on the other, should one choose sides?”⁶⁹ For Emily Apter, there is real hope in Pynchon’s “paranoid style,” which promises a way of building out beyond the either/or logic of paranoia and towards a new reading of American literature, one which “would entail using paranoia politically to weaken the system of delusional democracy that keeps America in the grip of a homogenized cultural program.”⁷⁰ Paranoia, then, is not just a style, or a reflection of Cold War America, but a politics that can be everted, or turned against itself. What Oedipa contemplates at the close of *Lot 49* is how to act as the guardian, the parent, or the caretaker of America itself. The muted posthorn, we learn, is the sign of “El Desheredado, The Disinherited,” whose feminized province is that of the night and the moon, juxtaposing once again injustice and the family (132). Oedipa sees this legacy of disinheritance all over the darkened nightscape of America – in the people around the W.A.S.T.E. cans under the freeway, the old man she takes in her arms as he weeps, the lone children dancing in the park, a “facially-deformed welder, who cherished his ugliness,” and “a child roaming the night who missed the death before birth as certain outcasts do the dear lulling blankness of the community” (100). Lastly, she encounters

“a Negro woman with an intricately-marbled scar along the baby-fat of one cheek who kept going through rituals of miscarriage each for a different reason, deliberately as others might the ritual of birth, dedicated not to continuity but to some kind of interregnum” (100). In this encounter, and in Oedipa’s phantom ‘menstruation,’ ‘pregnancy’ and ‘abortion,’ Pynchon confronts us with the cyclical, abortive, and unborn promise of the nation.

In the final pages, Oedipa struggles mightily with the legacy of America, wondering, “What was left to inherit? That America coded in Inverarity’s testament, whose was that?” (149) Significantly, Oedipa searches “for that magical Other who would reveal herself out of the roar,” seeing both America and its Other as feminized (149). Again, she tries to reduce her readings to the binary, but even as she names her possibilities, they proliferate metonymically: “For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy of America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed” (150). And she begins to think her way out of these binaries as she perceives the danger of “excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided; and how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity?” (150) Thus the novel’s end recalls Oedipa’s earlier, eversive characterization of America, at once a command, an accusation, and a plaintive call to action: “This is America, you live in it, you let it happen. Let it unfurl” (123).

NOTES:

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- ¹ Frank O'Hara, "Naphtha," in *Lunch Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2014) 26.
- ² See James Gourley. "Vladimir Nabokov and Thomas Pynchon at Cornell University." *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews* 30, no. 3 (2017) 170-3.
- ³ *Ibid.* 173.
- ⁴ *Ibid.* 173.
- ⁵ Brian McHale in Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, and Brian McHale, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 97.
- ⁶ Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Routledge, 1982) 86.
- ⁷ Hanjo Berressem in Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, and Brian McHale, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*. 169.
- ⁸ Berressem 169-70.
- ⁹ Dalsgaard, Herman, and McHale, eds. 7.
- ¹⁰ Berressem 170.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.* 170.
- ¹³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1991) 25 and Charles Newman, *The Postmodern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985) 10.
- ¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988) xii.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* x.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* 4.
- ¹⁷ Jeffrey Ebbesen, *Postmodernism and its Others: The Fiction of Ishmael Reed, Kathy Acker, and Don DeLillo* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 12.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* 4.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) 49.
- ²¹ Henkle qtd. in Kostas Kaltsas, "Of Maidens and Towers: Oedipa Maas, Maxine Tarnow, and the Possibility of Resistance," in Ali Chetwynd, Joanna Freer, and Georgios Maragos, eds., *Thomas Pynchon, Sex, and Gender* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018) 38.
- ²² Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1999). Quotations from the novel will hereafter be cited parenthetically, except where multiple pages are referenced.
- ²³ David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980) 91.
- ²⁴ David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). See the chapter entitled "Postmodernist Fiction" (270-300).
- ²⁵ Lodge 280.
- ²⁶ Berressem 172.
- ²⁷ Remedios Varo, *Embroidering Earth's Mantle (Bordando el manto terrestre)*. Oil on masonite, 1961. www.artstor.org.
- ²⁸ Jameson 16.
- ²⁹ Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992) 26.
- ³⁰ Quilligan 28.
- ³¹ Dana Medoro, paraphrasing Quilligan in "Menstruation and Melancholy: *The Crying of Lot 49*," in *Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins*, Niran Abbas, ed. (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003) 71.
- ³² Robert D. Newman, *Understanding Thomas Pynchon* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1986) 7.
- ³³ Medoro 78.
- ³⁴ Kaltsas 38. See Georgiana Colville, *Beyond and Beneath the Mantle: On Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1988).
- ³⁵ Kaltsas 38.
- ³⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage, 1989) 141.
- ³⁷ Nabokov 278.
- ³⁸ Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner* (New York: Penguin, 1984).

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- ³⁹ Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove, *The Wise Wound: Menstruation and Everywoman* (New York: Macmillan Books, 1978) 205.
- ⁴⁰ Medoro 81.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.* 83.
- ⁴² Robert Burch, "Charles Sanders Peirce," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Winter 2018) www.plato.stanford.edu/archives.
- ⁴³ Serpell 65.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 65.
- ⁴⁵ See Medoro 81-2.
- ⁴⁶ Robert D. Newman 8.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 8.
- ⁴⁸ Lodge 294.
- ⁴⁹ Emily Apter, "On Oneworldedness: Or Paranoia As a World System," *American Literary History* 18, no. 2 (2006) 375.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 385.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² Robert D. Newman 6.
- ⁵³ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 95, 101. Emphases mine.
- ⁵⁴ Kaltsas 36.
- ⁵⁵ Cowart 26.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 29.
- ⁵⁷ Emma Miller, "The Naming of Oedipa Mass," *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 1, no. 1 (2012) www.orbit.openlibhums.org.
- ⁵⁸ Kaltsas 48.
- ⁵⁹ Medoro 74.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ Catharine R. Stimpson, "Pre-Apocalyptic Atavism: Thomas Pynchon's Early Fiction," in *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, George Levine and David Leverenz, eds. (New York: Little, Brown, 1976) 43.
- ⁶² Stimpson 43 and Kaltstas 49.
- ⁶³ Kaltsas 49.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ Robert D. Newman 8.
- ⁶⁶ Kaltsas 48.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 46.
- ⁶⁸ Medoro 83-4.
- ⁶⁹ Berressem 172, 171.
- ⁷⁰ Apter 386.

CHAPTER 4

“DISASTER WOULD COME TODAY OR TOMORROW”: VLADIMIR NABOKOV’S *ADA, OR ARDOR*

When surface consumes depth, everything is turned inside out.
– Mark C. Taylor¹

In her 2005 installation “Matchwork,” which remained on display for six years at the Proteus Gowanus Gallery in Brooklyn, artist Sasha Chavchavadze captured the incendiary historical tension between America and the USSR through her matchstick constructions, one of which displays the flags of the two nations joined by interlocking matches, as if on the brink of mutual ignition. Chavchavadze says her “Museum of Matches” was inspired by Vladimir Nabokov’s passion for pattern, particularly a childhood game with matchsticks that he describes in *Speak, Memory*.² In linking the strained cultural milieu of the Cold War to Nabokov’s interest in strategy and mirroring, Chavchavadze’s work points to the explosive contiguity of the two nations and draws attention to the subtle but persistent concern with the Cold War that threads its way through Nabokov’s work.

Because of his own insistence that art held “no importance whatever to society,” and because he so detested those artists whom he saw as “rank moralists” and “didacticists,” critics of Nabokov have avoided the so-called ‘politicizing’ of his novels for many years.³ Yet as a product of both superpowers involved in the Cold War, Nabokov was bound to both sides of the looming, static conflict that defined the zeitgeist of his era; his abiding love for his homeland and his open critiques of the “bloodshed, deceit, and oppression” of the Soviet state appear throughout his writings.⁴ Born in 1899, Nabokov first fled Russia for Berlin with his family in 1919 following the Bolshevik Revolution, then relocated to America in 1940 with Vera, his half-Jewish wife.⁵ Though he does address the Soviet Union in the Russian novels of his youth, the Cold War between Nabokov’s home and adopted countries began only after Nabokov’s move to America and his adoption of English as his primary literary language, and thus it is his novels in English whose subtexts most clearly carry the conflict between the U.S. and the S.U. within them as cultural referent.



Sasha Chavchavadze, Matchwork (2005).⁶

Intimations of the Cold War are woven throughout the four novels Nabokov composed in English between 1947 and 1962 (*Bend Sinister*, *Pnin*, *Lolita*, and *Pale Fire*). Nabokov’s most overtly political novel, *Bend Sinister*, yokes Nazism and Communism within the oppressive ‘Ekwelist’ regime and highlights the importance of the artist’s mind as a locus of freedom from horror, asserting, as Julia Bader has argued in *Crystal Land*, that “the thinker is intrinsically independent of political systems.”⁷ In *Pnin*, Nabokov focuses on the displaced immigrant’s awkward embrace of the English language and the painful process of matching the scraps of a new tongue to their referents, as “Professor Pnin laboriously translate[s] his own Russian verbal flow, teeming with idiomatic proverbs, into patchy English.”⁸ In recent years, critics have also begun to devote significant attention to the political themes and Cold War allusions in what are perhaps Nabokov’s two most widely read novels in English, *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Adam Piette successfully unravels *Lolita*’s tightly guarded Cold War secrets in *The Literary Cold War*, beginning with the language of

Humbert's mysterious trip into "arctic Canada," a "Pre-Cambrian world of granite" where he engages in the "cold labor" of psychological investigation.⁹ Humbert's colleagues "analyz[e] glacial drifts, drumlins and gremlins, and kremlins," being "not really concerned with Victoria Island copper," as they say they are, but with something much more "hush-hush" indeed.¹⁰ Piette makes the case that these fragments of information encode the uranium rush of the Manhattan Project years, and that H.H.'s colleagues are probably examining the pitchblende seams of Pre-Cambrian granite to find fissionable ore for the construction of the first atomic bomb.¹¹ For Piette, the nuclear is closely tied to the sexual in *Lolita*, from the novel's various links between the phallic and the atomic mushroom-cloud to the "blazing, radioactive blast" of Humbert's "sexual gaze," which is a "lethal, sterilizing force" that leaves Dolly dead with a stillborn (radon) daughter in Gray Star, Alaska by the novel's conclusion.¹² In "The Zemblan Who Came in from the Cold," Steven Belletto also examines the ties between Cold War politics and sexuality in his reading of *Pale Fire*, considering Kinbote as an "object of persecution by a Cold War community" that would regard "weak-minded and emotionally fragile" homosexuals as potential informers posed to undermine American culture and the strength of its resistance to communism.¹³ Belletto points to Kinbote's fantasy world of open homosexuality in Zembla (from the Russian *zemlya*, meaning 'land' or 'earth'), as an important narrative of creative resistance to Cold War containment ideology. Kinbote's immoderate voyeurism and his hyperbolic fulfilment of the homosexual stereotype, too, seem to offer a tongue-in-cheek critique of the hysterical nature of pop-Freudian homophobia in the American 1950s.¹⁴

Yet despite such readings of the earlier English novels, Nabokov's 1969 masterpiece *Ada, or Ardor* has not garnered significant consideration as a political text, though its language and setting invite the reader early on to explore an intricate world of Cold War allusions. Written at the end of the 'first Cold War', at the onset of late-1960s *détente*, *Ada* braids together the multiple threads of Nabokov's literary concern with the Cold War during a period of the conflict's apparent diminution (it would not return in full force until the 'second Cold War' of the 1980s, after Nabokov's death).¹⁵ And while Nabokov wrote two more novels and a partial draft after *Ada* in Switzerland (which indeed concern themselves to a degree with exile, language, and sexual transgression), it is in *Ada* that Nabokov's Cold War patterning comes to its richest, if most subtle, maturity. *Ada* takes place in Estotiland, an Amerussia on the planet Antiterra, where "the roubles rolled, and the dollars poured," and where tourists can visit the "peasant-bare footprint of Tolstoy preserved in the clay of a motor court in Utah."¹⁶ On Antiterra, the continents are largely still joined in a world much less splintered than our own globe. Our world is referred to throughout *Ada* as "Terra," a mythical sibling planet known only through the hallucinatory visions of insane Antiterrans (345). The text of *Ada* is nonagenarian Van Veen's memoir, written in "the chronologically hardly believable Nineteen-Sixties," which correspond approximately to the 2010s on Terra, due to a time-gap of about fifty years between the worlds (237).

In "Nabokov's *Ada* as Science Fiction," Roy Arthur Swanson suggests that Antiterra be examined as an "eversion" of the world we know, a geographical and political "turning inside-out" of Terra.¹⁷ Swanson's vision echoes the advice of the master magician

in *Ada*, who reminds young Van that “secret pockets were useful (but could be turned inside out and against you)” (173). The concept of eversion also magically reveals the way that turning Terra inside out leaves the reader with an Antiterra fractured by the same interstices. By estranging us from our own world and everting it through his invention of Antiterra, Nabokov makes seeing our nation – and our world – in multiple a vital part of reading *Ada*. For Van, a psychologist specializing in ‘terrapty,’ it is simply

sidesplitting to imagine that “Russia,” instead of being a quaint synonym of Estoty, the American province extending from the Arctic no-longer-vicious Circle to the United States proper, was on Terra the name of a country, transferred as if by some sleight of *land* across the ha-ha of a doubled ocean to the opposite hemisphere where it sprawled over all of today’s Tartary. (17-18)

In Van’s Amerussia, led by President Abraham Milton, the potential Cold War threat of the Arctic Circle is utterly defused, and yet Van’s patients inform him that on Terra, there is “tangible water and ice separating the political, rather than poetical, notions of ‘America’ and ‘Russia’” (18). Thus Terra’s contemporary politics display the icy distance between Cold War superpowers, while on Antiterra, Soviet Russia is euphemized as “Tartary,” a “Golden Horde” of nations that lie benignly behind a “Golden,” rather than an Iron, Curtain (181-2).

There are two steps I want to take in approaching *Ada* as a Cold War text. First, I want to highlight how *Ada* reiterates the binaries of our world – fact and fiction, or the US/SU divide – but also adds in its own binaries – Terra/Antiterra, Van/Ada, indeed, *Ada*, or *Ardor* – all of which, as in *The Crying of Lot 49*, might push the reader towards a paranoid or symptomatic reading of the text. In creating new binaries to multiply the original binaries, by giving us excessive surfaces, aesthetic adornments, and linguistic games, I want to argue that *Ada*’s seeming dualisms, its invitations to paranoid reading, are multiplied beyond recognition through a metonymic chain of subjunctive possibilities in imaginative contact with the fabric of our own world. Far from the senseless ‘heap’ or impenetrable ‘wall’ we have in Fredric Jameson’s imagery of postmodern aesthetics, I argue for the world-making possibilities of that very excess, for a reading praxis that actually ends by counteracting, rather than reinforcing, the binary paradigm of paranoia itself. In *Ada*, such eversions work largely through the figure of the antagonym, or antilogy, a word that means both one thing and its opposite. Inherent in the word “antilogy” are the roots *anti* and *logos*, meaning defying logic, or defying the word. Some such words develop from two different roots (cleave), while many come from nouns being transformed into verbs (husk, bolt). An antilogy is not so much a paradox, but like the twin imaginative worlds of Terra and Antiterra, an eversion of one meaning that actually creates not just one opposite meaning, but shades of multiple other possibilities as well.

The story of *Ada* hinges on the passionate, lifelong affair of Van and Ada Veen, who fall in love as adolescents during a summer spent at the family estate of Ardis. At first, the children believe themselves to be first cousins, as their twin mothers Aqua and Marina are married to the Veen brothers Demon and Dan, respectively. Already immersed in their affair, fourteen-year-old Van and twelve-year-old Ada discover that they are actually both the illegitimate children of Marina and Demon, making them full brother and sister,

and Nabokov even seems to suggest that incest stretches back through several previous generations of the Veen family tree.¹⁸ Little Lucette, the legitimate child of Dan and Marina, is thus a ‘uterine’ (or as Lucette likes to say, “vaginal”), half-sister to them both (372). The area around Ardis, near Ladore, closely resembles the terrain surrounding the Vyra estate of Nabokov’s childhood, and the amalgamated culture of Estotiland fuses the best of *fin de siècle* aristocratic Russian life with bright, mid-twentieth-century American popular culture, expressing the boundless freedom of the artist’s imagination. In this fusion, as Michael Wood suggests, it is “as if Nabokov’s plight had become a nation.”¹⁹ Indeed, the exquisite details of Estotiland unite the cultures of the sparring superpowers in a land that is only desirable because of Nabokov’s loss; that is, its invention hinges on a reconciliation of two cultures that is only necessitated by exile. ‘Estotiland’ echoes the sound of the United States’ name in the romance languages (États-Unis, Estados Unidos, Stati Uniti), but *estoti* is also ‘waste’ in Russian, so that the moniker picks up on both the contemporary Cold War catchphrase ‘nuclear wasteland’ and on Nabokov’s inheritance of the modern literary tradition (Eliot, Pynchon).²⁰ Aqua and Marina, who are twins, form Aquamarine, “a geminate gem,” so that their twinning is not just dual, but multifaceted, as will be the case with Ada and Van, Ada and Lucette, Lucette and Lolita, and so on across the novel (19). Such rich connectivity among words fits in with Nabokov’s own view of language, which he once said “is never really quite bare: the white trace of a wrist watch, a curled piece of sticking plaster on a bruised heel, these cannot be discarded by the most ardent nudist...I doubt whether you can even give your telephone number without giving something of yourself.”²¹ Just as language can never be fully free of its user, so its user can never be fully free of culture, so that even Nabokov’s work, which employs the political only indistinctly and facetiously, becomes patently marked by the culture of the Cold War.

To begin with *Ada*’s binaries, its invitations to paranoid reading, it is worth examining Nabokov’s description of the good reader as one who will “notice and fondle details” in the world the author has created before searching for “links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge,” and *Ada*’s eponymous character reminds us simply that “the detail is all” (71).¹³ So while we are tasked with attending to and managing these details, Van himself writes that “some law of logic should fix the number of coincidences in a given domain, after which they cease to be coincidences, and form instead the living organism of a new truth” (361). This impetus to see details arranged into a predetermined pattern can engender an obsessive, systematizing impulse in the reader. Like Pynchon’s “executrix” Oedipa, who takes charge of untangling a rich man’s finances after his death, Ada functions as “editrix” here, filling the margins with clarifications, proliferating meanings, puns, and logical correctives. As an invagination of “the feminine,” Ada is a sterile, unfeeling scientist, ruled by sexual desire and intellectual precision, rather than emotion, romance, and feeling. She does not inhabit that role in a specifically masculine way, however; her gender is neither cancelled out nor inverted, as it seems initially, but shifts and changes over the course of the narrative.

The novel begins with an extended antilogy: the eversion of the opening line of *Anna Karenina*. In place of Tolstoy’s “All happy families are alike; all unhappy ones are unhappy in their own way,” Nabokov writes, “All happy families are more or less

dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike” (3). This is an eversion that not only poses a binary (inside-out, outside-in), but actually a faceted, multidimensional experience of narrative. Nabokov writes that the everted “pronouncement has little if any relation to the story to be *unfolded* now” in a “great and *variegated*” country,” including a “*tessellated* protectorate” that “commingles, *granoblastically*” with the northern portions of the nation (3). Again, at the start of the third chapter, “the mere geographic aspect” of the fabled land of Terra is likened to “marquetry,” “bric-à-Braques,” “ormolu,” and other methods of collage and inlaid work, “configurations” that make up a “varicolored map” that is “sidesplitting” to consider (17). As in Pynchon, Nabokov suggests, but then builds beyond, an either/or logic:

There were those who maintained that the discrepancies and ‘false overlappings’ between the two worlds were too numerous, and too deeply woven into the skein of successive events, not to taint with trite fancy the theory of essential sameness; and there were those who retorted that the dissimilarities only confirmed the live organic reality pertaining to the other world; that a perfect likeness would rather suggest a specular, and hence speculative, phenomenon; and that two chess games with identical openings and identical ending moves might ramify in an infinite number of variations, on *one* board and in *two* brains, at any middle stage of their irrevocably converging development. (18-19)

The idea of the story “to be unfolded now,” as well as the “tessellated protectorate” of Russian land inside of America lead into a series of contiguous bits of history and symbolically juxtaposed clues that begin to make some sense upon repeated readings and with attentive study of “Vivian Darkbloom’s” Appendix. Ada is ‘executrix’ of Van’s memoir, a kind of *miglior fabbro*, making and remaking the text with her marginalia, laying bare its puns and its processes, and making visible the invisible secretarial female labor that (certainly in Nabokov’s own life, through his wife Vera) would give male writing its shape.

In the childhood game that inspired Chavchavadze’s ‘Museum of Matches’, Nabokov recalls how his father’s visiting friend, a Russian general, ‘magically’ manipulated loose matches into patterns of calm and stormy seas for him; years later, dressed as a peasant and fleeing the Bolsheviks, the same general stopped Nabokov’s father in the road to ask for a match to light his cigarette.²² The story reflects Nabokov’s interest in tracking “thematic designs through one’s life,” which he held was “the true purpose of autobiography.”²³ In his fiction, Nabokov’s patterning serves the similar purpose of crafting meaning across a text. As Van himself writes in *Ada* (which is a memoir, albeit a fictional one), “some law of logic should fix the number of coincidences in a given domain, after which they cease to be coincidences, and form instead the living organism of a new truth” (361). Thus, although the Cold War elements of *Ada* are but subtle shading in the greater picture of the text, they still produce a vital meaning when examined holistically. Nabokov famously describes the good reader as one who will “notice and fondle details” in the world the author has created before searching for “links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge,” and *Ada*’s eponymous character reminds us that “the detail is all” in reading Nabokov (71).²⁴ Rather than presenting further

strictures to the reading of his novels, these instructions actually free any careful and intelligent reader to approach his works with an eye for expanding their meaning. Not quite the intensely controlling author he is so often assumed to be, Nabokov was quite open to the possibility of a pattern evolving and developing beyond his intentions; in a letter of response to the critic Carl Proffer's *Keys to Lolita*, he writes, "many of [your] delightful combinations and clues, though quite acceptable, never entered my head or are the result of an author's intuition and inspiration, not calculation and craft. Otherwise why bother at all – in your case as well as mine."²⁵ In acknowledging the importance of creativity on the part of both novelist and critic, Nabokov confirms Stephen Blackwell's assertion that in "refus[ing] to tell his readers what to believe, even while urging them to continue searching and asking," Nabokov actually creates space for incredibly rich and diverse readings of his work.²⁶

It is not surprising that Nabokov, raised by a White Russian family deeply versed in politics, the sciences, and foreign languages, and writing in mid-century America during a postwar boom of industrialization and imperialist expansion, should take an interest in the nuclear contest between the U.S. and the S.U. A scientist himself, Nabokov kept well abreast of contemporary developments in physics, psychology, and zoology, and the study and use of nuclear physics expanded by leaps and bounds in his lifetime.²⁷ Art and science, too, were closely linked through their joint exploration of nuclear physics, and in some cases proved mutually influential. In the late nineteenth century, scientists had discovered radioactivity and half-lives, through which 'one element could decay into another in a process of transmutation that gave off new sources of energy' in what seemed like "an alchemist's dream."²⁸ As early as 1914, H.G. Wells responded to the new world of physics in *The World Set Free*, where he imagines a mid-twentieth-century world in which "atomic bombs" were used as weapons and the power of the atom had also been channeled for energy purposes.²⁹ Physicist Leo Szilard, in turn, used Wells' fictional ideas as inspiration for his own developing nuclear theory.³⁰ The first purported atomic split occurred during an experiment conducted by the Italian physicist Enrico Fermi in 1934 (in fiction, also the year of *Lolita's* birth, Hazel Shade's birth, and Van and Ada's first summer together in Terra-time).³¹ By 1938, German scientists Hahn and Strassman had records of the nuclear bombardment of uranium, demonstrating the release of significant energy that occurred as the heavier element split into lighter ones, and plans to experiment with chain reactions were underway soon after.³² During the Second World War, American scientists raced to produce the A-bomb, scouring the North American continent for uranium, 'breeding' it into fissionable form, and constructing test bombs like those that would be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the summer of 1945.³³ Many of the details of the operation, code-named The Manhattan Project, became more widely known to the American public in the 1950s, when A-bomb mastermind J. Robert Oppenheimer was tried by the U.S. government for his opposition to the arms race, likening the involved nations to "two scorpions in a bottle, each capable of killing the other, but only at the risk of his own life."³⁴ The surreal quality of the atomic threat and the potential for what was known as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) led to a heightened sense of paranoia on both sides of the Pacific.³⁵ In *The Imaginary War*, Guy Oakes points to a shift in American strategic ideology after World War II, as "Cold War civil defense planning posed the much more

daunting problem of fighting an imaginary war.”³⁶ The constant governmental production of ‘threat’ and ‘enemy’, along with standard Civic Defense procedures that bizarrely encouraged Americans to ‘conceptualize fallout as a problem of nuclear housekeeping’ all served to hypostatize the previously unthinkable possibility of nuclear attack.³⁷

An imaginary war calls for a fantastical fiction, and incest, as it appears in *Ada*, forms a remarkably facile holder for the anxiety surrounding the A-bomb, which was somehow both a continuous and an absent event in everyday discourse. Gillian Harkins identifies the ‘central paradox’ of incest in the tension between “the ubiquity of its discourse and the elusiveness of its taboo,” so that like the hanging threat of the bomb, “by being locatable nowhere, the incest taboo could be found everywhere.”³⁸ Like the illicit sexual act, the contemplation of the nuclear event is thrilling because its actualization is so inconceivable, thus mirroring Prophecy Coles’ articulation of incest’s power to “evok[e] ideas of both the sublime and the horrific.”³⁹ Moreover, the mimicry involved in the arms race and its inherent threat of annihilation echo the narcissism and potential sterility associated with incestuous sexuality. From its very inception, the bomb was sketched in sexual-familial terms, as both the child (‘Little Boy’) of the scientists who created it and as the thrilling and threatening phallus of absurd Freudian proportions that would penetrate enemy territory.⁴⁰ In his famous description of the Trinity test at Alamogordo in July 1945, O.R. Frisch describes watching the cloud of the bomb

lengthening its stem and getting gradually darker and slightly larger...somewhat like a raspberry...[a] mushroom grew out of the top ... slowly penetrating the highest cloud layers...the whole top mushroom appeared to glow...⁴¹

The sexual undertones of the description are furthered by Frisch’s subsequent fixation on ‘the impact of the blast wave on the cloud layers’, as evidenced by ‘the sudden appearance of a white patch on the underside of the cloud layer... spread[ing] very rapidly, like a pool of spilt milk’.⁴² Frisch also figures the moment of explosion is as a climax for Oppenheimer, who

grew tenser as the last seconds ticked off... He held on to a post to steady himself... and then when...there came this tremendous burst of light followed ... by the deep growling roar of the explosion, his face relaxed into an expression of tremendous relief.⁴³

For those who never witnessed an explosion firsthand, the bomb nevertheless rapidly acquired mythical proportions and sexual associations once the initial ‘mushroom-cloud’ photographs crystallized the visual form of the bomb in Cold War culture. A-bomb-themed toys appeared in cereal boxes and a record label, Atomic, bore a mushroom-cloud logo on its products, while the “complex psychological link between atomic destruction and Eros” was borne out in nuclear-survival pop songs like “Atom Bomb Baby” and in burlesque club ads for “Atom Bomb dancers” in Los Angeles.⁴⁴ Even the new French-designed bikini, so dubbed because of a test bomb detonated two weeks earlier at Bikini Atoll, was modelled in a U.S. magazine by the “Anatomic Bombshell” Laura Christians as she lay draped over the concrete lip of an empty swimming pool.⁴⁵ *Ada*, incidentally, is first filmed at Ardis, “lying on the edge of the swimming pool,” at its “lip,” in a shabby

one-piece that repulses Van, enough to make Ada promise that she will soon don her “fabulous new bikini” (199-200).

To the skeptical reader, this probably all seems like precisely the kind of overly deterministic Freudian mumbo-jumbo that Nabokov so detested, and it absolutely is. Such lamely straightforward readings are characteristic of the very positivism and materialism that Nabokov regularly denounced as forms of “insult to art and truth.”⁴⁶ But let us not forget the playful Nabokov, the one whose inimitable sense of humour so famously signs his texts, the one Michael Wood calls “serious and playful, serious because playful.”⁴⁷ The Cold War engendered numerous ways of processing its own trauma, as evidenced by the range of art it produced, from the paranoid dystopian sci-fi of American writers to the state-supported Soviet visions of a utopian near-future, from Arthur Miller’s solemn allegorical condemnation of McCarthyism in *The Crucible* to films like *Dr. Strangelove*, which “lampoons the arms race as a distortion of the sex drive.”⁴⁸ By the 1960s, as Mitter and Major point out, American culture at large had developed a more critical and parodic consideration of Cold War paranoia, treating it with “satire, as if the subject was no longer accessible to ‘straight’ description.”⁴⁹ Nabokov, with his love of wit and deception, subtly incorporates detested elements from the political culture, so that his fictional patterning exists in a spirit of both jest and gesture, mocking the absurdity of pop-psychological symbolism while pointing out our readerly eagerness to identify it. Nabokov thus simultaneously invites and repudiates political readings, making it the pleasure of the perspicacious reader to find him/herself challenged by the puzzle of such allusions, partly *because* of Nabokov’s maddening and perverse refusals to account for them. In this way, locating the Cold War in *Ada* is itself a taboo act akin to incest, and it searches for a theme which is both absent and present in the text, one which lies behind the public mask of *Ada*.

In imagining the bomb as explosive, penetrative, and sexual in nature, American culture embraced the home and family, envisioned, as Deborah Nelson argues in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, as the “symbolic bunker” of society.⁵⁰ The term “nuclear family” itself reflects the rise of twentieth-century physics, sketching the family as the core, or nucleus, around which the ideal individual life would revolve. For this reason, in the crisis of the Cold War, Nelson argues that “domestic containment in American rhetoric substitute[d] the home and the nation...effortlessly,” because the two became “equivalen[t],” even “homolog[ous].”⁵¹ Indeed, though Nabokov’s Cold War novels describe motion and travel, they take place largely in suburban or rural locales, within the extremely private and constricted spheres of motel rooms, cars, family homes, and close neighbourhoods. These close, almost suffocating domestic spaces expose the taut home front of the Cold War, where new techniques of surveillance and apparatuses designed to control and contain the population complicate the safe ‘bunker’ into which Americans were meant to retreat from the bomb threat. While ‘normative’ sexuality was publicly discussed as a bellwether of American values and security, researchers like Alfred Kinsey scandalized the nation with reports of Americans engaging in extramarital sex, homosexuality, and masturbation, and ‘deviants’ were ferreted out, exposed, and barred from employment in the public sector.⁵² Nelson writes that the

rhetorically flexible characterization of the enemy served to both multiply the sites of invasion, dispersing them across U.S. social and political life, as well as intensify them, extending surveillance deeper into regions that did not then appear to be political, such as gender, sexuality, mental health, and personality... so-called private sexual behavior... was in the cold war fraught with political significance.⁵³

This manifests itself in much of Nabokov's work, where the containment-era home is a locus of sexual transgression in the form of homosexuality (as in *Pale Fire*), paedophilia (as in *Lolita*), or incest (as in *Ada*). Nabokov questions sexual tropes by actualizing Freudian 'phantasies' of sexual dysfunction and demonstrating their absurd links to paranoid political culture during the Cold War. Kinbote's insane political fantasy and obsessive neighborly spying are wedded to his farcically stereotypical homosexuality, Humbert's access to military secrets in the Arctic is mirrored in his invasion, as foreigner, of the American child's body, and the language of the bomb is applied to the consuming and sterilizing narcissism of incest in *Ada*. Nabokov both engages with and mocks commonly-made links between the psychological, the familial, and the political in the discourse of nuclear attack in what Adam Piette views as the constant "struggle between familial and superpolitical readings" inherent in the literature of the Cold War.⁵⁴

Van's personal life is invaded by the political when Gamaliel, an Antiterranean president, conducts a McCarthy-like witch-hunt for a sexual pervert known to have raped his children and grandchildren in his sleep in a hyperbolic manifestation of Freudian psychosexuality (134). Van recalls the day that "Gamaliel (then a stout young senator) thumped a conference table with such force that he hurt his fist" as he demanded severe "capital punishment" for such perverts, an intensity that mirrors Joseph McCarthy's midcentury containment rhetoric (135). Van then sadly recounts how Gamaliel's policies have affected incest laws so that not only cousins, but eventually even "uncles and grandnieces were forbidden to intermarry," while "large peasant families" are told to keep their windows "uncurtained at night for the convenience of petrol-torch-flashing patrols" called "Peeping Pats," whose nickname smacks of violation in the name of patriotism (135). Years later, Gamaliel goes too far, is "not reelected after his fourth term," and fades from the political stage, but his policies nevertheless continue to influence Antiterranean culture (472). Indeed, as Paul Boyer articulates in *By the Bomb's Early Light*, "the fundamental perceptions which continue to influence our response to the nuclear menace" were "articulated, discussed, and absorbed into the living tissue of the culture" even from the early part of the Cold War.⁵⁵ As a more meticulous examination of *Ada's* Cold War allusions will reveal, even Nabokov's sly and coquettish engagement with the political forms a meaningful pattern in the traces of its cultural infiltration, for the nuclear always leaves behind "a residuum... working itself out in the culture in ways no one can predict."⁵⁶

To continue down the rabbit hole of Cold War allusions, *Ada* herself tells us that she and Van are a "super-imperial couple" within their "cross section" of "spacetime," towering over others in intellect and importance (71). As an eversion of the couple formed by U.S.-S.U. rivalry, Bobbie Ann Mason writes that "each sees himself in the other and adores his own image, and the two images are blended like two mirrors reflecting each

other,' though in this everted allegorical representation, the threat and political distance of two superpowers is replaced with their desire and sexual contact.⁵⁷ Rather than a simplistically allegorical relationship, however, Nabokov's *Antiterra* is everted, so that the troubled and explosive U.S.-S.U. relationship becomes one of Van and Ada's passionate sexual contact, though it is still underlined by frightening similarities with our own world. In the escalating space, arms, and propaganda races of the Cold War, America and Russia constantly attempted to distinguish themselves from one another, but their competition instead became ironically imitative.⁵⁸ Such mirroring within the U.S.-S.U. rivalry is evident, for example, in Russia's insistence upon its 'democratic' form of communism, as well as in USIA broadcasts that depicted the American economy as the 'people's capitalism.'⁵⁹ This tension between similitude and contrast is manifest in Van and Ada's bodies, imagined as both separate, gendered opposites and as halves which make each other whole. The small brown spot on Ada's left hand and right foot complete those decorating Van's right hand and left foot, and Ada notes that while "officially we are maternal cousins...physically...we are more like twins."⁶⁰ She even recognizes their cognitive similarities in writing, "all my thoughts, oh my darling, are mimotypes of yours" (333). Yet the two are also remarkable strangers; as Michael Wood observes, they must "learn each other's bodies as if they were strange countries," and indeed Van imagines himself hailing "from a much more remote and grim country" than Ada (75).⁶¹ The two attempt to resolve this paradoxical combination of sameness and otherness, of mimicry and separation, through their sexuality, which evokes the close knowledge and intimacy that America and Russia continuously cultivated in order to engage as enemies. Before they make love there "extended a void of light and a veil of shade that no force could overcome and pierce," and even in their first caresses, "a secret sign was erected, a veil drawn between him and her" (59).

Such juxtaposition recalls Chavchavadze's matchstick portrayal of the interlocked tension of the Cold War superpowers, and in locating the mirroring and mimicking of U.S.-S.U. relations in the relationship between bodies, *Ada* highlights the sense of vulnerability engendered by nuclear threat. Both Van and Ada hold a powerful and controlling position in the Veen family, and they utilize their mental superiority and physical vitality to control the other members of the household. Even as a child, Ada is already militaristic in her epicurean avidity, "attacking the more amorphous junkety depths" of her meal, or, in conversation, "reach[ing] a climax," "sprawling forward," and "invading the table" in an effort to eliminate her own mother's dull contributions from the dinner conversation (47, 62). On her twelfth birthday, the clever little manipulator tells her nurse that menstruation "hardly ever happen[s] to normal girls today," leaving Blanche to wonder whether "the progress of science had not changed that of nature" (80-1). A budding botanist who continually attempts to manipulate and improve the strains of plants and animals around her, Ada manifests certain aspects of the space and arms races in her 'progressive' but sometimes destructive lust for control and improvement. She calls her larvarium alone "the real marvel of Ardis Manor," and spends her time drawing "unrecorded but possible" orchids, mixing species of "insect-mimicking" flowers and planning ways to breed and develop them herself (54, 99). In her lepidopteran pursuits, Ada exhibits "a mad scholar's quiet smile" as she examines her boxes of "hatched and

chloroformed” treasures (63, 96). Any insect of interest is instantly “choked with one nip by the nimble fingers of enraptured and heartless Ada,” who then takes these “inestimable gems” and “sets them and labels them and pins them in glass trays.”⁶² Yet as in the Manhattan Project, where uranium ore was mined and ‘bred’ into fissionable material, Ada’s penchant is not just for *collecting* such rarities, but for “breed[ing] all kinds of leps,” owning “all the special violets they breed on,” and having “eggs and larvae rushed to [her] by plane from all over” (57). Interestingly, Ada’s collection fantasy is distinctly linked with Cold War uranium mining sites, as she plans to begin by searching for all the specimens she can get in America and then expanding her search, “starting, for the heck of it, with arctic habitats – Lyaska, Bras d’Or, Victor Island” (404).

Ada, whose name means “ornament” or “decoration,” figures as aesthetic proliferation itself (she is endlessly productive, though not *reproductive*). A superb artist of anagrams, Ada is “a sort of graceful computing machine” with a gifted, almost martial notion of the “exploitation of chance” in trumping other players” (224-5). Whereas Van is an expert at choosing wisely from a limited set of tactical choices (the last few moves of a chess game), Ada’s skill is multiplicative: the “doubling, tripling, and even nonupling” of the value of her verbal creations, which “evolved monstrous forms in her delirium during a severe streptococcal ague” (223). In lording her mushrooming, unparalleled scores over fellow players, Ada mimics the colossal accomplishments of the A-bomb scientists, who created a weapon many times more powerful than any other in history. A poor chess player, however, Ada is still desperate to win by strategy, and is willing to “conjure up a combinational sacrifice” in order to do so (224). Violent, overreactive Van also models the superego behaviour of the superpower. He relishes the “banal acclaim and the vulgar envy that swirl[] around him,” and because of his short temper and physical prowess over others, he must constantly fight not to succumb to the “rapture of their destruction” (184, 301). Little Lucette, tortured with love for him, calls him “Dr. V.V. Sector” and “an abominably cruel Vandemonian,” but cold Van finds he “cannot brood over broken hearts: such as Lucette’s when he and Ada might share “a blue, icy, breathless day” together instead.⁶³ When he becomes jealous of Ada, Van stewes in “icy fury,” and when his anger overflows at her, he “expel[s] it like a rocket” (189, 204). At one point, Van even throws a handful of poker chips in a rival’s face, though he relents even as the “missiles were still in flight,” recognizing that he should not engage in such “cruel and commonplace violence” if his opponents cannot “respond in any conceivable fashion” (175).

When Van and Ada’s ‘free and frantic caresses’ finally begin, it is only with “strange craftiness” and “cringing stealth” that the lovers can proceed (97). Theirs is a “horribly hidden” and “perilous relationship,” a “premature and in many ways fatal romance” composed of “undercover dealings,” all of which breed an intense mutual distrust akin to that of two agents from opposing nations (100, 148). At one point, Van becomes paranoid that his own calculated moves are “inducing her to conceal from him, the concealer, her awareness of what he concealed” (98). Ada, in her turn, acknowledges the strategic nature of their interactions when she sees that she can no longer halt his advances “without... acknowledging a tacit acceptance of their routine repetition in [the] past” (99). In the end, Van cannot tell whether his own “other half” is “utterly ignorant

and as pure as the night sky,” or whether “total experience advised her to indulge in a cold game” (118). The two warring personalities of Van and Ada’s ‘cold game’ mean that they know from the start that “disaster would come today or tomorrow, a question of time or timing” (296). On the afternoon that the children first meet, Ada immediately tries to engage Van in a series of her stiffly competitive little games of sun and shadow, which she begins with a prolix enumeration of her rules: “You outline my shadow behind me...I move...You outline it again. Then you mark out the next boundary” (52). The language of Ada’s games plays maddeningly with ideas of borders on a number of different registers, highlighting the tense and ever-shifting boundaries of individual perceptions, bodies, and even nations.

The cardinal games of the novel, however, centre on language. English phrases have their shadowy Russian doubles in transliterated parenthetical phrases, translated either within the text in its accompanying footnotes (written by Vivian Darkbloom, who is simply Vladimir Nabokov anagrammatically masquerading as editor). This doubling and turning of meaning extends, too, to punning phrases like ‘yellow-blue Vass’, which Darkbloom condescends to tell us is a homonym of *ya lyublyu vas*, or ‘I love you’ in Russian (187, 597). In teasing the reader from the outset with such linguistic duplexes, Nabokov forces us throughout *Ada* to see in double, and to construct meaning across the gaps between English and Russian, Terra and Antiterra, experience and imagination, fact and fiction. Nabokov forms these doublings through his eversions of deep linguistic pockets, thereby revealing the fractures of our world from the inside out. As Ada says,

Speaking as a botanist and a madwoman...the most extraordinary word in the English language was “husked,” because it stood for opposite things, covered and uncovered, tightly husked but easily husked, meaning they peel off quite easily, you don’t have to tear the waistband, you brute. (267)

Ada’s wonderful puzzlement over the antilogy “husked” shows us the binary – the word and its definitions, covered and uncovered – and then immediately transcends those binaries by making its figuration stand beside her body, a picture of Van’s desire by metonym. Another seemingly “excessive” detail in the text that works here is the moment where Van has a dream of the sisters licking his “corn cob” (521). This makes that reference less a chance metaphor for the phallus and more a lateral connection, across the surfaces of the text, to another moment of desire in the “husked” passage – a besideness, a network of meanings made contiguous by the reader’s act of remembrance, of folding and shaping, rather than the overt consistency of a single symbol or metaphor. In linking madness, biology, and language in the moments just preceding intercourse with Van, Ada’s summation of ‘husked’ also relates to the games of anagrams that take place throughout the novel. At Ada’s twelfth birthday, her playmate Grace comes up with ‘nicest’ and ‘insect’, while Ada offers ‘scient’ and ‘incest’ in quick return, in a synthesis of language and sexuality that reflects David Schneider’s description of incest as a form of ‘ungrammatical love’ (85).⁶⁴ The nicest—scient—insect—incest sequence also carries within it *Ada*’s emphasis on the links between nature, the personality performance, and the study and subversion of the natural world through science and transgressive sexuality. Each word occurs elsewhere in the text - linked together here by a metonymic chain, they

suggest not meaningless excess, but a meaningful nexus of other aesthetic points, meaningful not because of what lies behind the terms, but of how they lie beside one another.

In the anagram games, language becomes incestuous through its sensuousness, its self-referentiality, its endless capacity to mirror and merge, and its occasional sterility of meaning. For example, in a game played in Russian (the children still love this game even though Roman lettering has officially replaced the “old Cyrillitsa, a nightmare alphabet”), Lucette forms ‘ROTİK’ (‘mouth’) from ‘LIKROT’, which not only misses the ribald ‘KLITOR’ altogether, but also eludes ‘KROLİK’, or ‘hare’, the name of the good doctor who helps Ada breed her leps (84, 224). Thus, this one set of letters contains both facial and nether labia, as well as the connection of science and sex with a play in Krolik’s name on the phrase ‘breeding like rabbits’. Another incestuous sequence is the random pattern of tiles in the holder one day that forms ‘the amusing VANIADA’, a perfect seven-letter blend of ‘Ivan’ and ‘Ada’ that also represents their interlocking bodies and mounting desire for one another (224). The children, however, can make no sense of the sterile assortment ‘LINKREM’, and when Van suggests ‘shift[ing] those two syllables and you get a fortress in ancient Muscovy’ (*kremlin*), Ada says simply, “That pretty word does not exist in Russian” (227). In robbing the potent cultural referent ‘Kremlin’ of its power, Nabokov forces the reader to consider the entrenched place of the political in our sense of language. Later, one of Van’s books includes among its typographical errors ‘the meaningless “nuclear” instead of “unclear” ’ (360). These eversions rob potent cultural referents of their power, graphing a historical fantasy of words rendered meaningless because their harrowing referents do not exist. More than that, they locate a Saussurean breakdown that is also the imaginative opening of many other meanings, of language as other possible worlds.

Nabokov further plays with language in the epistolary code that Van and Ada develop for their separation, which places them in a frustrated mode of spy-to-spy communication. As an example for the reader, Van describes “making *klv zdB AoyvBno wkh gwzxm dgq kzwAAqvo a gwttp vq wiflhm* Ada in a natural bower of aspens; *xliC mujzikml*,” which seems tantalizingly to veil some sexual act among the trees, but actually just encodes “his way through the brush and crossing a brook to reach” her, where “they embraced” (157). Before they part, Ada reminds Van to learn the formula for the code “by heart and then eat it up like a good little spy” (157). As Ken Ruthven notes in *Nuclear Criticism*, the spy code is “a scrambling device” akin to anagrammatic games, in which “the function of words is not to clarify but to conceal what is going on from everybody except those authorised to know.”⁶⁵ The irony in *Ada* is that this backfires; as their code undergoes various changes, it becomes so complicated as to fold in on itself, becoming sterile and illegible even to its inventors. Bobbie Ann Mason calls Vaniada’s code “superfluous and misleading,” as well as incestuous, for it “shifts the alphabet back and forth as Ada had shifted incest to insect by an alphabetical maneuver.”⁶⁶

The title *Ada, or Ardor* itself suggests an uncomfortable language slippage, encapsulating Van’s solipsistic conflation of Ada and his desire for her, and demonstrating the primacy of the image or memory of something over the thing itself throughout the novel. Ada’s name, taken as acronym, also recalls the anticommunist group Americans for

Democratic Action, started in the 1930s, as well as the Air Defense Artillery branch of the US military (so renamed in 1968).⁶⁷ Ada also shares her name with four towns scattered across the American Midwest and a genus of orchids that includes the two species *Ada aurentiaca* and *Ada lehmanni*.⁶⁸ Van's punning "terrapy" practice introduces us to the psychological games of the novel, as he deals constantly with insane and paranoid patients who believe themselves to be in contact with Terra, and yet it is *Van's* ability to interpret the world around him as a psychologist that Nabokov mocks most mercilessly. Not only are Van's books a series of rather obscure failures, but his very surname reflects Vienna, the hometown of Freud, "the Viennese quack," which is incidentally spelled "Wien" and pronounced *Veen* in German.⁶⁹ There is also the implication that Van himself is somewhat insane, for, when he brachiates upside-down as "Mascodagama," his "*maniambulation*" appears as the "restless walk of a caged madman," causing both Ada and Lucette to burst into tears at the sight of him (185, 183).

Aqua (Van's 'putative' mother), offers in her insanity some of the most definitive imaginings of Terra, which help fuel the studies of Van and other 'terrapists' like him. Her illness begins after the Great Revelation, which carries with it the characteristics of the Bolshevik Revolution, suggesting that the division of worlds and the insanity of the contemporary political scene began with this political shift (20). In her 'insanity', Aqua imagines "alabaster buildings one hundred stories high" (skyscrapers), "giant flying sharks" that take "barely one night to carry pilgrims...across an entire continent" (airplanes) and "magic-music boxes," along with a host of other Terran technologies that are familiar to us, but become estranged in Aqua's watery and delusional vision (21). This estrangement from the technological forces us once again to think in double, comparing our Terran technology with the "dorophones," "clepsydrophones," "hydrophones," "campophones," and "jickers" ("Magicarpets") of Antiterra, and hinting at the way in which mid-century technology, "notably the atomic bomb and later the race into space" seemed to be "leap-frogging ahead of the popular imagination."⁷⁰ Like Humbert, Aqua participates in "some Social Improvement project or another in the Severniya Territorii" (22). This name, interpretable as 'Northern Territories', conflates the *Severnaya Zemlya* (Северная Земля), or Northern Land, of Russia's Arctic Circle with the Northwest Territories of Canada and the northern U.S. territories such as Alaska and the Yukon, linking the Cold War sites of U.S. and S.U. radar surveillance and weaponry. As Piette argues, the whole Arctic became the symbolic and mythological locale of the static Cold War, as it was "secret, inaccessible, bitterly cold, [and] hiding within its wastes enormous bases" unknown to the public, as well as "incredible surveillance systems and mind-numbingly powerful weaponry."⁷¹ This fictionalized closeness of the weapons of MAD and the imaginations of the insane is just of the many pop-psychological jests in the novel.

In order to be cured, Aqua visits a Dr. Froid for group therapy in Mondefroid, which turns out to be useless because, as Nabokov humorously attests, "a demented patient [can] outwit in one snap an imbecile pedant," echoing Humbert's deft manipulation of his own half-witted psychologist (27). Aqua's visit to this 'cold world' (Mondefroid) points to the impact of psychology in the Cold War through the Doctor's name, which both means 'cold' in French and is homonymous with Freud's. In a rather extreme turn, Aqua is moved later to the facility of a Dr. Sig Heiler, "another agent or

double” of Dr. Froid, who turns out to be a lecher, linking, as *Bend Sinister* does, the tyranny of fascism and communism in Nabokov’s mind (28). Aqua’s insanity also comes to represent the psychological warfare of the era, “for the human brain can become the best torture house of all those it has invented,” as Van’s fantastic paranoia about Ada’s many infidelities proves (22). Though Van claims to critique Freudian dream theory, seeing that its mistake is to abstract a pumpkin or a pompom into a breast, and though he tells his reader that “symbols [do] not exist either in dreams or in the life in between,” both he and Ada employ pop-psychological sexual symbolism throughout the novel (363, 510).

A good symptomatic reader of *Ada* might notice that the first time little Amerussian Ada sees Van’s erection, she abstracts it into a mushroom, musing that “[t]he cap of the Red Bolete is not half as plushy’ while she touches it, before Van, like a time-bomb, explodes ‘in a puddle of pleasure’ (p.119). In his old age, Van recalls how “two children with a basket of mushrooms looked on in the merrily burning pine forest,” encoding the fire of their mutual desire, and Ada employs the excuse of ‘mushroom-collecting’ throughout her youth to euphemize her unfaithful sexual escapades in the woods (546). At other moments, Van sees Ada’s beautiful fingers as “pink mushrooms” and watches Lucette as she lingers around their trysts, examining a “bunch of pink mushrooms” and “picking a chanterelle and feigning to eat it raw” in a performance of toxic fellatio (203, 212). Van later encrypts his dreams with Freudian symbolism; in one, both sisters lick what he refers to out of decency as a corn cob, and in another, they gaze upon a “red, irritated shaft” that turns out to be his (521). Van’s hilarious lack of awareness about his own psychology becomes still more apparent when a Dr. Lena Wien diagnoses Van with “onanistic voyeurism,” a kind of peeping-Tom masturbation not unlike Kinbote’s in *Pale Fire* (573). Later, an “obscure mechanical disaster” interrupts Van’s vocal track during a pre-recorded lecture, and he runs off in shame, but scorns the interpretation of “Dr. Froid,” who thinks the fear of public speaking comes from one’s “having read in infancy his adulterous parents’ love letters,” which, of course, Van has (549). Technology also elucidates the role of psychological propaganda in the Cold War through Ada’s film career, which she seems to use to perfect her skills of deception in ‘real’ life, so that even Van can only “guess whether she expressed sarcasm or ecstasy, or a parody of one or the other” (278). In her own propagandist presentation of herself, Ada mesmerizes Van both on the silver screen and off, for she has “a way of always smoothing out the folds of the past,” suturing her own image to keep jealous Van from his momentary plans to “torture the males, rape the females,” and glean further information about her disloyalties (394, 287).

It is perhaps worth noting that while Van knows that sexual relations with his sister are *illegal*, he does not consider their relationship with any *shame*. What does appall him, however, are the homosexual romps of his schoolmates at Riverlane, though he “surmount[s] his disgust and coldly watche[s] their rough orgies” (32). Riverlane is a homogenous place of “creamed hash, God save America...and yoickfests in the Bahamudas,” and it exhibits the same small-town politics that oppress Kinbote in *Pale Fire* (238). Interestingly, Van’s view mirrors Arthur Schlesinger’s perception of communism in modern Russia quite well, as “something secret, sweaty and furtive like nothing so much...as homosexuals in a boys school.”⁷² Van really is intensely homophobic; he calls

one of his tutors “a decrepit and dour homosexual,” and he sees the Ardis swimming pool as a foul minefield of “chance contacts with odious male flesh,” with the looming possibility of a “suspicious bubble bursting like a small stink bomb” (186, 200). The rather pathetic psychology he employs to “recognize a Lesbian” includes observing women for “slightly trembling hands, a cold-in-the-head voice, and that skidding-in-panic of the eyes” when a man gazes appreciatively upon her “charms” (164-5). Van’s repulsion to homosexuality, the major sexual ‘plague’ attacked as a national security issue throughout the Cold War, seems strange when one considers the elevated status he grants incest in his chronicle of Antiterra. His insistence upon the beauty of incest in the gardens of Ardis is a still more deranged version of Kinbote using Zembla as a means of coping with his frustrated desires. If Belletto is right, and homosexuality in *Pale Fire* represents a kind of creative, ‘deviant’ freedom from Cold War social mores, Van’s utter disgust with it confirms the brutal, controlling, and deterministic aspect of his personality, and makes him worse than hypocritical in the severity of his own sexual deviance. Such ironies abound as Van twists nature again and again in his memoirial justification of the indulgence of incest. Ada’s innocent insects are cheekily sexualized, bending entomology into the discourse of incest as the young lady longs for a certain “noble larva...a seven-inch-long colossus, flesh colored, rearing its hyacinth head in a stiff ‘Sphinxian’ attitude,” and she once draws a “Ladore satyrion, silky-haired, fleshy, erect” (56, 401). Concomitantly, as Mascodagama, Van is an “unpleasant colossus,” and at a dinner he confirms that his own erect manhood is over seven inches in length (183, 411).

As the sexual tension rises between the children and explodes into passion, hordes of insects descend on Ardis; the “first bad mosquito of the season” arrives on Ada’s twelfth birthday, and the others follow, biting with “diabolical regularity” (86, 106). The pernicious ‘Chateaubriand’ mosquito who seems to carry the weight of incestuous desire takes a silent approach, followed by the shock of “the sudden insertion of its absolutely hellish proboscis,” which “resembled the brass crash of a military band” (107). This penetrative ‘attack’, suggestive of a missile, is followed by “fiery irritation,” and is ignorable only by “the strong and the cold” (107). Demon synthesizes this relationship in considering “how passionately, how incandescently, how incestuously...art and science meet in an insect” (436). Watching Ada bleed after scratching her bites, Van threatens that he will “slash [his] leg to match [hers]” if she does not stop, in a kind of everted threat of nuclear annihilation, where the reactive equality of Mutually Assured Destruction is turned in upon itself (108). The insects of the woods and the bugs on the wall at Ardis are also playful reminders that Van and Ada have been ‘bugged’, and that in true Cold War fashion, spying eyes (Lucette’s, Kim’s, Blanche’s) are around every corner. As in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, surveillance is closely tied to desire, and sight and sex meet in references such as Marina’s to the Spanish ‘anatomical term with a “j” hanging in the middle’, which seems suggestive of a phallus, but which probably just encodes ‘ojo’, or ‘eye’ (46). On Van’s first tour of Ardis, he notices “an indescribable confusion of angles and levels” where “you could clip and kiss, and survey in between,” even as far as the “inkline of larches that marked the boundary of the nearest estate miles away,” making the manor simultaneously a place for hidden sport and for those who like to spy upon such sport (45). Van’s planned cover from “inquisitive skimmers or picture-taking balloons” places a light-hearted spin on

the invasive surveillance of the Cold War, and it foretells the many spies who gaze on him and Ada (45).

Outside of Ardis, Vinelander's sister likes to "spy upon Ada" and has figured out in spying "that Ada had a lover in Switzerland; that Van was her brother; and that he was arranging for his sister secret trysts with the person she had loved before her marriage" (527). Her meddling demonstrates the fuzziness of information obtained by spying, and the "delightful phenomenon of all three terms being true, but making nonsense when hashed" is extremely amusing to Van (527). Eventually, we learn that she has "retired to a subarctic monastery town" where she marries an archaeologist who studies the ruins of the "Lyaskan Herculaneum," further linking her activities to sites of potential explosion and trauma (532). The novel's many spies multiply Vaniada's already significant sense of mistrust, reflecting Nina Krushcheva's description of the U.S. and the S.U. "see[ing] each other through a looking glass of mythologies that represent (and sometimes substitute for) the living reality."⁷³ Lucette's infatuation with Van (and with Ada as an extension of him), Kim's perverse voyeurism, and Blanche's crush on Van make each of them a kind of 'eager informer,' desperate to spy on a sex life they cannot have and empowered by the information they glean from gazing (293). Blanche, for example, writes "a wonderful screenplay about mysterious children doing strange things in old parks," Lucette recalls and recounts Vaniada's exclusivity in excruciating detail, and Kim blackmails the couple with an explicit photo album of their childhood when they are living in Manhattan (249). As revenge, Van attacks the photographer Kim, leaving him with "one eye hanging on a red thread and the other drowned in its blood" (441). In a novel that so deeply fuses desire with vision through the delicious and illicit act of voyeurism, Van thus commits a form of enemy castration.

The violence of the children's love is built into Ardis' very name, from the Greek for *arrow*. This etymology links Ardis to weaponry, and thrust upon "the poisoned point of Ardis," Van feels his own vulnerability in Ada's "disarming" kiss (318, 170). Ada herself is depicted as "arrow straight, adored and abhorred, heartless and heartbroken, against the trunk of a murmuring tree" (308). Mason addresses the way in which "trees and masculine sexuality... become inextricably linked" in the characters' imaginations, as the "sempervirent sequoia" and other specimens attest (522).⁷⁴ Like the humorous use of mushrooms in *Ada*, trees serve as another droll connection to the phallogentric Manhattan Project, in the name of the major A-bomb test site, Alamogordo, near Los Alamos, New Mexico. The site's name comes from *alamo*, meaning aspen or poplar in Spanish, and *gordo*, meaning large or rotund. Thus the A-bomb is tested at the site of the 'big tree' (Alamogordo), located in Los Alamos (thereby a grove of trees), much like the sexualized shattal (a kind of apple) 'tree of knowledge' at the centre of the arbours of Ardis. The gardens of 'practically subtropical Ardis' are filled with trees from the southern hemisphere shedding leaves in the 'wrong' seasons, reflecting the distant atomic testing sites of subtropical islands like Bikini Atoll, but Ardis is linked, too, with subarctic radar-warning sites in the "many exotic, alpine, and polar animals [that] mixed with ordinary ones in [the] region" (116, 399). For Mason, such bizarre marriages work in the text to "provide rich imagery for Van's distorted view of nature," which, in its obsessive

justification of incest, relates to trees that “work against their environment” and are decidedly “out of kilter.”⁷⁵

Van’s fantastic memories of the early joys of Ardis Park (an anagrammatic *paradise*) lie in tension with the many demonic tortures of his toxic relationship with Ada, which she describes as *moego ada* (моего ада) – my hell (583). Twice elsewhere in the novel, the phrase and *iz ada* (из ада) is also employed – once by Aqua who signs her suicide note as ‘My sister’s sister who *teper’ iz ada* (“now is out of hell”), and once by Ada herself, who likens her agony without Van to a ‘howl *iz ada*’ (29). These translations dually imply ‘out of hell’ as having escaped *from* it and as being, in essence, *of* it, so that in his love for Ada, Van paradoxically finds both a paradisiacal escape from hell and its essence (homonymically, too, hell *iz ada* – Hell is Ada). Indeed, as Van summarizes, “she hated him, she adored him. He was brutal, she was defenceless” (204). The paradox of Van and Ada’s love encapsulates the perilous balance of Cold War arms control policies, which existed in “a kind of no-man’s-land between the paradise of disarmament and the hell of nuclear war.”⁷⁶ Even as the depiction of their volatile relationship circles around the language of violence, both Van and Ada tactically distance themselves from thoughts of death and damage. Van hates churchyards because “the entomologies of death leave [him] cold,” and Ada, “never being ill herself, could not stand the sight of an ailing stranger” (526, 297). On Ada’s birthday, when she receives a huge doll “with a braced right leg and a bandaged left arm, and a boxful of plaster jackets and rubber accessories,” Ada is so revolted that she orders her mother to “carry the whole business to the surgical dump” (84). Ada’s weird denial of the products of violence causes Marina to see her as “satanic” in her “cruelty” (84).

This attitude toward violence is especially interesting considering that Van and Ada’s desire for one another is drawn in terms of injury; Van echoes Aristophanes in his view of sexuality as a way of healing the violence of separation and of reintegrating the split half of the self into a whole.⁷⁷ If lips mean, as Van holds, that “we simply speak with our wounds; wounds procreate,” then the expanding damage and fallout of Vaniada’s sexual relationship becomes even more clearly bomb-like (102). Van’s sedulous descriptions of the discovery of Ada’s body, his experience of the obstacles to its access, and his sensuous adoration of her mouth, with its “red riches of tongue and palate” that make him wish to “be a goblin-sized Gulliver and explore that cave,” are all reminiscent of the processes of mining (216, 103).⁷⁸ Later, Van adores “a mere touch of coal at the mystery point of her chalk-white body” and notes that “a bad boil had left a pink scar between two ribs” on the form of his “pale fatal sister” (120, 307). As Mascodagama, Van also describes his visions of “the reflections of a richly colored nether world that he had been the first to discover,” and Ada, called *adova dochka*, or Hell’s daughter, seems to have been mined from the underworld (185, 403). In mining Ada’s silvery white body, in exploring “the long, pure line of the throat,” in adoring her skin, which is a “live ivory... incomparably rarer than Lucette’s golden bloom,” Van imagines Ada’s body as precious ore: as uranium (104, 129). She has “pale, impermissible skin” and, like a pitchblende seam, “her pallor shone, her blackness blazed” (59, 58). Other men like Pedro, too, note her “*radiant* beauty,” which is “the beauty for which many men would cut off their members” (203). Whereas her friends have “a healthy hot flush,” Ada is all “skimmed-milk

pallor” and “lackluster grave eyes,” and she returns from her time in Arizona even “whiter-faced” (80, 390).

The Four Corners area of the United States, comprised of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado, was militaristically both central and absent during the Cold War. The A-bomb tests carried out in the deserts of New Mexico were geographically adjacent to New Mexican uranium mines, the major corporate mines along the Colorado Plateau (notably at Uravan) and throughout Utah, and as at least two sites in Arizona (at Globe and Tuba City).⁷⁹ Ada writes her most impassioned letters to Van from the Four Corners, accusing him of “having let loose something mad” in her at “the most vicious and tender point” of her body’ (334). Travelling in Nevada, she writes of her addictions to “the impact of alien flesh” and the “ecstasy of friction,” linking her own radioactive sexuality to Van’s as their “joint past radiates ripples of boundless betrayals” (334). Eventually, Ada writes Van from Arizona, where she plans to marry Andrey Vinelander, an Arizonian Russian who owns oil wells (“whatever they are”), and with whom she likes to look at “military-looking desert plants” and rare larvae (385), which seem to encode the secret military testing sites of the American Southwest. To stop the marriage, Van brings Ada out of Arizona in 1911 (1941 on Terra) and into their own little Manhattan Project in the city (386). As in the historical development of the Manhattan Project, Van, like Oppenheimer, is prepared to the cover the secrets of his Park Lane apartment, for “two giant guards were soon to rise on both sides of it, ready to frog-march it away” (149). It is here that Demon catches Vaniada, and, in one blowup, “all was lost in that one chink of a second” (438). As a consequence, Ada does marry Vinelander, who descends from “one of those great Varangians who had conquered the Copper Tartars or Red Mongols,” and whose more recent ancestors lived in Lyaska (437, 462). Geographically, Vinelander’s ancestors start out in Northern Europe, filter into Tartary, cross over into Lyaska, and migrate south into America, representing a progressive advancement through various crucial spaces of the Cold War.

Van and Ada are split halves, as explosive when reunited as Vaniada as are the radioactive parts of the atomic bomb. The crucial unification of atomic parts was outlined in the Frisch-Peierl memorandum of 1940, which specifies the that ‘critical radius’ of a uranium sphere to be used as an explosive may be reached by constructing a bomb that has been “made up in two hemispheres” that are “kept separated by a suitable structure which is removed at the desired moment.”⁸⁰ Like the scientists’ assertion that the reactive parts of the bomb will remain anodyne while separated, and that even “a sphere only slightly below the critical size is entirely safe and harmless,” Van observes of his own lifelong tumultuous and argumentative relationship with Ada that it is “in coming together [that] the harmless parts made a lethal entity” (298). The language of violence continues as Van and Ada initiate a fiery physical contact, for Van recalls that as Ada “moved her head to make him move his to the required angle and her hair touched his neck... a lifted sword signaled fire and violent release” (39). In his dreams of an advancement on Ada’s body, she “recoil[s] with a wild look” and leaves “his lust in a lurch... punchable... puncturable like a bladder of blood,” giving him the oneiric sense that he is about to “be expelled from Ardis” (97). When they finally engage, the children transmit the “burning bloom” of their “raging bodies” through their kisses, whose rhythm of “right, left, life,

death” communicates “a distant vibration of desperate signals” (103). These high-stakes signals are communicated through the children’s lips, which the dictionaries at Ardis define in English as “either of the fleshy folds surrounding an orifice,” and in Russian (*guba*) as a “court in ancient Lyaska or an arctic gulf” (102). The communication of the children’s mouths across an ‘arctic gulf’ echoes the distant radar signal detection systems scattered through the arctic to warn each nation of the threat of the other’s approaching aircraft.

Vaniada’s sexuality is also represented as combustible on the “Night of the Burning Barn,” when the children first make love in the library after the rest of the family has left the house to watch the spectacle (113). Van recalls that they “had long been kissing cousins when the fire started,” and when he meets Ada in the hallway, “a hundred barns blazed in her amber-black eyes, as she beamed” (114,117). The radiant energy of Vaniada’s desire evokes both the contemporary language of the nuclear event as “fire-storm” and a unit of measurement in particle physics called a barn used to measure a reaction cross-section.⁸¹ The barn is equal in area to a uranium nucleus, and is so named because scientists thought it as wide a target as “the side of a barn” in nuclear physics. Van draws the reader into the scandalous Night of the Burning Barn, too, knowing that we will “read *this* forbidden memoir with a secret tingle...in the secret chasms” of our own libraries (220). The language of theatre also pervades the sexual event, and just as “the library... provided a raised stage for the unforgettable scene of the Burning Barn” and “throw[s] open its glazed doors,” so the so-called ‘theatres’ of bomb-testing sites formed a stage like the “green moving backdrop of one of [their] Ardis sets” for the rehearsals of war and the performances of threat that characterized the Cold War (137, 583). The martial language continues as morning arrives with its “firefly signals” and a bluebird’s “warning warble,” and Van, a “few blind thrusts” in, “burst[s] at the lip of the orchid” before the two must return to their rooms, thinking “how cold the iron steps” feel on their feet (121-2). Van terms his love for Ada a “a passion, a sickness,” and Ada grows “more aggressive and responsive” as they consume each other in “moments of ravenous ardor.”⁸² Eventually, Van “expects only torture” from the “violent rhapsody” of their love, and Ada begs him only that there be “no more destruction.”⁸³

In the late nineteenth century, scientists had discovered radioactivity and half-lives, through which “one element could decay into another in a process of transmutation that gave off new sources of energy” in what seemed like ‘an alchemist’s dream.’¹⁶ As they reach the “complicated, dangerous, ineffably radiant coming of age” of their love, both Van and Ada begin to recognize signs of decay and damage (521). Each of *Ada*’s five sections is a rough halving of the previous in length, and lies that much further in time from the original perfection of Ardis, signalling the text itself as a radioactive object, disintegrating through half-lives. Having sex up to seven times a day as adolescents, by their twenties, Van and Ada agree to “transcend his and her sensual sins,” and by their thirties, “each reflect[s], as it were, the uncertain light to which all that radiance of mutual welcome had catastrophically decreased” (431, 511). By their fifties, Ada’s garments present nothing but “obstacle and defense,” and Van’s “senses certainly remained stirless” anyway (556-7). By their sixties, Van is sometimes surprised to note that “a whole week had passed in unruffled chastity,” at “seventy-five fortnightly intimacies... sufficed,” and

finally we learn that Van is “eighty-seven and completely impotent” (573, 575). Thus, in their old age, Vaniada’s bodies stabilize as their sexual explosivity fades, a decreasing radioactivity akin to that of uranium into lead.

Of his own body, Van finds that “furcating cracks kept appearing in his physical well-being,” a form of “inevitable decomposition...sending out to him, across static gray time, its first emissaries” (546). Van even addresses memory as a radioactive component of his being, asking himself whether he might “tell by its tint if it comes earlier or later, lower or higher, in the stratigraphy of [the] past? Is there any mental uranium whose dream-delta decay might be used to measure the age of recollection?” (569) Roy Arthur Swanson points out the nomenclatural echo of the Norwegian goddess of fertility, Vanadis, in the Van—Ada—Ardis family of names, mirrored again in Van’s mantra, ‘Nirvana, Nevada, Vaniada’ (p.583).⁸⁴ Incidentally, the goddess Vanadis is also the appellative source for vanadium, a chemical element found alongside uranium in mines, absorbed by mushrooms, created as a by-product of uranium breeding, and resoundingly close to ‘Vaniada’. Vanadium thus occupies a wonderfully eversible position in nature, both occurring and nourishing organically and being produced by man in the process of nuclear ‘breeding’. So while their bodies decay, a decreasing radioactivity akin to that of uranium into lead and vanadium, this might also be imagined as alchemy, a kind of refining magic in its own right. It is through the final images of decay that the narrators become capable of shaping and writing their own story. The reader, too, can begin to assemble the excesses of the novel, arranging that its many pieces and patterns into a shifting, dimensional whole.

The tension between the natural and the nuclear appears quite clearly at the end of the novel, as Van and Ada’s ‘editor,’ Ronald Oranger (a sort of worshipping Kinbote figure who abuses the manuscript he inherits), marries the secretary, Violet Knox. Violet’s name embodies the novel-long conflict between the organic and the fabricated, holding within it, as Mason points out, anagrams for ‘to live’ and ‘love it’, and also referencing Ada’s lepidopteran breeding process, where one must hold two bugs “with the tips of their abdomens touching...and *soaked* in their favorite violet’s reek” (57).⁸⁵ On the fabricated side, her name recalls Ada’s desperate “violet-sealed” letters to Van, as well as Ft. Knox, the symbol of the U.S. gold standard and Knoxville, Tennessee, whose proximity to the Oak Ridge nuclear plant caused midcentury real estate agents to advertise it proudly as the “capitol city of atomic energy” (369).⁸⁶ The other, more colorful characters of the novel, in contrast to the monochromatic Vaniada, seem to represent other ore lines used by miners in locating uranium. Torbernite, “a bright emerald-green hydrated phosphate of copper and uranium” is reminiscent of Lucette’s emerald-copper complex and hydrous suicide in the sea.⁸⁷ Autunite, a “lemon-yellow” vein in dark granite, and carnotite, a “canary-yellow hydrated vanadite,” both oxidize to a sunny colour from the “black, heavy, metallic” original colour of pitchblende, recalling the black and yellow outfits of Aqua and Lucette at their suicides and Ada on Van’s departure from Ardis (298, 492).⁸⁸ Notably, these colorful peripheral veins and subsidiary characters among the other branches of the family tree are merely lines, for Van, that lead home to his precious Ada.

On April 30, 1943, J. Robert Oppenheimer wrote to Leslie R. Groves about the need “to reduce the curiosity of the local population” of New Mexicans who lived near

Los Alamos, “at least to delay the dissemination of the truth.”⁸⁹ The letter addresses an element of early cultural fallout, only to be superseded by the horrific physical and psychological effects of the bombs dropped in Japan in 1945 and the environmental repercussions of those tested throughout the world in the decades that followed. Oppenheimer’s solution to the problem of secrecy was to publicize the development of “a new type of rocket”; he also suggested that “the detail be added that this is a largely electrical device,” thinking this could “mak[e] th[e] story one which is both exciting and credible.”⁹⁰ Written into the propaganda of Van’s fantastical reliving of his memories and beautiful rewriting of his past are the recognizable traces of fallout. The whole Veen family seems to possess some toxic blood that makes them unscrupulous; Demon’s name recalls the origins of ‘plutonium’, a man-made fissionable material produced from uranium ore and named for Pluto, god of the underworld.⁹¹ As the son of Dedalus Veen, Demon, who sits with ‘iridescent wings humped’ and describes the many little girls he has ‘preyed upon’, is a subtle reminder to the reader that desire, whether scientific or bodily, may be pushed to harmful lengths (245, 242). Even Demon’s death is destructive; he perishes when “a gigantic flying machine... inexplicably disintegrate[s] at fifteen thousand feet above the Pacific” over the “Lisiansky and Laysanov” islands in a crash that also kills an array of civilians, “women, and silent children” (504-5). The obituary lists Demon’s household in Manhattan and the “small, perfectly round Pacific island” he owns, recalling locales vital to the development and testing of the A-bomb (506).

Although Van and Ada are demonically and inhumanly immune to sickness, they constantly harm those around them. Simply by proximity, Van ‘poisons’ with madness his ‘mother’ Aqua, his wet nurse, Lucette, Blanche, and a whole host of the women he pursues romantically, for “no sooner did all the fond, all the frail, come into close contact with him” than they seem fated “to know anguish and calamity, unless strengthened by a strain of his father’s demon blood” (20). Ada’s radioactivity, too, seems to infect the men around her, for Van is spared the task of killing his rivals when, as if “Ada’s lethal shafts were at work,” both Rack and Percy die before Van can get to them (320). Vinelander also suffers from his exposure to Ada. Van writes off his “two-pack smoker’s fruity cough” and his face, covered in “various wartlets and lumps,” as a paranoiac’s “psychopathic pseudobronchitis,” but Andrey eventually becomes so ill that Ada must leave Europe to attend to his treatment with “a wonder-maker in Arizona.”⁹² Ada and Andrey’s occupation of the Four Corners area suggests the purported dual capacity of radioactive materials; they were known to be dangerous and toxic elements crucial to bomb construction, but they were also perceived as potential sources of energy, and doctors also once believed that exposure to radioactive isotopes could cure cancer.⁹³ Andrey’s love for Ada reveals her paradoxically life-giving and life-taking persona; with her by his side, “steadily but very slowly Andrey’s condition kept deteriorating” and eventually “he lost the power of speech,” dying alone one night in his hospital room (532).

Lucette, lacking the ‘demon blood’ of Vaniada’s father, is perhaps most clearly and poignantly the victim of fallout in *Ada*. The embodiment of the organic and the natural in the novel, Lucette is continually imagined in the bright colors of a flower, her red hair bobbing over a stem-green dress. As their adoring toy and ‘pet,’ Lucette is the couple’s favourite little specimen. In the midst of one of her pleonastic botanical descriptions, Ada

glances around for Lucette, “our darling copperhead...in her green nightgown,” and when, soon after, she resumes her description of “our poor flower,” one cannot help but imagine Lucette instead (64). In the conflict between her desire for Van and her jealousy of Ada, the ‘neutral’ and natural Lucette becomes both victim and double agent, giving over her body as a space of contest for the two ‘main’ lovers, passing notes between them when they are separated, copulating with Ada when she is without Van, and trying in vain to manipulate Van into bed using “her set piece... her desperate cunning” (36, 382). Lucette is a pesky voyeur, “spying on them through the larches,” and “seem[ing] to lurk behind every screen, to peep out of every mirror” (152, 211). In response, the two abandon her in the “liquid prison” of the bathtub while they make love, or else they construe games in which Van becomes a knight and Ada a dragon, and they prance off for a tryst in the woods, leaving Lucette tied to a tree with a jump-rope to await her salvation (144, 143). Locked in a closet one day, jealous Lucette responds by “knock[ing] and call[ing] and kick[ing]” as “the keyhole turn[s] an angry green” (213). As the excluded and passionately infatuated sibling and as the “neutral pure little child” onto which Vaniada project their own frustrations and irritations, Lucette comes to represent those ‘hot’ proxy spaces in which the fraught battles of the Cold War were fought (370).

Lucette struggles in playing anagrams with “borderline cases” of words, and Van says that “it was pitiful to see Lucette cling to her last five letters...forming the beautiful ARDIS,” which she knew “meant ‘the point of an arrow’ – but only in Greek alas” (225). Thus, even as Lucette struggles to launch a defense against her controllers, her weapons are nullified by their towering superiority over her (228). As a “little proxy,” Van finds Lucette’s charms “pathetic” compared to Ada’s, making her “furious with Ada and jealous by proxy” (281, 462). Ada and Van eventually fold the jealous girl into kissing games to “act as an alibi if she caught them in a more ambiguous romp,” but Ada also patronizingly determines that because Lucette “is essentially a dumb child, and should be protected,” they might also threaten her if necessary, for “ugly dark words scare her” (213-14). Van admits that these games of control and manipulation have “worked the wrong way” and are destroying Lucette’s mind, and he even wonders whether Ada “did it on purpose” (213). In the marginalia, Ada begs Van to strike this from the manuscript, another attempt to rewrite and gloss over an unflattering historical moment. Outside of her Sapphic exercises with Ada, Lucette remains an unpenetrated virgin, and through her martial deflection of other men (she says “thrusts must be parried, advances fought off”), she remains faithful to Van in this chastity (371). As she enters into sexual foreplay in Vaniada’s bed in Manhattan, she becomes the martyr figure torn between two superpowers that Piette describes in *The Literary Cold War*, her body a landscape that Van surveys as Ada explores it, so that they both see her merely as a means of heightening their own desire for one another.⁹⁴ When Ada summons her to bed, “involuntarily Lucette bent her head and frail spine; then she lay back...in a martyr’s moribund swoon,” with “Ada’s red-lacquered talons” hovering over her “pried-open legs” (418-19). This disturbing scene represents a mix of both violation and volition for Lucette, as she is prodded into a sexual performance with Ada and deprived of the union she desires with Van, becoming the weak and subjugated object of their game. She departs abruptly the next morning for the snowy mountains to go be with “other poor woolly worms,” likening herself to one of

Ada's experimental little insects (421). Years later, Van asks if she is still "half-a-martyr – I mean half-a-virgin," and she replies that she is but now "a quarter," demonstrating the slow deterioration that will eventually lead to her suicide (464).

On the sunny day of her death, Lucette wears an alluring green "bickny" by the pool on the ship's deck and warns Van of her tendency to "teeter on the tender border" (484, 478). Though he is tempted to sleep with her, they go see a movie in the ship's theater and "somebody she could not compete with entered the picture" – an image of Ada on film (497). Refused and left alone, Lucette takes a number of sleeping pills and jumps into the ocean, self-destructing at the "meridian of Iceland and the latitude of Ardis" on an evening "cut by glacial gusts" (477). Van links the wide, cold space of the tragedy to Lucette's singular body as he calls her name "in the black, foam-veined, complicated waters" of the ocean (495). Incidentally, the year of Lucette's suicide is 1911, 1951 on Terra, the year radiation reached as far as Rochester, New York, exposing a whole warehouse of Kodak film and leading to the construction of "a long-range radiation monitoring system throughout the United States."⁹⁵ Lucette, as the sexualized object of nuclear fallout, also comes to represent the political in Van's horrid memory of the 'L disaster,' which "had the singular effect of both causing and cursing the notion of 'Terra'" (17). The L disaster, or 'Letrocalamity', which is never openly discussed, seems to be some kind of 'electro-calamity' involving 'L'-ectricity, and is suggestive of Oppenheimer's encoding of the nuclear as 'electric,' of the potential for nuclear energy, and even of the electrons and other subatomic particles of nuclear physics (147). Blackwell's assertion that in *Ada*, the L disaster "represents the hubris of humanity's partially ignorant exploitation of the secrets of nature" is also reminiscent of the fear the creators of the atomic bomb had about the consequences of their own invention.⁹⁶ In Van's mind, the 'L' of 'L disaster' also synecdochically implies 'Lucette,' allowing him to refer to *that* disaster without actually having to face it. The phrase 'L disaster' performs the same function as 'A-bomb' or 'H-bomb', conveniently eliding by abbreviation any explicit confrontation with the horrific.

Nabokov also enfolded artistic censorship as a form of fallout, suggesting that the discourse of the Cold War must be encrypted. As Leland de la Durantaye suggests, Cold War containment ideology affected the whole "social and political climate" of America, so that "social moralizing and political preaching" became "dangerous and perennial traps" for Nabokov as much as for anyone else.⁹⁷ This may be further reasoning for Vladimir Vladimirovich (V.V.) Nabokov's denial of the political in his novels; as Van Veen, another V.V., attests, any "powerfully plodding Administration prefers...the safe drabness of an academic mediocrity to the suspect sparkle of a V.V." (472). On Antiterra, the L disaster not only leads to the banning of a number of technologies that must then be replaced by water-powered devices, it also breeds severe artistic censorship. Van writes that "no censor in America or Great Britain would pass the slightest reference to 'magnetic' gewgaws" in art, or even to the "banned, or burned, books of the three cosmologists...who had recklessly started the whole business half a century earlier" (339).

Another form of fallout is the revelation of the 'true' Terra in the film version of *Letters from Terra*, a bastardization of Van's first book for which the film's director, Vitry, gives him no credit. Though in Van's original he writes of such wild inventions as a manned space capsule and a propelled rocket in phrases like 'Star Rats' and 'Space Aces',

it is Vitry's film which Van sees as a "rigged up" version of Terra's real history (338-9, 581). The 'truth' of Vitry's Terra is ugly; it includes a "trench-scarred wilderness" of Europe where "Athaulf Hindler" rules Germany, and it describes a number of split nations, divided faiths, and continental fissions, all of which Ada and Van find "absurdly farfetched," but which mirror our own world quite closely (581). Antiterran Vitry gets a few names wrong, but his film so convincingly tells the truth of our world that people begin to suspect a conspiracy, a "secret Government-concealed identity of Terra and Antiterra," in which the 'Old Felt' and 'Uncle Joe' (Roosevelt and Stalin) of Terran lore "had really existed" (582). Nabokov also eerily links Vitry's Terra to Cold War through its spies, who are described as "agents from distant Atomsk" (582). Most tragic, though, is the haunting revelation that "the Russian peasants and poets had not been transported to Estotiland, and the Barren Grounds, ages ago," as the fantasy of *Ada* has upheld for a whole novel, but that instead, "they were dying, at this very moment, in the slave camps of Tartary" (582). At the end of the film, Terra's fate is sealed as it "convalesced after enduring the rack and the stake," so that Vitry's artistic vision serves as a warning of those aspects of fallout already evident in midcentury culture (582).

Like radiation, "a kind of nemesis hanging over humanity which can be neither contained nor resisted," Van and Ada's relationship has a viral capacity to injure.⁹⁸ At one point, the couple cleverly uses the excuse of the dead Lucette's unsettled bank account to steal away and make love, but there is a disturbing second meaning to their insistence that this "business of untraceable deposits is terribly urgent," suggesting the severity of the fallout surrounding their relationship (515). The more they make love, the more "physical, horribly physical" Ada becomes, unable to stay faithful to Van, while he tours the world indulging in Ada-looking whores in expensive brothels.⁹⁹ He also knows how "atrociously untrue to him" she is, though he realizes only later "how fiercely untruthful Ada could be when shielding an accomplice" (220, 166). Her deception makes Van want to "satanically and viatically" possess another woman, to try something "nasty and tainted to revive his manhood," and he experiences a "dazzling inward shock of despair" when he thinks of her power over him.¹⁰⁰ Even in their old age, after Van has endeavoured the "morally rewarding" task of "resolv[ing] to be true to her," he still finds that "his senses would be exposed in icy, fantastic detail" whenever he is in the presence of a beautiful young woman (574). Van and Ada's relationship is based upon the effort to "constantly figh[t] temptation while constantly dreaming of somehow, sometime, somewhere, yielding to it," in a precarious balance like that of the late-1960s U.S.-S.U. *détente* during which Nabokov wrote *Ada* (575). Van and Ada's mutual sterility is the ultimate sign of fallout in their fatal romance. Before they are aware of it, they research places where "cousins can marry by special decree, *if* they promise to sterilize their first five children," but they later learn the truth, so that Van retroactively calls Ada "my lovely and larveless," acknowledging the scient-incest connection and their sterile, mutually annihilating love (148, 95). The sterilizing effects of incest are most crudely depicted in a reference Van makes to Tartary (perhaps a cheeky allusion to the inbred Russian royals of history), where "fifty generations of ever woollier and woollier sheep had recently ended abruptly in one hairless, five-legged, impotent little lamb" (134). Though humorous, this description is haunting in that

it also matches the symptoms of radiation sickness observed in survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings.

The bomb itself was said to have produced multicoloured “lighting effects” that “beggared description” – its explosion “was golden, purple, violet, gray and blue,” and synesthetic Van says that his memories late in life are “grayish blue, purple, reddish gray” (548).¹⁰¹ As he stares over the lake in Switzerland, where he and Ada live, “the dazzling wake of the westering sun pulsated through a lakeside lombardy poplar that seemed both liquefied and on fire,” almost as if he were recalling the dazzling explosion at Alamogordo, the “big poplar” in Spanish (555). Ada sees a bird on the same lake that she claims also to have seen once at “Saltsink – a kind of man-made lake” in Arizona, tying her experience once again back to the seepage lagoons and tailings pools of waste around nuclear production plants in the Four Corners area (526).¹⁰²

As in *Lolita*, the way out in *Ada* is not through the male narrator and his logic games, but the glimpse of an alternative narrative offered by the female protagonist and her imagination. In what seems a pre-Jamesonian description of postmodernism’s aesthetic abuse of history, Van and Ada battle over the documentation of a shared past. Despite their use of numbing morphine and their joint attempts to rewrite history (as evidenced by the “regular inferno of alterations in red ink and blue pencil” on their manuscript), Van is categorically “denied the unconsciousness he so fiercely scorned and so assiduously courted” (587, 572). The novel becomes more fragmentary towards its end in phrases like, “Sudden ice hurtling down the rain pipe: brokenhearted stalactite” (583). At its very conclusion, it devolves into a parodic ‘blurb’ that recaps the plot and dismantles the totality of experience contained in its own pages with useless comments like “the story proceeds at a spanking pace,” which then peter out into the meaningless final phrase (which, incidentally, repeats the name of Oedipa’s husband, Mucho Maas): “and much, much more” (588). “Who dies first?” the text asks, and then answers itself ambiguously: “Ada. Van. Ada. Vaniada. Nobody” (584). In the end, the reader is left clueless, for

the hero and heroine... get so close to each other by the time the horror begins, so *organically* close, that they overlap, intergrade, interache, and even if Vaniada’s end is described in the epilogue we, writers and readers, should be unable to make out (myopic, myopic) who exactly survives, Dava or Vada, Anda or Vanda. (584)

Instead of further narrative, we learn only that they “die, as it were, *into* the finished book, into Eden or Hades,” in the midst of a “crystal winter” (587). Here, the fragments themselves work not only as deterioration, but, again, as the seemingly superficial detritus that is actually a regeneration point for a more proliferative and constructive, if “surface-level,” re-reading of the novel’s aesthetic patterns.

These “excessive” or “decorative” textual surfaces connect in aesthetically concrete, historically informed ways. *Ada* is a Cold War text, though a paranoid reading it invites may not be the most pleasurable or productive one we can perform. As in Pynchon, symptomatic reading actually does not move against the grain of the text, since the text itself mocks depth reading and thematizes paranoia. what we do with the aesthetic dimensions of the text is often historically and politically charged. Nabokov is working not just with proliferation, but decay, and decay acts as a sort of refining point at the end of

Ada. Like proliferation, decay lies in contrast to the binary because both counteract the stasis of either/or. In the end, *Ada* is a Cold War text; a depth reading will indeed uncover its language as a vital site of trauma, a body that manifests signs of cultural irradiation. In forcing us to read through the many eversions and ambiguities of *Ada*, Nabokov asks us to consider the complex and interwoven sibling relationships between bodies, languages, nations, and realms. The subtle patterning of the nuclear in *Ada* uses incest as the bomb to reveal the text as a cultural artifact that absorbs, however faintly, the radiating waves of the historical moment in which it is written, confronting that which is broken in our world, as well as how artifice might remake it. At the same time, knowing it is “staged in a dream-bright America,” it is perhaps more compellingly a Cold War text in that its excessive aesthetic details form a network of associative meaning that actually undercuts the impetus to paranoia in the first place (588). Its eversions and multiplications of meaning demonstrate the way in which aesthetic proliferation and decay are visible at the surface in ways that that undercut, rather than undergird, the text’s own invitations to symptomatic reading. If these fragments are not the baroque, Jamesonian “heap” we so often label postmodern aesthetics, but rather the faces of a massive, shifting, and dimensional aesthetic whole, they point beyond the binary view Van himself offers us, towards imaginative possibilities that free us from the ideological paradigm of paranoia itself.

NOTES:

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- ¹ Mark C. Taylor, *Hiding* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998) 188.
- ² Sasha Chavchavadze, artist website (www.sashachavchavadze.com) and Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 27.
- ³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 33.
- ⁴ Ibid. 149.
- ⁵ Nina Krushcheva, *Imagining Nabokov: Russia Between Art and Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007) 3.
- ⁶ Sasha Chavchavadze, *Matchwork*, 2005. Mixed-media. www.sashachavchavadze.com.
- ⁷ Julia Bader, *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels* (*Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972) 113.
- ⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (New York: Vintage, 1989) 15.
- ⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage, 1991) 33-4.
- ¹⁰ Nabokov, *Lolita* 34.
- ¹¹ Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 82-3.
- ¹² Piette 90, 94, 92.
- ¹³ Steven Belletto, "The Zemblan Who Came in from the Cold," *ELH* 73, no.3 (2006) 755, 760.
- ¹⁴ Belletto 761.
- ¹⁵ Patrick Major and Rana Mitter, eds., *Across the Blocs: Cold War Cultural and Social History* (London: Frank Cass, 2004) 16.
- ¹⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 194, 171. Quotations from the novel will hereafter be cited parenthetically, except where multiple pages are referenced.
- ¹⁷ Roy Arthur Swanson, "Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* as Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 2, no.1 (1975) 76.
- ¹⁸ For a fuller justification of this argument, see D. Barton Johnson, "The Labyrinth of Incest in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*," *Comparative Literature* 38, no.3 (1986) 238-9.
- ¹⁹ Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994) 210.
- ²⁰ Swanson 82. Swanson also notes that *Invitation to a Beheading* is born in 1872, 1922 on Terra, the year Eliot's poem was first published in *The Criterion*.
- ²¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 12.
- ²² Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* 26-7.
- ²³ Ibid. 26-7.
- ²⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," in *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) 1.
- ²⁵ Nabokov qtd. in Stephen Blackwell, *The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov's Art and the Worlds of Science* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2009) 139.
- ²⁶ Blackwell 201.
- ²⁷ Blackwell 4.
- ²⁸ Philip L. Cantelon, Richard G. Hewlett, and Robert C. Williams, eds., *The American Atom: A Documentary History of Nuclear Policies from the Discovery of Fission to the Present* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984) 1.
- ²⁹ Ibid. 1. Nabokov, not always a sci-fi enthusiast, nevertheless expressed a deep boyhood love for Wells, and the parallel worlds of Terra and Antiterra in *Invitation to a Beheading* closely resemble those in *Men Like Gods*.
- ³⁰ Ibid. 8.
- ³¹ Ibid. 2.
- ³² Ibid. 2.
- ³³ Ibid. xiv.
- ³⁴ Ibid., pp.xv, 71.
- ³⁵ Wayne D. Cocroft and Roger J.C. Thomas, *Cold War: Building for Nuclear Confrontation 1946-1989* (Swindon, UK: English Heritage, 2003) 19.

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- ³⁶ Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 6.
- ³⁷ Ibid. 123.
- ³⁸ Gillian Harkins, *Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) 6.
- ³⁹ Prophecy Coles, ed., *Sibling Relationships* (London: Karnac, 2006), p.23.
- ⁴⁰ Fred Inglis, *The Cruel Peace: Everyday Life in the Cold War* (London: Aurum Press, 1992) 42.
- ⁴¹ Cantelon, Hewlett, and Williams, eds. 51.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) 12.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid. 12.
- ⁴⁶ Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* 5.
- ⁴⁷ Wood 6.
- ⁴⁸ Major and Mitter 137.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid. 137.
- ⁵⁰ Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 76.
- ⁵¹ Ibid. 107.
- ⁵² Ibid. 13.
- ⁵³ Ibid. 11-13.
- ⁵⁴ Piette 80.
- ⁵⁵ Boyer 367.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid. 366.
- ⁵⁷ Bobbie Ann Mason, *Nabokov's Garden: A Guide to Ada* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1974) 18.
- ⁵⁸ Major and Mitter 51.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid. 26.
- ⁶⁰ Nabokov, *Ada* 105, 218, 148.
- ⁶¹ Wood 207.
- ⁶² Nabokov, *Ada* 56, 79, 57.
- ⁶³ Ibid. 369, 377, 423.
- ⁶⁴ Schneider qtd. in Prophecy Coles, ed. 30.
- ⁶⁵ Ken Ruthven, *Nuclear Criticism* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993) 52.
- ⁶⁶ Mason 63.
- ⁶⁷ K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005) xi.
- ⁶⁸ Mason 80.
- ⁶⁹ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 47.
- ⁷⁰ Major and Mitter 72 and Nabokov, *Ada* 195, 385, 553.
- ⁷¹ Piette 79.
- ⁷² Schlesinger qtd. in Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1988) 98.
- ⁷³ Krushcheva 11.
- ⁷⁴ Mason 40.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid. 34.
- ⁷⁶ Cantelon, Hewlett, and Williams, eds. xvi.
- ⁷⁷ Jonathan Dollimore, *Sex, Literature, and Censorship* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001) 90.
- ⁷⁸ See also Piette, who points to Humbert's similar desire to evert Lolita's body and taste her inner organs.
- ⁷⁹ Newton I. Steers, Jr., "Uranium Demand and Supply," *The Analysts Journal* 12, no.2 (1956) 75.
- ⁸⁰ Cantelon, Hewlett, and Williams, eds. 13-14.

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- ⁸¹ Major and Mitter 122. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the barn as, “in nuclear physics, 10^{-24} square centimetres, a unit of area used in the measurement of the cross-section of a nucleus.” It is The barn is “said to have originated in the phrase ‘as big as a barn’” (www.oed.com).
- ⁸² Nabokov, *Ada* 404, 219, 266.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.* 387, 389, 404.
- ⁸⁴ Swanson 78.
- ⁸⁵ Mason 110.
- ⁸⁶ Boyer 86.
- ⁸⁷ J.K. Gustafson, “Uranium Resources,” *The Scientific Monthly* 69, no.2 (1949) 116-17.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 116.
- ⁸⁹ Cantelon, Hewlett, and Williams, eds. 27.
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 27.
- ⁹¹ Gustafson 117.
- ⁹² Nabokov, *Ada* 513, 527, 529.
- ⁹³ Boyer 119.
- ⁹⁴ Piette 88.
- ⁹⁵ Cantelon, Hewlett, and Williams, eds. 164.
- ⁹⁶ Blackwell 159.
- ⁹⁷ Leland de la Durantaye, *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007) 106.
- ⁹⁸ Major and Mitter 122.
- ⁹⁹ Nabokov, *Ada* 158, 195, 358.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 320, 573, 324.
- ¹⁰¹ Cantelon, Hewlett, and Williams, eds. 56.
- ¹⁰² E.C. Tsivoglou A.F. Bartsch, D.E. Rushing and D.A. Holaday, “Effects of Uranium Ore Refinery Wastes on Receiving Waters,” *Sewage and Industrial Wastes* 30, no.8 (1958) 1014.

CHAPTER 5

“IT COULD VERY WELL HAVE BEEN”:
MAXINE HONG KINGSTON’S *THE WOMAN WARRIOR*,
WITH NOTES ON LESLIE MARMON SILKO AND THOMAS PYNCHON

*No wonder our imagination stumbles beyond 2030,
when we may be regarded as monsters to the generations that follow us.*
— Toni Morrison¹

In a 1996 lecture entitled “The Future of Time,” Toni Morrison meditates on the problem of periodization at the close of the twentieth century, noting how predicated our vocabulary is on the terminology of the past: “Our definitions of the period we are living in have prefixes pointing backward: postmodern, poststructuralist, postcolonial.... Our contemporary prophecies look back, behind themselves, post, after, what has gone on before.”² Rather than a future-oriented writing, Morrison notes that postmodern fiction has turned to history, finding endless possibilities for narrative: “What is infinite, what is always imaginable, always subject to analysis, adventure, and creation is past time.”³ In locating ‘prefixes pointing backward’ and ‘prophecies [that] look back,’ Morrison reverses time’s conventional directionality, but she also challenges the characterization of the postmodern as an aesthetic divorced from history.

Whereas, for Fredric Jameson, “it is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place,” for Morrison, history is ripe material for fiction precisely *because* its monologic narrative is finally available for reconsideration and revision. While Jameson and Morrison share in a critique of global capitalism and an acknowledgment of the failed promises of modernism, they differ in their understanding of fiction’s response, as well as its political potential. At the close of *Postmodernism*, Jameson concludes that, of all the postmodern art forms of which he might be “a relatively enthusiastic consumer.... the novel is the weakest,” or “at least the high literary novel is.”⁴ By contrast, Morrison argues that “it is precisely [in literature], at the heart of that form, where the serious ethical debates and probings are being conducted.”⁵ For Jameson, postmodern culture represents one more elongated stage in the inevitable dissolution of capitalism as an economic system, in which “the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience,” so that the fiction of the period amounts to nothing more than “heaps of fragments.”⁶ More dismaying for Jameson still is that “the randomly heterogenous and fragmentary and the aleatory” are not, as he intends, insults to be leveled at postmodern fiction, but are “very precisely some of the privileged terms in which postmodernist cultural production has been analyzed (and even defended, by its own apologists).”⁷

It is in just the terms that Jameson enumerates – heterogenous, fragmentary, aleatory – that critics have praised Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* since its publication in 1976. Unable to pin down its genre or to codify its juxtapositions, critics describe the text by listing its composite parts and lauding its disjointed construction. E.D. Huntley, for instance, documents Kingston’s “tendency toward self-referentiality, a leaning toward pastiche and collage, quotation and parody, an eclectic embracing of all genres – both fictional and nonfictional, realistic and fantastic.”⁸ Its postmodern revisionist history, too, contributes to rhizomatic descriptions of uncertainty; as critic Julia H. Lee has argued, “Kingston’s works are often fractured in their construction” and “call attention to the gaps and inconsistencies within them,” so that “her narrators never operate from a perspective of omniscience, and the texts often draw attention to this lack of knowledge and the extent to which they must imagine or fantasize events in order to make them comprehensible.”⁹ In this chapter, I argue that Kingston’s text, while proliferative and fragmentary, is constructed as more than its binaries but less than its endless possibilities, forming a legible, dimensional whole, much like the other postmodern fictions I have already examined. The so-called “fake” qualities of Kingston’s writing are not mere “heaps of fragments,” signaling a disordered aesthetic, but rather a deliberate and productive assemblage that is not out of step with (American) history, but vital to its preservation.

In this chapter, I address the way postmodern fictions ‘prophesy’ into the past – that is, how they take up, manipulate, and rewrite history in fiction, both with an awareness of the social changes that have taken place since time times they look back on and as a way of recovering voices and histories sutured over by a monologic and linear historical narrative. In this way, I hope to demonstrate that these fictions are, in fact, manifold – that is, enfolded, dimensional, and multiplicatory, and that history itself is crafted, not found. Crucial to my understanding of this ‘backwards prophecy’ is the concept of *projection*, which comes from the Latin prefix *pro-*, meaning ‘forward,’ and *iacere*, to ‘throw’ or ‘let go.’ ‘Projection’ dates to

Middle English and implies 'throwing forth' or 'stretching out,' covering a whole range of meanings from 'suggestion' to 'prophecy.'¹⁰ In the nineteenth century, the word also took on the meaning of "to cast an image on a screen," a technological valence that illuminates the filmic qualities of postmodern fiction. The psychoanalytical sense of "to project" as in "to attribute to another" emerges around the turn of the twentieth century, and is also vital to Kingston's storytelling technique. Toni Morrison's contention in "The Future of Time" is that we cannot idly envision a utopian future until we acknowledge the injustices and reclaim the storytelling possibilities of the past. Capitalism's forward movement, Morrison reminds us, depends upon violent erasure:

I am not interested here in signs of progress, an idea whose time has come and gone.... gone in the histories of so many nations mapping their geography with lines drawn through their neighbors' mass graves; fertilizing their lawns and meadows with the nutrients of their citizens' skeletons; supporting their architecture on the spines of women and children.¹¹

In the face of such 'progress,' history begs to be retold, so that we might shape another future. Morrison's concern with a global, material history of oppression makes her look backwards, rather than forwards, for inspiration. "The journey into the cellar of time," Morrison concludes, "is a rescue of sorts, an excavation for the purposes of building, discovering, envisioning a future."¹² What interests Morrison about this backward glance is the notion of "ago," a vast expanse of time that stretches away behind us, yet which feels rich in fictional possibility: "It is ago that unravels before us like a skein, the origins of which remain unfathomable."¹³

What Morrison encourages, in short, is a consideration of literature in deep time. In Wai Chee Dimock's terms, a recuperative sense of shared narrative is plausible only if we examine stories and myths cross-culturally within "a *longue durée*, much closer to the life of the species than to the history of Europeans in the New World."¹⁴ For Morrison, this means that the future of art will "require thinking about generations to come as more than a century or so of one's own family line, group stability, gender, sex, race, religion," as well as "the quality of human life, not just its length."¹⁵ Indeed, it is this deep, diachronic sense of time that Maxine Hong Kingston draws upon to construct her narrative. Kingston manipulates ancient Chinese myth, family history, the "talk-story" of her mother, her own childhood memories, and a series of suppositional narratives loosely based in fact, adopting, rearranging, and juxtaposing their component parts anew for her reader. This deep time will, by necessity, be disordered by a narrative combination of history and imagination, a practice Jameson figures, even in the novels he likes, as "nonrepresentational work that combines fantasy signifiers from a variety of ideologemes in a kind of hologram."¹⁶ To take up this concept of the hologram, and of Morrison's concept of 'prophecies that look back,' I would like to consider Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and its tendency towards *projection*, as well as how her writing anticipates (in Silko and Pynchon) two similar experiments with revisionist historical narrative in the 1990s.

The Woman Warrior engages multiple meanings of projection: the 'throwing forth' of possible alternate histories, the backwards prophecy that renders time multidirectional, the filmic quality of the narrator's 'mind-movie' becoming 'talk-story,' and the attribution of one's own emotions and experiences to another. Through projection, Kingston builds upon

the binaries that structure her experience and adds life and flesh to figures mythical and familial, living and dead. Kingston begins *The Woman Warrior* with a short paragraph comprised of internal contradictions, narrative impossibilities whose entanglement forms the structural basis of her own mode of written ‘talk-story’:

“You must not tell anyone,” my mother said, “what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born.”¹⁷

This admixture of tenses sets up two binaries. The first is the tension between the modal command (‘you *must not tell* anyone’) followed immediately by the mother’s own contradictory intent (‘what *I am about to tell* you’). The second is the assertion of family history (‘your father *had* a sister’), followed immediately by its revision (‘we *say* that your father *has* all brothers’). The shift from the past tense (‘had’) to the present tense (‘has’) is occasioned not only by the aunt’s suicide, but by her total erasure from the family story; the conjunction ‘*as if*’ works as a simile of sorts, pressing forward to the counterfactual statement, ‘she *had never been born*.’

In opening her ‘memoir’ in this way, Kingston emphasizes to her reader how partial, how mutable our understanding of the past really is. Even the dimensions of perspective are distorted, since, as she informs us, “my mother spoke about the raid *as if* she had seen it, when she and my aunt, a daughter-in-law to a different household, *should not have been* living together at all” (7). Whether Maxine’s mother actually witnessed these events, whether she puts on the mask of first-person recollection for narrative credibility, or whether these events happened at all remains unclear, not just to the reader, but to the narrator herself. Maxine thus entertains huge gaps in her knowledge of the past, even as she embarks upon the project of describing it, editing it, assembling it, and sharing it with the reader. She demonstrates how impossible it would be to learn more about this ‘no-name aunt’:

If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore, whether flashy or ordinary, I would have to begin, ‘Remember Father’s drowned-in-the-well sister?’ I cannot ask that. My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts. She will add nothing unless powered by Necessity, a riverbank that guides her life. (6)

Maxine’s only power of articulation, then, is metonymic. She must project from the fragments, the pieces on the cutting-room floor, her own ‘mind-movie’ of the aunt’s experience. Maxine lists the things she would not know from her mother’s abortive histories, all of which become the stuff of her own narrative: “if we had to depend on being told, we’d have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death” (185). In this sense, *The Woman Warrior*, though it does not neatly fit the category of historical fiction, follows Jameson’s argument that the historical novel, as Lukács defines it, becomes in postmodernism “a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum,” which “can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes ‘pop history’).”¹⁸ And yet, to *articulate*, over and against the silencing binary choices or the overwhelming void of the past, is to bind together the available limbs or pieces at the joint, a metonymic mode of assembly that allows for motion and change; that is, for the life of stories.

Kingston’s verbal depiction of visual media begins just a few pages into the text, when she addresses her Chinese-American readers directly and asks, “What is Chinese tradition

and what is the movies?” (6) Kingston marks her project early on as an interrogation of received knowledge, whether traditional or popular. The imaginative act that allows her to construct visions of her own future, her family’s past, and the richness of the myths she hears is a form of fanciful elaboration she refers to as her “mind-movies,” with storytelling the vehicle that might “start the movies in my mind coming true” (203, 197). Maxine realizes as a child that this unusual practice marks her as a storyteller: “Once when I realized how often I went away to see these free movies, I asked my sister... ‘do you talk to people that aren’t real inside your mind?’” (189-90). She describes an old photograph in which her father, standing in front of his laundry in America, “wears a new straw hat, cocked at a Fred Astaire angle” and “steps out, dancing down the stairs, one foot forward, one back” (60). Kingston’s narrative becomes a form of ‘talk-story’ that blends her mother’s beautiful stories with the pop-culture iconography of her youth, and films in particular:

My mother told [stories] that followed swordswomen through the woods and palaces for years. Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep. And on Sundays, from noon to midnight, we went to the movies at the Confucius Church. We saw swordswomen jump over houses from a standstill; they didn’t even need a running start. (19)

Kingston does not seek to blend the disparate parts of herself or the mismatched materials of her narrative into a smooth, synthetic shape, but rather, recognizing their distinctions and edges, to deliberately arrange them into a seamy whole: “When you try to understand *what things in you* are Chinese,” she continues, “how do you *separate* what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese?” (6)

The story of the no-name aunt is suffused with images of brokenness. Maxine’s mother tells her that the villagers descend upon the house, breaking the dishes and slaughtering the animals “to show her a personal, physical representation of the break she had made in the ‘roundness’” (13). They “came to show my aunt and her lover-in-hiding a broken house,” and as they leave, their “lanterns now scattering in various directions,” the aunt’s “family broke their silence” (13). It is this shattering that gives Maxine the pieces to begin her work of assemblage. As she continues the story, Maxine’s mother again falls into the counterfactual: “she *could not have been* pregnant, you see, because her husband had been gone for years. No one said anything. We did not discuss it. In early summer she was ready to have the child, long after the time *when it could have been possible*” (3). What Maxine has are the broken shards of her family’s past, and out of that, out of old myth, and out of personal experience, she must build her own ‘talk-story,’ different from her mother’s. Though Brave Orchid’s sister, Moon Orchid, describes Maxine in free indirect discourse as “an oldest girl who was absent-minded and messy,” and says of all the siblings in the house, “None of them were articulate or friendly,” *The Woman Warrior* belies that reading with Maxine’s sharp, insistent, and and critical voice (131-2). An initial review claimed the book “burns the fat right out of the mind,” leaving the reader “shuttling, on an electric line of prose, between fantasy and specificity.”¹⁹ Kingston, who described the text as “five interlocking pieces and each one was like a short story or an essay,” owns a preoccupation with the problem of

articulation from the start – whether one can tell a story at all, whether to speak out or to remain silent.²⁰

In her mother's language, gravid with suggestion, yet abortive and self-cancelling, the text's opening rehearses the aunt's fate. Holding her baby against her breast after it is born, Kingston imagines that the aunt nourishes it, even knowing she is about to kill herself and take the child with her: "full of milk, the little ghost slept" (15). This is a kind of backwards prophecy – Maxine looks back at the newborn child and sees it, as the no-name aunt *might have once done*, as dead before its death. In his section on "Order" in *Narrative Discourse*, Gerard Genette struggles to label such narrative occurrences, which are neither prolepses nor analepses, but something else in their combination, more like, as he puts it, "it would happen later, as we have already seen" or "it had already happened, as we will see later":

Retrospective advance notices? Anticipatory recalls? When later is earlier, and earlier later, defining the direction of movement becomes a delicate task. These proleptic analepses and analeptic prolepses are so many complex anachronies, and they somewhat disturb our reassuring ideas about retrospection and anticipation... which therefore necessarily entails the existence of temporally indefinite narrative sections.²¹

To prophesy back in time, or to project the past forward into the future, is to create "genuine *achronic structures*" and "in defiance of all chronology," to join "events connected by spatial proximity, by climactic identity... or by thematic kinship."²² Rather than, as Jameson argues, signifying a degradation of the historical, such spatial, climactic, or thematic licenses enact, in Genette's descriptions of Proust, "narrative's capacity for *temporal autonomy*."²³

The story of the no-name aunt that begins *The Woman Warrior*, "a story to grow up on," is occasioned by the arrival of the narrator's first period, but Maxine's mother reminds her a third time upon telling it to her, "Don't *let your father know* that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, *what happened to her could happen to you*. Don't humiliate us. You *wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born*" (5). Maxine's mother utters this prophecy as a cyclical repetition of the past. In the next section, "White Tigers," we inhabit a seemingly new narrative voice, that of Fa Mu Lan, the warrior woman who dressed as a man to fight in battle. It is not until the narrative break towards the end of the chapter that we realize this has likely been one of Maxine's "mind-movies" all along. In juxtaposing Fa Mu Lan's final sentence – "From the words on my back, and how they were fulfilled, the villagers would make a legend about my perfect filiality" – with Maxine's voice – "My American life has been such a disappointment" – Kingston highlights the jagged edges of myth coming up against her own ordinary life in Gold Mountain.

When Maxine's mother says a fourth time, at the end of her story, "*Don't tell anyone* you had an aunt," following with the counterfactual "*She has never been born*," Kingston draws attention to her own defiance in writing the story of this aunt, whose name she still does not know (15). In a 1989 interview, Kingston says she drew inspiration from her feeling, even as a child, that it was "a very terrible thing to do to a human being, to... strike her name from the book of life."²⁴ To bring the aunt's ghost back requires a metonymic recovery, filling out swaths of her life that remain unknown. Kingston says she "retrieved her from the no-nameness, the nothing, and created her again... She lives because of your having read that story and having questions about it."²⁵ At the same time, she emphasizes how different is the anonymity of the man who impregnated the aunt, for his is an anonymity of salvation. She

imagines that her aunt “told the man, ‘I think I’m pregnant’” and in response “he organized the raid against her” (7). To remain unnamed, for the man, is to remain enfolded in the book of life’s pages: “To save her inseminator’s name she gave silent birth” (11). Between telling and not telling, between a circumscribed existence and total annihilation, Kingston shades in a wide range of possibilities and projections of her own. Rather than violating the past, Kingston’s narrative represents that ‘excavation’ into the ‘cellar of time’ – here, the bodies of the aunt and her baby, “plugging up the family well” – that Morrison touts as the vehicle for reimagining the future (5). Kingston describes this work in an interview as “reverse memory, maybe that’s what I am getting into; because it seems to me, I’m writing the *memory of the future* rather than a memory of the past.”²⁶ As she imagines her aunt’s life, the many binary divisions and linguistic choices that she encounters combine and fork into a limited but multiple set of possibilities. The binaries Kingston confronts, shatters, and then reassembles proliferate as she writes, and include male and female, young and old, dead and alive, Chinese and American, Say Yup (Cantonese) and English (American), fiction and nonfiction.

Kingston criticism has posed the question of genre in the binary since the publication of *The Woman Warrior* in 1976: is the book a novel or a memoir, fiction or nonfiction? The answer is complicated by the text’s publication history, as it was not Kingston, but her editor, Charles Elliot, who selected the title and categorized it as a “memoir,” and thus a work of nonfiction.²⁷ Critic Jennie Wang attributes much of the success of the book, in fact, to its categorization as nonfiction, arguing that it may never have fallen under consideration for the National Book Critics Circle Award had it competed in the fiction category. Moreover, Wang continues, “the title is brilliant, considering the overwhelming response of feminist critics... and the widespread adaptation of that title in feminist writing ever since.”²⁸ If Elliot’s choices for title and genre contributed to the book’s runaway success (Shelley Fisher Fishkin was not alone in asserting, in 1991, that Kingston was perhaps “the most widely taught living American author,” and *The Woman Warrior* remains a staple on syllabi nationwide), it is still worth considering Kingston’s own intended title for the book, *The Golden Mountain Women*.²⁹ As Wang notes, this title refers to the use of ‘The Golden Mountain’ as synonymous with the U.S. and “indicates that [Kingston] meant to create heroic images of Chinese-American immigrant women, who had conquered their destiny in California, made themselves and their children Americans.”³⁰ From her research and her interviews with Kingston, Wang concludes, “a novel was what Kingston had in mind when she wrote the book, more becoming her status, a genre that calls to mind the narrative of an ‘ex-slave girl.’”³¹ Even the title and genre categorization that won out, however, retain vestiges of generic ambiguity. As Wang further details, the subheading ‘memoirs’ is itself curious, suggesting a challenge to the genre in its very plurality; memoirs, “being in the plural, clearly, suggests that the book couldn’t be an ‘auto’ biography,” and in any case, “a ‘girlhood’ is too short a lifetime to make a ‘biography.’”³² The most popular paperback edition of the book bears on its cover the label “Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction,” but the shelving label on the back reads “Fiction/Literature.” As Kingston expresses in a lecture given in Shanghai in 2004,

If you look on the cover, it would say ‘fiction,’ and then on the back cover, it says ‘non-fiction.’ The critics feel it also. They can make both clean. We can see the

contradiction on the side of the book and on the other side. This is a task that I have been working on for a long time, to make the border between fiction and non-fiction very wide.³³

Part of the work, for Kingston, is to break down generic categories altogether. If, as Homi Bhaba writes, hybridity is “the margin... where cultural differences... conflictually touch,” then the negotiations required in such cross-critical thinking might function as “the moment of panic which reveals the borderline experience.”³⁴

The question of genre matters because it has shaped much of the controversy around Kingston’s work, since Frank Chin branded *The Woman Warrior* “fake” in a 1990 piece entitled “Come all Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake.” Chin describes Kingston as a writer audacious enough to “boldly fake the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian American lore in history,” a writer who as “given up even the pretense of reporting from the real world... she lives entirely in her imagination. It is an imagination informed only by the stereotype communicated to her through the Christian Chinese American autobiography.”³⁵ In the introduction to an anthology of the following year, Chin and co-editors Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong accuse Kingston of suffering from Christian and Western brainwashing into crafting a confessional narrative that betrays her origins:

We describe the real, from its sources in the Asian fairy tale and the Confucian heroic tradition, to make the work of these Asian American writers understandable in its own terms. We describe the fake – from its sources in Christian dogma and in Western philosophy, history, and literature – to make it clear why the more popularly known writers such as... Maxine Hong Kingston... are not represented here... Their work is not hard to find. The writers of the real are very hard to find.³⁶

The dichotomies of fake/real and common/rare recall Renu Bora’s address of textural binaries: “we can read sheen as an emblem of the artificial, the technological, the feminine, the Oriental, the luxurious, glamorous, tacky, or gay,” and, as in Chin’s division of the real and the fake, “these value-laden, reversible codes could be mapped onto sexuality’s problematic history of binarisms.”³⁷ While Chin himself deploys inventive, metafictional postmodern strategies in his writing, Wang continues, he “fails to identify the features of postmodernism in Kingston’s fiction,” arguing that “if *TWW* had been published as fiction, he would have praised it up and down,” but because “it focuses on individual experience,” it is supposedly “alien to Chinese literary sensibility and Chinese novelistic tradition.”³⁸

Written at a moment when female writers, and particularly female writers of color, were just emerging into the consciousness of American literature, *The Woman Warrior* has often been folded into ethnic literature, rather than considered as a text of literary postmodernism. Wang articulates the effects of this ghettoization, writing:

In the convention of American literary criticism... there exists a class distinction between ‘high’ genre and ‘low’ genre... tragedy is considered to be the high genre and comedy the low genre; the novel is a major genre, and the short story a minor one; women’s stories are generally placed under the category of domestic fiction or sentimental romance. Slave narratives are ‘artless’ and ‘autobiographical’; the ‘art novel’ or avant-garde fiction belongs to so-called ‘high’ modernism, and ethnic

literature 'low brow.' The postmodernist fiction is labeled to be a male genre, 'elite,' Euro-patriarchal writing, and 'talkstories' are 'oral history' from tribal cultures. 'Mother tongue' must be 'native,' and the Word of Father, 'Logos and Law.'³⁹

This history of classification is particularly odd considering that Linda Hutcheon recognizes Kingston's work as both feminist and postmodernist several times in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, citing both *The Woman Warrior* and its counterpart, *China Men*, as texts that "have gone far to expose – very self-reflexively – the myth- or illusion-making tendencies of historiography" and "linked racial and/or gender difference to questions of discourse and of authority and power that are at the heart of the postmodernist enterprise in general and, in particular, of both black theory and feminism."⁴⁰ *The Woman Warrior*, then, has become a text debated on the matrices of "gender and genre," but rarely on its contributions to postmodern literature. As Kathryn West writes,

Literary criticism on contemporary American fiction and writing – especially criticism from the 1970s through the early 2000s – has tended to take up either postmodern texts or multicultural texts, treating them as two different kinds of literature, with differing purposes, audiences, modes of presentation, and effects. Seldom, if ever, did anthologies of contemporary fiction include writing identified as multicultural along with postmodernist writing. Many scholars are now recognizing that in fact they overlap in many respects, formal and philosophical, and that postmodernist approaches are employed by key figures in the prominence of ethnic American literature from the 1970s to the present.⁴¹

The poetics and politics of postmodernism not only appear in feminist and ethnic literature, but are in part shaped by it, a reciprocal relationship to which I will return at the end of this chapter in examining Silko and Pynchon. Indeed, what Mary Jacobus calls postmodernism's "multiplicity, joyousness, and heterogeneity, which is that of textuality itself" would also fit as a descriptor of Kingston's proliferative and combinatory experiments with gender in *The Woman Warrior*.⁴² Wang contends, "the most serious problems of reading and interpretation were caused by misplacement of genre and misinterpretation of Kingston's feminist agenda."⁴³ In the failure to see that Kingston's "texts evade existing genre classification and disrupt binary gender opposition," we have sometimes reduced her texts to reinscriptions of these dualisms, making our readings of *The Woman Warrior* more prescriptive than descriptive.⁴⁴ To balance this critical tradition, Wang contends, we must make an effort to consider "her works as fiction rather than non-fiction, and recognize the postmodern stance in her writing."⁴⁵

Newer criticism by Lisa Lowe, Jodi Kim, Elizabeth Rodrigues, and Kandice Chuh, among others, highlights the way in which "the designation 'Asian American' reflects not a pre-existing cultural identity or innate difference between people but instead arises from the historical need for capitalist formations to create divisions among the labor force," meaning that criticism should focus more on how literature proliferates in response to migrations and displacements precipitated by the Cold War in Asia and domestic and global gendered racial formations.⁴⁶ As King-Kok Cheung points out, in *China Men*, the follow-up to *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston makes clear that gender is complex and intersectional, as she concerns herself with the emasculation of Chinese-American men by the white majority:

In making women the captors of Tang Ao and in deliberately reversing masculine and feminine roles, Kingston also foregrounds constructions of gender. I cannot but see this legend as double-edged, pointing not only to the mortification of Chinese men in the new world but also to the subjugation of women both in old China and in America.⁴⁷

Chin's critique duly noted that Kingston's work was at risk of being assimilated into a unilateral white 'feminist' imaginary, but Kingston already writes through multiple lenses of awareness, addressing the restrictive gender norms of both Chinese and American cultures. Describing her time at Berkeley, the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* says, "all the time I was having to turn myself American-feinine, or no dates" (47). In her response to the "misreadings" of her work by white men, feminists, and Chin alike, she reserves particular vim for a subset of American critics who Orientalized her in their praise: "How dare they call their ignorance our inscrutability!"⁴⁸ As Cheung notes, Chin's criticisms of Kingston as "fake" fail to land with "feminist critics," even or especially those of color, "many of whom are skeptical of either/or dichotomies (in this instance fighting vs. feeling) and are impatient with normative definitions of genre (not that Chin's criteria are normative)," and who furthermore "believe that women have always appropriated autobiography as a vehicle for *asserting*, however tentatively, their subjectivity."⁴⁹ And as Julia H. Lee insists, "Kingston's questioning of gender does not occur separately from her consideration of race and ethnicity," and in questioning her own split and silent self, her inability to speak and write, "Kingston describes [her] voice in highly gendered terms – its hyperfemininity, unintentional as it is, is also what makes it ineffective and ignorable."⁵⁰

Part of Kingston's work of projection is actually to deploy the 'fake' not as literary vice, but virtue, emphasizing fiction's modular, constructed qualities. After all, as *The Woman Warrior* continuously insists, all narrative is artifice, in the sense that it is constructed, made, and fabricated. As if anticipating Chin's critique, Maxine depicts the fear of deportation, which makes shifting and multiplying identity a way of protecting "anybody here on *fake* papers" (184). Maxine's parents advice is, as always, "Don't tell," an echo of the ghost story of no-name aunt: "Lie to Americans... Don't report crimes; tell them we have no crimes and no poverty. Give a new name every time you get arrested; the ghosts won't recognize you" (184). To be "fake," Kingston suggests, is not only a way to 'talk-story,' but to survive. Culture, including stories, must be created over and over again, Kingston asserts. Observing the Chinese superstitions of her mother, Maxine says, "I don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn't; maybe everyone *makes it up as they go along*" (185). This fits with Kingston's own insistence that her multiple avenues of meaning and experience stem from the way she herself (mis)remembers things. In her 1987 essay collection, *Hawai'i One Summer*, Kingston describes memory thus:

A few large shapes remain in the memory – unforgettable. A thing which at one time seemed monumental becomes background or a surprisingly small figure in front, or it has disappeared. Remember how stereopicton pictures look like popping 3-D with cut-out-like-cars and buildings and people artificially forward and backward? Memory is artistic in the ways it arranges and sorts out... The result is that I am making up meanings as I go along. Which is the way I live anyway. There is a lot of detailed doubting here.⁵¹

To 'make it up as you go along' is the 'fake' storytelling act at the nexus of individual and communal experience, matching Kingston's assertion that it is her right, even her duty, to break apart the myths she has inherited and to retell them anew. She says,

I change them a lot, and I've been criticized for that by traditionalists because they don't understand that I have no intention of just recording myths. I mean, I'm not an archivist... When the woman warrior has the words carved on her back, that's actually a man's story. It's about a man named Yuch Fei who had the vow carved on his back by his mother. Now, I took that and gave that to a woman. I gave a man's myth to a woman because it's part of the feminist war that's going on in *The Woman Warrior*, to take the men's stories away from them and give the strength of that story to a woman. I see that as an aggressive storytelling act, and also it's part of my own freedom to play with the myth, and I do feel that myths have to be changed and played with all the time, or they die.⁵²

In this sense, Kingston again seeks to restore flesh and bone, not just to her aunt, but to the stories and myths that will otherwise become mere hauntings.

Kingston's novel, then, is 'fake,' it is artifice, and it is even plastic, but it is not synthetic. It is made, moldable, and constructed, but it preserves its seams and edges. Rather than resolve the binaries it presents, it builds upon them and watches them proliferate and recombine. Etymologically, 'plastic' dates in English to the 1630s and derives from the Greek *plastikos*, meaning "able to be molded, pertaining to molding, fit for molding." The surgical sense of "remedying a deficiency of structure" dates to 1839. It is only in the 1960s, squarely in the postmodern period, that "plastic" takes on the slang meaning "false, superficial."⁵³ Like 'ghost,' 'plastic' has a double valence in *The Woman Warrior*. If ghosts can be revived, reincorporated into the book of life, so plastic is at once the fake material of 'ghost' (white American) life, but also a flexible material to be incorporated along with the rest of the scraps that Kingston assembles. Whereas "Ellis Island had been made out of wood and iron," in twentieth-century California, "everything was new plastic, a ghost trick to lure immigrants into feeling safe and spilling their secrets" (115). Plastic is the treacherous stuff of global production from China to America – "shoes from the made-up aunt... glittering with yellow and pink plastic beads," "plastic vases" and "bowls of plastic tangerines and oranges," but also the sign of a welcome and equitable modernization: "new plastic pants – not homemade diapers" and the "plastic couches" of an apartment lobby.⁵⁴ Plastic is part of the material Maxine imbibes, included but not assimilated, into her narrative. "I would live on plastic," she asserts, rejecting her mother's roadkill dinners and quivering blood puddings (92). Enacting a tongue-in-cheek play on 'fake it 'til you make it,' Kingston figures narrative as an act of projection that, like a prophesy, makes things come true:

Be careful what you say. It comes true. It comes true. I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing... Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways and sidewalks. Give me plastics, periodical tables, t.v. dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots. Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts. (204)

The paradox here is that it is precisely this plastic American culture that is full of 'ghosts.' But as we learn in "White Tigers," "the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes"

(29). Plastic, like ghost, works in the novel as both a technique of hollowness and dimensionality, a conglomerate term that Kingston molds to her own uses. As Amy Ling writes, Maxine incorporates this world into her narrative, but does not resolve the contradictions: “although the daughter/narrator states a preference for the clean, the illuminated, and the plastic, she weaves her actual text from the monstrous, the frightening, the powerful – her mother’s stories. The words say one thing; the text does another.”⁵⁵

The word ‘fake,’ too, carries similar shades of meaning. While it is unclear whether it derives from the German *fegen* meaning “to polish, spruce up by artificial means, or plunder,” or from the Latin *facere*, “to make or do,” from which the central concept of this book – faceting – also comes, “fake” can be both damning in its assumption of superficiality or rich in the sense of changeability and innovation.⁵⁶ Kingston herself cheekily mines this insult for value in her novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, in which she plays on another meaning of the “fake book,” that is, the jazz musician’s record of the basic melody and chords of a piece of music, over and against which they improvise. Kingston’s investment in the “fake book” not only undermines Chin’s criticism of *The Woman Warrior*, but figures her relationship to the revisionist histories and inventive alterations inherent to ‘talk-story.’ In her 2018 monograph *Understanding Maxine Hong Kingston*, Julia H. Lee encourages critics to set aside the focus on Chin’s critique of Kingston altogether, relegating the request itself to a footnote in her text. “For too long,” she contends, “Chin’s critiques have played an outsized role in Kingston criticism especially given how debunked, challenged, and misguided that criticism now seems to be.”⁵⁷ Lee also offers evidence from a range of interviews with Kingston over the past five decades demonstrating that “Chin has expressed a desire to do violence to her,” and that, time and again, Kingston’s assertions to that effect “elicit no comment from the interviewer.”⁵⁸ Kingston’s work should be free of Chin’s criticism, Lee argues, not only because of the irony of his sexist treatment of her feminist text, or because the life of her work has survived his critiques, but because it is one thing to “acknowledge the critical history that surrounded and even at times produced Kingston’s career, but one does not need to pay deference to it ‘ad infinitum,’ especially since most of it is misogynistic, bullying, and even violent in nature.”⁵⁹ What remains, as Lee insists, is “Kingston’s resistance to the binaries that order our social interactions and politics.”⁶⁰

In her landmark 1970 work *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Shulamith Firestone stages the dialectic specifically in filmic terms. Referring to Marx and Engel, she writes:

The first in history to view history dialectically, they saw the world as process, a natural flux of action and reaction, of opposites inseparable and yet interpenetrating. Because they were able to perceive history as movie rather than as snapshot, they attempted to avoid falling into the stagnant ‘metaphysical’ view that had trapped so many other great minds.⁶¹

Further, Firestone adds, dialectical analysis itself may have emerged from sex as a deep-rooted vision of balance and opposition. Firestone describes writing as “visual images projected through verbal symbols,” and later claims that of all the art forms, it was film that preserved a strain of realism in the modern period and “broke down the very division between the artificial and the real, between culture and life itself, on which the aesthetic mode is based.”⁶² Echoing Jameson’s formulation of late capitalism, Firestone writes,

“empirical science is to culture what the shift to patriarchy was to the sex dialectic, and what the bourgeois period is to the Marxian dialectic – a latter-day stage prior to revolution.”⁶³ Like, Chin, Firestone uses ‘plastic’ as a negative: “the exploration of artificial materials, e.g., plastics; the attempt to confront plastic culture itself (pop art); the breakdown of traditional categories of media (mixed media), and of the distinctions between art and reality itself (happenings, environments).”⁶⁴ The logical conclusion of the dialectic of sex is, for Firestone, a synthetic resolution of the gender binary: “more than a marriage, rather an abolition of the cultural categories themselves, a mutual cancellation – a matter-antimatter explosion, ending with a poof!”⁶⁵ If, as Firestone and other Marxist feminists argued, this stage of artistic production is a precursor to synthetic resolution, what has happened instead of this cancellation is more akin to Foucauldian proliferation.

Gender is a binary Kingston continuously exploits as a site of proliferation, rather than erasure. In an interview with Shelley Fisher Fishkin in 1991, Kingston describes how Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* “broke through constraints of time, of gender, of culture,” as Woolf “can make one character live for four hundred years, and that Orlando can be a man, Orlando can be a woman.”⁶⁶ Kingston suggests the way in which this reimagining, at its best, entails multiplication, rather than dissolution:

I think an American writer who does that same thing is William Carlos Williams. I love *In the American Grain* because it does that same thing. Abraham Lincoln is a ‘mother’ of our country. He talks about this wonderful woman walking through the battlefields with her beard and shawl. I find that so freeing, that we don’t have to be constrained to being just one ethnic group or one gender – both those writers make me feel that... I don’t have to be restricted by time and physicality.⁶⁷

This, in turn, leads into Kingston’s insistence that while “feminist writers *have* been writing with power and pride... we have to invent new images and ways of power. So far the world thinks of power as violence, that power comes from a gun. We must create a new kind of drama in which there *is* drama, but it’s nonviolent. And this has barely been thought of.”⁶⁸ To do this is not to remove gender identity entirely, but to exploit its fungibility and multiplicity. Like Morrison, Kingston emphasizes that the ability to (re)imagine the past makes room for such a future: “What we need to do is to be able to *imagine* the possibility of a playful, peaceful, nurturing, mothering man, and we need to imagine the possibilities of a powerful, nonviolent woman and the possibilities of harmonious communities – and if we can just *imagine* them, that would be the first step toward building them and becoming them.”⁶⁹

In 1984, Maxine Hong Kingston made her first trip to China, traveling up the Li River by boat with a group of fellow American writers sponsored by UCLA and the Chinese Writers’ Association.⁷⁰ Among the nine writers on the trip were both Leslie Marmon Silko and Toni Morrison. It was on this journey that Kingston came to feel that she had prophesied a world through her writing:

The trip made me see another use of memory or imagination or talk-story... I wrote about the savage barbarians shooting off arrows with whistles on them. I wrote that, and then, not very much later, I saw one of those whistling arrows in a museum. I felt that I created it. I wrote it; and therefore, it appeared... The power of imagination leads us to what’s real.⁷¹

This form of projection recalls the moment in *The Woman Warrior* where Moon Orchid, arriving from China, seems to summon Maxine's future writing prowess from a pun on her name. Since Maxine sounds to her "like 'Ink' in Chinese," Moon Orchid calls out the word, and "sure enough, a girl smeared with ink said, 'Yes?'" (131) Maxine's ink-stained skin comes to foretell the written 'talk-story' that will define her eventual ability to articulate herself and an alternate history of her family. In the same interview, Kingston said, "I invented new literary structures to contain multiversions and to tell the true lives of non-fiction people who are storytellers."⁷² In place of her mother's counterfactual subjunctive, which negates the aunt's existence (*as if* she was never born'), Maxine imagines and assembles various histories for her aunt, prophesying a multitude of possibilities into the past: "*Perhaps* she had encountered him in the fields... *perhaps* he first noticed her in the marketplace... His demand *must have* surprised, then terrified her. She *obeyed* him; she *always did* as she was told" (6). Kingston moves from a vision of the burden this places on her aunt – "And she *might have separated* the rapes from the rest of living *if only she did not have to* buy her oil from him or gather wood in the same forest" (7). Finally, working through her aunt's pain vicariously, she wills it *to have ended*, so that it would not go on haunting: "I want her fear to have lasted just as long as rape lasted so that the fear could have been contained" (7). "She *may have been* unusually beloved, the precious only daughter," supposes Maxine, or, in a subtle reference to incest, the man who impregnated her "*may have been* someone in her own household" (10, 11).

Then Kingston imagines what it would have been like if the aunt actually had sex of her own volition, describing the desire almost as if it were her own: "Fear at the enormities of the forbidden kept her desires delicate, wire and bone. She looked at a man because she liked the way the hair was tucked behind his ears... For warm eyes or a soft voice or a slow walk – that's all – a few hairs, a line, a brightness, a sound, a pace, she gave up family" (8). The possibility that the aunt was not raped, but followed her desires seems unlikely to Kingston, and yet this possibility intrigues and invigorates her: "It *could very well have been*, however, that my aunt did not take subtle enjoyment of her friend... Imagining her free with sex doesn't fit, though. I don't know any women like that, or men either" (8). She ends with an assertion that her work of history and myth is also a formation of the self: "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (9). At the center of the narrative of no-name woman is the punishing, endless work of feminine gender performance. Perhaps the no-name aunt "worked at herself in the mirror, guessing at the colors and shapes that would interest him, changing them frequently in order to hit on the right combination. She wanted him to look back" (9). In the midst of her subjunctive talk-story, imagining her aunt painstakingly threading the tiny hairs from her face, "her eyes watering from the needles of pan," Maxine switches directly into her own experience, juxtaposing it to her no-name aunt's: "It especially hurt at the temples, but my mother said we were lucky we didn't have to have our feet bound when we were seven" (9). To conclude this reverie of pain, the narrator proclaims, "I *hope* that the man my aunt loved appreciated a smooth brow, that he wasn't just a tits-and-ass man" (9). In this moment of levity, Kingston cracks the image of bygone rural Chinese life, pushing its images up against the crude slang of 1970s America. Kingston treats language as the material for bricolage: words may not magically fit or flow, but must rather be assembled together in surprising juxtapositions and collages. Here, Kingston's experience of intersectionality contributes to the multiplicity of language, of family history, and of gendered experience. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, "Kingston links the postmodern metafictional

concerns of narration and language directly to her race and gender.”⁷³ Kingston’s narrative act of faceting points to identity as the site of fracture, but also the means of repair.

Perhaps the greatest signal of the proliferation of gender identity in *The Woman Warrior* is simply that its characters, times, and places are all insistently distinct, yet sewn together, so that all of the women inhabit the status of ‘warrior’ differently. This is clearest at the places where the edges of the narrative fold back and come up against each other. The story of Ts’ai Yen, which closes *The Woman Warrior*, folds the story of exile and the “Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” against the specter of Maxine’s childhood enemy, the hated version of her own younger self: “I hated her for her China doll hair cut. I hated her at music time for the wheezes that came out of her plastic flute” (173). Raised in a land foreign to her parents, Maxine wrings a new song, and a new story, from this plastic flute. When Fa Mu Lan thinks, “I bled and thought about the people to be killed; I bled and thought about the people to be born,” she not only overcomes the death/life binary associated with the male/female gender binary, she also echoes Maxine’s own fantasy of power as a child: “I hunted humans... Tears dripped from my eyes, but blood dripped from my fangs, blood of the people I was supposed to love” (33, 190). In “White Tigers,” Fa Mu Lan has the grievances of her parents cut into her back: “My father first brushed the words in ink, and they fluttered down my back row after row. Then he began cutting... If an enemy should flay me, the light would shine through my skin like lace” (35). The pain is so intense, and there is so much blood that, the narrator tells us, “if not for the fifteen years of training, I would have writhed on the floor” (35). The “grievances” carved into Fa Mu Lan’s back match Maxine’s own: “What we have in common are the words at our backs... I have so many words – ‘chink’ words and ‘gook’ words too – that they do not fit on my skin” (53). Maxine’s own mother does cut her as a child, though not her back, but her tongue, slicing her frenum at birth: “I cut it so you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language” (164). Maxine inquires, “Did I cry and bleed?” and her mother response only, “Probably” (164). As an adult, Maxine contrasts her ability to write with her inability to speak: “A dumbness – a shame – still cracks my voice in two” (165). It is from this split place and through this “broken voice” that Maxine speaks – through writing (165). Maxine’s version of ‘talk-story,’ then, is shaped by both the pain and the awe she feels at the marks left by her mother: “Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me. At other times I was terrified – the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue” (164).

Kingston draws parallels between the ordinary occurrences that shape all the women’s lives – no-name aunt, Maxine, and Fa Mu Lan all are marked as women when their periods arrive, as the initial warning of her mother’s ‘story to grow up on’ suggests. Rather than defining her, however, Fa Mu Lan’s period becomes another kind of blood, marking her understanding of herself as a warrior:

Menstrual days did not interrupt my training; I was as strong as on any other day. ‘You’re now an adult,’ explained the old woman on the first one, which happened halfway through my stay on the mountain. ‘You can have children.’ I had thought I had cut myself when jumping over my swords... ‘However,’ she added, ‘we are asking you to put off children for a few more years.’ (31)

On the day of her first period, Fa Mu Lan is permitted to look into her future by examining the water in the gourd, this time not just to see the “the men [she] would have to execute...

fat men [who] sat on naked little girls,” but to see her own future. As she does, she mixes and juxtaposes different tenses:

Yes, I *would be* happy. How full I *would be* with all their love for me. I *would have* for a new husband my own playmate, dear since childhood, who *loved me* so much he *was to become* a spirit bridegroom for my sake. We *will be* so happy when I *come back* to the valley, healthy and strong and not a ghost. The water *gave me* a close-up.” (31)

Blood marks the birth of Fa Mu Lan’s first child years later, but also, not long after, her return to battle “with the prince who had mixed the blood of his two sons with the metal he had used for casting his swords” (42). Blood becomes, for Fa Mu Lan, not the *negation* of gender, but the fluid marker to be applied to a variety of life’s ceremonies, for there’s mettle in women, too: “Forebodingly I caught a smell – metallic, the iron smell of blood, as when a woman gives birth, as at the sacrifice of a large animal, as when I menstruated and dreamed red dreams” (34). When she finally kills the baron who has trapped and violated so many women, Kingston folds the faces of the story together again, as Fa Mu Lan’s revenge is colored by Maxine’s own dislikes. Speaking of the women he has imprisoned, he says “Everyone takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to be rid of them. ‘Girls are maggots in the rice.’ ‘It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters.’ He quoted to me the sayings I hated” (43). These are sayings Maxine has heard time and again in the streets of Chinatown and at the tables of her uncles. The women Fa Mu Lan frees become the stuff of legend themselves. Though they “wandered away like ghosts,” the narrator tells us in an analeptic prolepsis that “later, *it would be said*, they turned into the band of swordswomen who were a mercenary army” of “witch amazons” (44, 45). And unlike Fa Mu Lan, “they did not wear men’s clothes... but rode as women in black and red” (44).

Stories, Brave Orchid suggests, are always composed of shattered fragments. She tells Maxine of the “village crazy lady” whose “headdress of small mirrors” ends up in “fragment[s] of glass” when the villagers turn on her during a Japanese bombing and stone her to death. When her husband leaves and her first two babies die, Brave Orchid studies to become a doctor. She says the other women in her university “*pieced together* new directions, and my mother’s spirit followed them instead of the old footprints” (76). In times of joy, the same practice of breakage appears, for when Moon Orchid visits, Brave Orchid “cracked rock candy into jagged pieces,” and the children took the “smallest slivers,” as “it was very important that the beginning be sweet” (121). In a book where food and stories alike are taken into the body, it is the act of eating these small fragments that binds the women together, across space and time. These broken pieces recall, too, the broken shards of pottery in the house of no-name aunt, and the images of her own future that shatter as she labors in childbirth: “as the *pictures burst*, the stars drew yet further apart” (14). What Brave Orchid does is to shatter the world for her daughter, then show her how to put things back together, telling contradictory stories of women that do not cancel out, but rather proliferate, in Maxine’s mind:

After I grew up, I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father’s place in battle.... I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman. (20)

Shulamith Firestone documents the ways in which twentieth-century society attempted to “contain” feminism’s “shattering” of culture, as in the deployment of Freudian psychoanalytic theory to conservative ends. What Kingston suggests against this containment is assemblage, cobbling women’s stories back together from brokenness, even knowing they will have to be broken and remade again.

That both Fa Mu Lan and the aunt commit suicide in a text so preoccupied with ghosts and with hauntings is an interesting twist, and one that places Kingston’s multifaceted tale in the company of Western authors and characters who share the same fate – the characters of Tolstoy and Chopin, the authors Woolf and Plath themselves. Kingston insists that she sees herself, meaningfully, as an American writer contributing to and remaking that Western canon.⁷⁴ The improvisation of Kingston’s story is an ode to her mother, who flipped the script, to her aunt, and to women Chinese and American alike. In two later works (*I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* and *The Fifth Book of Peace*) Kingston revisits the story of Fa Mu Lan, changing the spelling of the heroine’s name to the Say Yup spelling Fa Mook Lan and reworking its dimensions within her own oeuvre. In particular, Kingston wishes she had added that the heroine herself is engaged in the work of assemblage:

She was a weaver. This is one of the first bits of knowledge I ever learned. The chant starts off with the sound – “chick-chick-chick” – of the loom going through the shuttle. “Chick” is also the word for weaving or knitting.... It’s important to know that the woman warrior did women’s work; she wasn’t just a military hero. Also, I love it that the word ‘texture,’ which has to do with weaving, comes from the same root word as ‘text’ – ‘text’ in writing. So weaving and writing have a connection.⁷⁵

The title of the book itself suggests gender violation: to be a warrior, unmarked by gender, is to be a man. To be a *woman* warrior is to violate that norm, to be what “could not be,” in the case of the aunt.

“At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story,” Maxine articulates (20). Though the quote begins with “at last,” the narrator tells us this at the start of the second section of her narrative. Brave Orchid’s Chinese name, Ying Lan, echoes that of Mu Lan, which means Sylvan Orchid.⁷⁶ At the end of the text, having juxtaposed the many broken pieces of the past, the narrator begins to see her own mode of storytelling as combinable with her mother’s. Introducing the story of Ts’ai Yen, she writes, “here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (206). In the final line of the text, Maxine wryly adds, in her own voice, “It translated well” (209). The cycle of stories that Kingston makes of these broken pieces is not a perfect circle, but it is a dimensional whole. The work does not and will not end: “I continue to sort out what’s just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living” (205). As she says of Hawai’i, so might she say of the woman warrior who persists, in different characters, and in fabricated pieces, across the text: “There should be epic poems, as there were in ancient times. Failing that, I have instead and incidentally described her piece by piece, and hope that the sum praises her.”⁷⁷

I wish now to consider how Kingston’s multidirectional projections set the stage for two later postmodern texts of the 1990s: Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997), both of which run to nearly eight

hundred pages. In their length alone, these novels typify the period of high postmodernism that perhaps crested towards the end of its dominance as a literary aesthetic, as I noted in the introduction to this book. Towards the end of “The Future of Time,” Toni Morrison turns to consider *Almanac of the Dead*, written five years prior to the time of her lecture. Silko, she says, “flails and slashes through thousands of years of New World history, from centuries before the conquistadors made their appearances on these shores to the current day. The novel rests on a timelessness that is not only past, but a future timelessness as well – time truly without end.”⁷⁸ Contra Jameson, Morrison locates a vision of futurity in Silko’s past-facing prophecies:

Cocoons from which healed women burst, dreams that take the terror from time, tombstone hopes for a better time, a time beyond chaos where the seven mountains of destiny lie, snake gods anticipating the people who will come from the south – these closing images following treks into the past lead one to hazard the conclusion that some writers disagree with prevailing notions of futurelessness. That they very much indeed not only have but insist on a future. That for them, for us, history is beginning again.⁷⁹

Closing her lecture, Morrison cautions her audience against the hopelessness that a seemingly ‘futureless’ postmodernism might suggest: “I believe I am detecting an informed vision based on harrowing experience that nevertheless gestures toward a redemptive future,” she insists. “And I notice the milieu from which this vision rises. It is race inflected, gendered, colonialized, displaced, hunted.”⁸⁰ Rather than a dying form, inferior to the video art and glassy architecture that draws so much of Jameson’s attention, Morrison insists that “literature, sensitive as a tuning fork, is an unblinking witness to the light and shade of the world we live in,” and that the future “will be shaped by those who have been pressed to the margins,” for “the current disequilibria is a stirring, not an erasure.”⁸¹

For Gerald Vizenor, the postmodern novel actually represents a *return* to ‘postmodern’ Native structures, which he identifies as tribally pre-modern and pre-imperial. In describing the inherently hybrid tradition of the Native American novel (that is, oral and literary, western and tribal at once) argues that the narrative structures of postmodernity are purely tribal: “The postmodern opened in tribal imagination; oral cultures have never been without a postmodern condition that enlivens stories... without trickster signatures and discourse on narrative chance.”⁸² This resonates with Maxine Hong Kingston’s own assertion in a 2016 interview that time and ancestry are more a dimensional shape than a directional line:

We have a culture here in the West in which it is very hard to get in touch with the past and ancestors. Caring about ancestors is important not just for the present but for the future. American Indians have a tradition of ancestors, but they also have a tradition of descendants. You must ask, ‘How will my actions affect my descendants for seven generations?’ You have to think that far ahead.⁸³

In *The New Nature of Maps*, the critical cartographer J. B. Harley writes, “As much as guns and warships, maps have been the weapons of imperialism.”⁸⁴ Historically, Harley maintains, maps have been employed to “create myths which would assist in the maintenance of the territorial status quo,” thus holding the capacity to redefine not only physical space, but social ideology as well.⁸⁵ Harley’s assertion links the cartographic and the literary in suggesting that

the story told through the lines of a map might overwrite alternative perspectives of the past with a monologic narrative of history. In viewing map as text, Harley thus draws a vital connection between the written line and the borderline, a connection acutely palpable in both *Almanac of the Dead* and *Mason & Dixon*. Both novels are revisionist historical narratives rooted in the American landscapes they describe and fixated on the East-West borders that bisect them: the international U.S.-Mexico boundary for Silko and the proprietary line between the Pennsylvania and Maryland colonies for Pynchon. By setting up a number of dualities and then blurring the lines between them, the texts eat away at the solidity of the very borders they describe through a subjunctive, revisionist narrative that considers what *might have* happened, what *actually* occurred from another perspective, and what *still could* take place at the intersections of fact and fiction, object and subject, and past and future. Through their writing style, Pynchon and Silko also traverse literary boundary lines, blending the postmodern narrative form with traditional Native American oral storytelling techniques in order to redress the white historical record, empower the voices of the marginalized, and rewrite the topography of the nation's past.

Silko and Pynchon initially establish cartographic borders as manifestations of ongoing white brutality and ignorance. Ordered into existence by faceless bureaucracies – the numerous “Societies” and the nebulous “British American Policy, ever devious” of *Mason & Dixon* – these borders are violently maintained in *Almanac* by the “Border Patrol,” the “State Police,” the “Federal District,” and “U.S. tanks,” which are “deployed along the entire U.S. border.”⁸⁶ The depersonalization of what Silko terms “the Destroyers,” or those in power who are “attracted to and excited by death and the sight of blood and suffering,” makes incidents of violence and oppression metonymic/synecdochic of a larger force of oppression (475). To these white institutions and many of their agents, linear borders represent perfect reason and “orthogony,” but this positivism lies in sharp contrast to the way Native Americans see the land. As they move West, Mason and Dixon are warned not to extend beyond the Indian Warrior Path, for “Cutting it with [their] Visto would be like putting an earthen Dam across a River” to interrupt the “unimpeded flow” of Natives across the land (646-7). This threat to Native movement along the Warrior Path also foreshadows the Line's future role in injustice, when, during the Civil War, it will be used to delineate free from slave states. Resistance to such borders, then, becomes an expression of Native freedom and self-determination. In *Silko*, the border separates culturally similar indigenous groups into foreign nations and interrupts their migratory patterns. As Calabazas says, framing time as a continuous present,

We don't believe in boundaries....We *are here* before maps...We *know* where we belong on this earth. We have always moved freely. North-south. East-west. We pay no attention to what isn't real. Imaginary lines. Imaginary minutes and hours. (216)

For Calabazas, the senseless, arbitrary border is one that constantly invites transgression, making North-South movement symbolic of Native freedom. Indeed, the most lasting borders in both novels are not the Lines running East to West, but the divisions between the oppressed and their oppressors. In *Mason & Dixon*, the surveying chain itself comes to represent the chains of slavery, and the Natives are aligned with all the dispossessed in their desire for freedom and border dissolution, including African slaves, Zhang, the Jews living in the woods, and even the Swedes who came long before the other Europeans (417). In

Almanac, too, the global revolution of ‘tribal people’ includes not just a range of Indian tribes, but Jews, Africans, black Americans, Mexicans, mixed-bloods, the homeless of all races, the Chinese revolutionary Awa Gee, and even the ‘eco-freaks,’ all of whom seek liberation from institutionalized oppression.

Importantly, both Pynchon and Silko allow individual whites to cross over into the camp of the disenfranchised, creating a more subtle critique of postcolonialism that stops short of an indictment of the entire race. While the powerful white ‘Destroyers’ in both novels are afflicted with substance addiction, sexual perversion, nightmares, bloodlust, madness, and greed, other whites turn away from the faceless establishment and instead relate to the victimized minorities; Dixon, for example, “seems quite content in their company’, and often relates to the Natives more closely than to his white fellows” (648). In *Almanac*, the revolutionary La Escapia and her “all-tribal army understood that U.S. troops had...to follow orders,” but they also encourage them to “quit the government forces and join the people’s army” (590-1). In allowing individual white characters to become open-minded border-crossers, Pynchon and Silko condemn the forces behind the violence of colonialism while still recognizing the importance of dialogue and understanding across cultural boundaries on an interpersonal level. In fact, the authors themselves, in blending postmodernism with elements of Native American oral storytelling, transgress the normative divisions of the literary world and trade narratively across cultural borders.

While it may seem benighted to impose a single notion of ‘Native storytelling’ on the panoply of indigenous cultures in the Americas, it is a technique Silko herself employs in *Almanac* to increase the scope and resonance of her novel. *Almanac* calls for a global, migratory revolution of indigenous peoples against their oppressors, thus “operating above tribal identities and sacrificing cultural specificity’ to create, in Shari M. Huhndorf’s words, a ‘pan-tribal identity.’”⁸⁷ This is feasible because although some features of orality are culturally specific, others occur across Native traditions, such as cyclicity, structure in (tangential) episodes, reflexive passages, repetition, audience participation and questioning, colloquialisms, asides, the collocation of diverse subjects, and ‘variations upon stories’ in their retellings.⁸⁸ If, as Frederic Jameson has argued, the postmodern narrative consists of “a dissolution of linear narrative, a repudiation of representation, and a ‘revolutionary’ break with the (repressive) ideology of storytelling generally,” then perhaps the melding of postmodern form and Native orality in *Almanac* and *Mason & Dixon* becomes less surprising, particularly given Gerald Vizenor’s claim that ‘the postmodern opened in tribal imagination.’⁸⁹

Postmodernism, then, might provide some release for Native writers from the kind of appropriation and mimesis that, Ernest Stromberg explains, they have historically used to “establish a degree of consubstantiality’ with white culture by ‘mediat[ing] a non-Native form.’”⁹⁰ While the novel will never be an intrinsically Native American mode of expression, postmodernism’s ideological connections to Native orality at least offer such writers an empowering style, one that, in Vizenor’s words, “liberates imagination and widens the audiences for tribal literatures.”⁹¹ David Witzling credits the “transnational turn in critical thought” for allowing minority and women writers to craft the kinds of large-scale postmodern narratives that were once “the purview of white and male authors.”⁹² While earlier texts of the Native American Renaissance, including Silko’s own debut novel, *Ceremony*, may have focused inward on local communities, in *Almanac*, as Huhndorf points out, Silko explores the

‘revolutionary possibilities in transnational alliances’ which “brings Native studies into closer relation with other fields engaged in critiques of nationalism and colonialism,” including postmodernism itself.⁹³ In its style, too, *Almanac* explicitly embraces postmodernism; as Adam Sol writes, ‘Like the works of Thomas Pynchon... *Almanac*’s vision is broad and dark, its cast of characters huge, its narrative line jumbled’.⁹⁴ Committing such a narrative to print might seem to fix it, but like the border it describes, *Almanac*’s narrative remains perforated and manipulable. Silko demonstrates this through the written Almanac that gives the novel its title, an imaginary fifth Mayan codex saved from the conquistadors that “must be kept” by the people “carefully... Nothing must be added that was not already there” (129). The keepers of the Almanac, however, lose, sell, and even eat its pages, keeping missing portions alive orally, rewriting lost sections, and adding their own notes, such as, “Narrative... a mosaic of memory and imagination” (574). Silko thus establishes the written codex, like the border, as a fixed entity, but then undermines this by demonstrating the mutability of the object’s ‘fixedness’. This is what Ellen R. Arnold describes as Silko’s attempt to “recontextualize printed language and reconnect the written word with the dynamic, multisensory, multidimensional experience of orality.”⁹⁵

Pynchon, too, combines the oral and the written in a flexible narrative that opens American history to its Native voices. Pynchon’s ‘Indians’ are not the central characters of *Mason & Dixon*; rather, they stand constantly at the fringes of the text, as knowledgeable guides, pitiable victims, purveyors of warning, or fantasy companions. Yet Pynchon consistently accords Native Americans a voice in his revised history, incorporating, like Silko, a range of tribes into his yarn and, despite ongoing disputes among these tribes, representing a vision of Native America that is bound by a common set of lamentations for and spiritual connections to the violated land (673). If Native American fiction “transcends the lineal, judgmental, and historical view adapted by Western Christians,” as Vernon E. Lattin has argued, then *Mason & Dixon*’s connections to the oral tradition become still clearer.⁹⁶ The novel as a whole shows, in Arthur Saltzman’s words, a “mockery, distrust, or desecration of linearity,” largely manifest in its oral frame narrative.⁹⁷ Cherrycoke, the “untrustworthy Remembrancer” who serves as narrator, adopts Native storytelling techniques as he wanders into digressions, alters the story for his audience (“Don’t know that I’d phrase it quite like that in the present Company”), takes questions (“Don’t his feet get blister’d?” hollers Pitt), offers multiple possible endings to episodes, and provides moral asides (“Unfortunately, young people... the word *Liberty*... was taken in those days to encompass even the darkest of Men’s rights”).⁹⁸ In this way, although he establishes himself as the “Authorial Authority” of the tale, Cherrycoke becomes what Brian McHale terms ‘the source of the subjunctivity’ in the novel (354).⁹⁹ While Cherrycoke refers to Mason’s journal, firsthand conversations with the surveyors, and written letters, he admits that he was often absent, and only “later heard from them... [and] tried to record... what [he] could remember,” even “presum[ing]” at times what they have done, so that entire portions of his story are based upon hearsay and imagination (14, 341). At one point, the family-audience actually debates this tension in Cherrycoke’s narrative, with Uncle Ives defending a single history of “evidence” and “testimony,” in which “Facts are Facts,” while Ethelmer counters that history must not be left “within the reach of anyone in Power,” lest it become “a Single Version... proceeding from a single Authority,” and thus inevitably “coerc’d, only in Interests that must ever prove base” (349-50). Instead of such narrow and ‘factual’ monologism, Ethelmer insists, history must “be

tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiters,” so that, for McHale, Ethelmer comes to “speak for the ‘postmodern’ position, defending fictitious history as the subversion of monopolistic ‘truth.’”¹⁰⁰ Opening the tale to a dialogue between Cherrycoke’s ‘historical account’ and the interactive frame of its telling subverts the notion of a single version of history and opens the text to a variety of perspectives.

Employing the revisionism and interactivity of Native American storytelling alongside the conglomerated form of the postmodern novel, Silko and Pynchon expose, through narrative, the very boundaries they seek to tear down. *Almanac* and *Mason & Dixon* explore a number of borders both physical and conceptual that separate North and South, past and future, life and death, inert and animate, natural and technological. Like the interwoven oral and written, the alternate proliferation and destruction of such binaries proves a powerful mode of resistance, allowing the texts to discredit traditional romantic historiography and empower the voices of the disenfranchised. Silko actively assails the division between past and future; for her, time is “round,” as in the Mayan calendar of the *Almanac*, so that “there are no future times or past times; there are *always all times*,” and “the past and the future are the same because they exist only in the present of our imaginations.”¹⁰¹ The novel leaps unapologetically back and forth through time and, in a characteristically oral fashion, is riddled with sections that are either exact repetitions or altered reflections of earlier passages. In *Mason & Dixon*, too, the fixation on and symbolic recurrence of the “lost eleven days” in the linear but “Schizocronick” Gregorian calendar reveals an anxiety about the nature of time (190, 192). As the surveyors move repeatedly back and forth along the Line, they not only relive moments of past journeys with slight variations, they also anachronistically anticipate future events in their own lives and in history up through the twentieth century.

Time becomes, in both novels, a collapsible entity, which in turn opens the portal between the living and the dead. The haunted spaces of America in *Almanac* and *Mason & Dixon* are rather benign for Natives, populated as they are by dead ancestors and communicative spirits. For the whites, however, they are often slightly more eerie manifestations of dislocation, like Mason’s variously kind and creepy visits with Rebekah, after which he “cannot even remember her face,” or Seese’s nightmares about her dead baby, which make her cry because afterwards, she has “difficulty remembering Monte’s face.”¹⁰² On a larger scale, the victims of the twin oppressions of slavery and genocide haunt the continent. Mason and Dixon feel “the ghosts of ’55 growing, hourly, more sensible and sovereign – as unaveng’d Fires” from the Indian massacres, and there is the continued sense that the truth behind the nation’s history “cannot be let go so easily,” for “the Ghosts will go on contending” (677, 660). In *Almanac*, the ghosts “are always traveling up and down the riverbanks,” restless because “soldiers slaughtered all of them,” and the Lakota medicine man Weasel Tail rallies the people at the Holistic Healer Convention by reminding them that “The enraged spirits haun[t] the dreams” of white America, and that “The Ghost Dance has never ended” (190, 723-4). The laws that would normally govern the physical world also give way to ‘Magick’ in the novels, so that the boundaries between object and subject are blurred. Mason and Dixon encounter powerful giant vegetables, hear the story of R.C. (who swallows a “chronometer” and wonders, “How could it bite me?...’Tis a Watch”), and meet the mechanical wonder of the Duck, who is “brought to life by the kiss of... *l’Amour*” to become an animate, sentient being (325, 373). In *Almanac*, Lecha encounters an old Eskimo woman who can spin a walrus tusk until it changes into “a giant ocean shell...a disk...a fan or a

bird's wing"; finally it "burst[s] into flames" before she returns it to its prior shape (152). In both texts, too, movement is linked with 'Magick', as it mysteriously confers invisibility. Mason and Dixon keep "Westering" because "Whenever they do stop moving... they lose their Invisibility' and are bound again to 'earthly purposes" (707). In *Almanac*, Mosca can explain Root's tragic high-speed motorcycle accident because "witches have methods of making their victims invisible... so that just this sort of accident takes place (207).

The lines between the many doubled and redoubled characters, too, become as perforated as the borders they inhabit. Huhndorf points out that in *Almanac*, the mythological "quest of hero twins to defeat the lords of death," common across multiple Native mythologies, "is echoed by the two sets of twins in Silko's novel who battle 'the Destroyers.'"¹⁰³ The twin sisters Zeta and Lecha are themselves doubled by the twin brothers El Feo and Tacho south of the border. In each pair, one serves a revolutionary (Zeta stockpiles weapons and El Feo rallies the people), while the other is a visionary (Lecha is psychic and Tacho speaks to the spirits through macaws). The novel also anticipates a mutual dream of revolution in which the sets of twins meet in a confluence of their cross-border revolutionary activities. In *Mason & Dixon*, examples of twinning abound as well, including Pitt and Pliny, who are named "so that each might be term'd 'the Elder' or 'the Younger,' as might day-to-day please one, or annoy his Brother," and Zhang's astronomers Hsi and Ho are "frequently mistaken for one another," as are the potential endings of their shared story (7, 628). Although Pynchon accords Mason and Dixon unique personalities and perspectives, they are often misidentified, sometimes choose to impersonate one another, and eventually enact exchanges within their "Tale of Geminity" (347, 315). When Dixon asks Mason to respect the boundary of the Warrior Path, calling the Line a "great invisible Thing that comes crawling straight on over [Indian] lands," Pynchon writes that "Mason, stubborn, wishes to go on," yet only a page later, "the Surveyors... at some point change Positions, with Dixon now for pushing on, razzle-dazzling their way among the Indians" (678-9). While the characters thus exchange identities, they never actually become one, and taken together as a pair of complementing opposites, they do not form, as Dixon suggests, "one latter-day English Subject," but, as Mason counters, "Twins, ever in Dispute, – as the Indians once told us the Beginning of the World" (689). Still, Mason's reference itself, which (like Silko's doublings) relates the surveyors to the archetypal hero-trickster twins of Native mythology, is 'Dixon-like,' thus multiplying them beyond the dynamic of 'geminity' and ironically highlighting the very fluidity he seems to undercut. Such proliferation demonstrates the fragility of character divisions in the novels and the danger of attempting to pin a narrative to a single – or even a dialectical – perspective.

Instead, experience becomes fluid and variable in the retelling, making history open to revisions that empower the disenfranchised. In *Almanac*, Sterling takes Seese on a tour of Native Tucson and rewrites the story of the Great Depression from an Indian perspective. He tells Seese that "the old-timers... had no money in banks to lose" and no "legal title to any Indian reservation land" (40). Because of good weather, "harvests had been plentiful and the game had been fat," and "they remembered 'The Crash' as a year of bounty and plenty for the people (41). Sterling also reveals a darker history through the stories of Geronimo and other Indian outlaws, telling Seese how "None of the [treaty] promises were ever kept," how the U.S. "made money off the Indian wars," and how "the murderers of Apache women and children had prospered" in Tucson, even down to their present-day descendents (40). In

Mason & Dixon, too, the surveyors' visit to the massacre site illuminates an alternative history, as Dixon notices "blood in Corners never cleans'd" and imagines the horror of "these poor People, as the blood flew and the Children cried," appalled "that at the end no one understood what they said as they died" (347). Even Mason is affected, announcing that "Acts have consequences," an observation that both condemns the violence of the massacre and implicates the surveyors themselves in the violence of "Westering," for the two see that they are "but the simple Tools of others, with no more idea of what they are about, than a Hammer knows of a House" (669). Their experience at Lancaster chips away at the heroism of the frontier romance by making the event not a 'battle' between whites and 'others,' but a cruel tragedy.

The rearrangement of so many boundaries makes for a complex and often disorienting readerly experience, but for Ellen R. Arnold, it is this very "practice of seeing double" which lies at the heart of the border text.¹⁰⁴ Fluidity between binaries actually moves the texts "beyond dualisms" in a narrative that can "enfold (but not necessarily erase) the dualisms that it exceeds."¹⁰⁵ In exposing the fallibility of such borderlines, Pynchon and Silko enact not a *narrative* breakdown, but a breakdown of what narrative normatively *represents*: the idea of a single history. Through the dialogic interplay of orality and literacy and the heteroglossic inclusion of dozens of characters and multiple tellings of tales, American history, the authors suggest, can be remapped.¹⁰⁶ At their conclusions, both *Almanac* and *Mason & Dixon* cycle back to their borders to highlight them as permeable and fragile lines and to challenge colonial cartography. After they hear tell of Ley lines, the earth's true magnetic meridians, and Zhang's 'Dragon' whose '*sha*' is within the Earth, Mason and Dixon, too, begin to see their Line as "a conduit for Evil" (701). Despite their careful and repetitive carving out of the border, by the end of *Mason & Dixon*, white settlers, terrified by rumors of a magical Creature in the forest, "slip out after dark, dig up and move the Boundary-Stones, as far as they dare, some one way, some another," so that the Line "soon loses all pretense to Orthogony, becoming a Record in Oölite of Fear" (711). Dixon's final map is "elegantly cartouch'd with Indians and Instruments," with "the Dragon nearly visible," bleeding through the empty space around the Line and making itself known upon the land (689). Dixon's map thus acknowledges the scientific carving out of the new borders in the white historical record while simultaneously filling its 'blank spaces' with Natives and its 'wilderness' with nature's mysticism. Like the novel itself, the map undercuts the potency of the very borders it displays.

Silko, too, includes her own map of the border at the start of *Almanac*, which highlights cross-border activities and cultural connections and leaves the U.S. unlabeled, tacitly denying its nationhood. Silko's map also recalls how "Sixty million Native Americans died between 1500 and 1600," is decorated by a snake, and describes the *potential* of the future in the present tense, stating: "The Twin Brothers walk north with hundreds of thousands of people." Beaufrey, one of the Destroyers in *Almanac*, says that "Capitalism stay[s] ahead because it [is] ruthless"; he makes his money selling harvested organs and photographs of the tortures, murders, and suicides from which he gleans them (565). Indeed, both texts describe a world made flesh: the colonizing force violates the earth through uranium, iron, and coal mining, bloodies it through the genocide and slavery it requires to grow, and scars it through the endless penning of borders, treaties, reservations, and Lines. In contrast to such 'ruthless' linearity, Pynchon's and Silko's remapped histories reveal the Natives' alignment with nature

in their reverence for serpents, which are symbolic of the earth's resistance to her violators. In *Mason & Dixon*, the Dragon of the land, the dog called Snake, "the earthwork serpent" of the iron Indian mounds, the electric eel, and "the Worm at Lambton Castle" are all messengers from the earth, as echoed in *Almanac*, where Zeta talks to snakes and the Spirit Snake manifests itself in a giant stone figure "emerg[ing] from the uranium tailings at Laguna," pointing South in the direction of revolution.¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, this new mapping collapses traditional divisions between nature and technology, not only affirming the land's alliance with Natives, but also placing white technology in their hands in a statement against colonization. Towards the end of *Mason & Dixon*, the surveyors see that "Catfish is packing a Lancaster Rifle...with an inverted pentacle upon the stock, unmistakable" (680). When they question him about it, the Indian pulls a scalp "yet darkly a-drip...with Blood" from his bag and replies, "I took this Rifle! From a White man...a very bad man" (680-1). Mason and Dixon easily recognize LeSpark's fresh scalp and "Dutch Rifle," marked, like those of the Cape, with the "Polaris of Evil" (428). The gun, like the Line, is a white "Conduit of Evil"; in the hands of Catfish, it reverses the Jamesonian formula of the romance by citing *white* culture as the source of the evil and the 'other' as its rightful and empowered possessor at the story's conclusion.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, *Almanac* tells the story of "the four Geronimos," all of whom claim to be the warrior, and whose quadrupling of identity allows the real Geronimo to escape the authorities (225). Each time the different men are photographed, the same face appears, which "belonged to an ancestor, the soul of one long dead who knew the plight of the Geronimos" (232). As in Kingston's missive "Lie to Americans," the multiplication of identity occurs in Silko because the white officers compare the photographs to each other, rather than to the living people they represent, so that they ultimately misconstrue the products of their own technology and take the wrong man prisoner.¹⁰⁹ Like the rewritten maps, the pentacle rifle and the Geronimo photos rob white technology of its power to oppress by turning it back on its makers, pointing to an ongoing resistance to injustice in American history and suggesting the power of storytelling to preclude a future of continued cultural imperialism. Perhaps the most convincing indicator of this potential is the ultimate survival of the Native in the imaginations of both texts. In the very last lines of the novels, Sterling suddenly understands "what the snake's message [is] to the people," and Mason's sons, speaking impossibly outside of Cherrycoke's frame, share the fantasy of a future America, still populated by "Indians [who] know Magick."¹¹⁰ In an echo of *Almanac*'s "Ancient prophecies foretell[ing] the arrival of Europeans in the Americas," an Iroquois guide in *Mason & Dixon* says, "All the people, even Nations far to the South and the West, dreamt you before we ever saw you...Now [we] have fled into Refuge in your Dreams, at last" (663). *Mason & Dixon* and *Almanac* are not, then, narratives of the 'vanishing Indian,' but rather of the vanishing power of the white historical 'record,' its invisible borders, and its suppression of the 'other's' voice.

Almanac and *Mason & Dixon* ultimately point to the capacity of stories to reveal untold versions of the past and thereby remap history. The *Almanac* declares that "One day a story will arrive at your town" that will initiate the people's revolution, and Cherrycoke, too, tells his listeners that stories have the power to enact change, because, as in Kingston, "talking about things, while not exactly causing them to happen, does cause something."¹¹¹ In a review of a Louise Erdrich novel, Silko writes, "Good fiction need not be factual, but it doesn't obscure basic truth."¹¹² Indeed, even as they provide subjunctive, perspectival, and

even fantastical retellings of America, these fictions strive to reconnect America with what is ultimately a *truer* version of its past, one that might allow it to actualize its cultural idealism in the future. As Shawn Smith contends, “Pynchon writes not to tell us our tragic fall is irrevocable, but to suggest that more humane alternatives for living in the world exist.”¹¹³ This might begin, as Silko advocates, with “an appreciation for the boundless capacity of language that, through storytelling, brings us together, despite great distances between cultures, despite great distances in time.”¹¹⁴

In “The Future of Time,” Morrison examines the strange multi-tense structure of *Almanac*’s final line: “The snake was looking south, in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come” (763). This sentence, in effect, reshapes the linearity of past, present, and future into a dimensional whole, where “the future tense of the verb is attached to a direction that is, unlike the directions of most of the comings we approve of, the south... where walls, fences, armed guards, and foaming hysteria are, at this very moment, gathering.”¹¹⁵ As Kingston also asserts in an interview, “All these people crossing the border from Mexico are refugees, and they are fleeing conditions that we are partially responsible for... I want readers to have compassion for someone who is not like themselves.”¹¹⁶ In this way, Kingston, Pynchon and Silko act as tricksters themselves, trading masks and shape-shifting across literary traditions, but ultimately imagining a similar ideological revolution. Just as their characters challenge physical, generic, and conceptual binaries within the texts, so the authors themselves enact a narratological border-crossing to more fully engage the powers of oral and literary storytelling. As their texts cross and interact magnetically along the lines of alternative histories, they suggest that the future is as open to revision as their fictionalized pasts – or, at the very least, that it *still could be*.

NOTES:

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- ¹ Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019) 119.
- ² Ibid. 114.
- ³ Ibid. 115.
- ⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1991) 298.
- ⁵ Morrison 120.
- ⁶ Jameson 25.
- ⁷ Ibid. 25.
- ⁸ E.D. Huntley, *Maxine Hong Kingston: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001) 65.
- ⁹ Julia H. Lee, *Understanding Maxine Hong Kingston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018) 9.
- ¹⁰ Oxford English Dictionary (www.oed.com).
- ¹¹ Morrison 120.
- ¹² Ibid. 122-3.
- ¹³ Ibid. 115.
- ¹⁴ Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008) 175.
- ¹⁵ Morrison 116, 117.
- ¹⁶ Jameson describes *Ragtime*, “the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past,” an author whose “splendid novels” one cannot read “without a poignant distress that is an authentic way of confronting our own political dilemmas in the present” (23).
- ¹⁷ Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage, 1989) 3. Quotations from the novel will hereafter be cited parenthetically, except where multiple pages are referenced.
- ¹⁸ Jameson 18.
- ¹⁹ John Leonard, “In Defiance of Two Worlds,” *The New York Times* (September 17, 1976).
- ²⁰ Kingston in Jennie Wang, *The Iron Curtain of Language: Maxine Hong Kingston and American Orientalism* (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2007) 55.
- ²¹ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) 83.
- ²² Ibid. 85.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Interview with Paul Skenazy (1989), in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, Tera Martin and Paul Skenazy, eds. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) 119.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Interview with Paula Rabinowitz (1986) in Martin and Skenazy, eds. 76. Emphases mine.
- ²⁷ See Huntley: “Kingston did not choose to label her work as ‘nonfiction’ – the decision about the label was made by her publisher, Knopf, and her editor, Charles Elliot... nonfiction was more marketable” (24).
- ²⁸ Wang 42.
- ²⁹ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston,” *American Literary History* 3, no. 4 (1991) 782.
- ³⁰ Wang 41.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Kingston in Wang 376-7.
- ³⁴ Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 296.
- ³⁵ Frank Chin, “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” in Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds., *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) 3, 26.
- ³⁶ Chan, Chin, Inada, and Wong, eds. xv.
- ³⁷ Renu Bora, “Outing Texture,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997) 104, 96.
- ³⁸ Wang 34.
- ³⁹ Wang 39-40.

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- ⁴⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 16.
- ⁴¹ Linda Trinh Moser and Kathryn West, eds., *Critical Insights: Maxine Hong Kingston* (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2016) 46-7.
- ⁴² Jacobus qtd. in Hutcheon 66.
- ⁴³ Wang 35.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid. 43.
- ⁴⁶ Elizabeth Rodrigues, "Truths and Tellings: *The Woman Warrior* and Kingston's Transformational Genres of the Real" in Moser and West, eds. 205. See also Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
- ⁴⁷ King-Kok Cheung, "The *Woman Warrior* vs. *The Chinaman Pacific*: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?" in *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, ed. (New York: GK Hall & Co, 1998) 113.
- ⁴⁸ Kingston qtd. in Wang 30.
- ⁴⁹ Cheung 111.
- ⁵⁰ Lee 11.
- ⁵¹ Maxine Hong Kingston, *Hawai'i One Summer* (San Francisco: Meadow Press, 1987) xvii.
- ⁵² Interview with Kay Bonetti (1986) in Martin and Skenazy, eds. 40.
- ⁵³ Oxford English Dictionary (www.oed.com).
- ⁵⁴ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* 119, 123, 191, 147.
- ⁵⁵ Amy Ling, "Maxine Hong Kingston and the Dialogic Dilemma of Asian American Writers" in Skandera-Trombley, ed. 177.
- ⁵⁶ Oxford English Dictionary (www.oed.com).
- ⁵⁷ Lee 115.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid. 38.
- ⁶¹ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) 4.
- ⁶² Ibid. 156, 169.
- ⁶³ Ibid. 163.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid. 170.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid. 174.
- ⁶⁶ Fishkin 784.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid. 784-5.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid. 782.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid. 783.
- ⁷⁰ See West and Moser, eds. 23 and Martin and Skenazy, eds. xxiii.
- ⁷¹ Interview with Paula Rabinowitz (1986) in Martin and Skenazy, eds. 71.
- ⁷² Ibid. 75.
- ⁷³ Hutcheon 71.
- ⁷⁴ See Fishkin 790.
- ⁷⁵ Interview with Paul Skenazy in Martin and Skenazy, eds. 131.
- ⁷⁶ See Moser and West, eds. 8.
- ⁷⁷ Kingston, *Hawai'i One Summer* xviii.
- ⁷⁸ Morrison 125.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid.
- ⁸¹ Ibid.
- ⁸² Gerald Vizenor, *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1989) x.
- ⁸³ Kingston interview with Linda Trinh Moser, in Moser and West, eds. 33.

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- ⁸⁴ J.B. Harley, *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) 57.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid.
- ⁸⁶ Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997) 680 and Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin, 1992) 272, 513. Quotations from both novels will hereafter be cited parenthetically, except where multiple pages are referenced or it is unclear to which text the citation refers.
- ⁸⁷ Shari M. Huhndorf, *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009) 60.
- ⁸⁸ See Janna Knittel, "De-assimilation as the Need to Tell: Native American Writers, Bakhtin, and Autobiography," in *American Indian Rhetorics of Survivance: Word Medicine, Word Magic*, Ernest Stromberg, ed. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006) 121-2.
- ⁸⁹ Frederic Jameson, "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodern Debate," *New German Critique* 33 (1984) 54.
- ⁹⁰ Stromberg 6, 10.
- ⁹¹ Vizenor 6.
- ⁹² David Witzling, *Everybody's America: Thomas Pynchon, Race, and the Cultures of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 9.
- ⁹³ Huhndorf 15.
- ⁹⁴ Adam Sol, "The Story as It's Told: Prodigious Revisions in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*," *American Indian Quarterly* 23, nos.3/4 (1999) 24.
- ⁹⁵ Ellen R. Arnold, "The Word Made Visible: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*" in Stromberg, ed. 214.
- ⁹⁶ Vernon E. Lattin, "The Quest for Mythic Vision in Contemporary Native American and Chicano Fiction," in *Minority Literatures in North America: Contemporary Perspectives*, Wolfgang Karrer and Hartmut Lutz, eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990) 159.
- ⁹⁷ Arthur Saltzman, "'Crank's of Ev'ry Radius': Romancing the Line in *Mason & Dixon*," in *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon*, Brooke Horvath and Irving Malin, eds. (London: Associated University Presses, 2000) 70.
- ⁹⁸ Pynchon, 8, 96, 307.
- ⁹⁹ Brian McHale, "Mason & Dixon in the Zone, or, A Brief Poetics of Pynchon-Space," in Horvath and Malin, eds. 51.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 48.
- ¹⁰¹ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 137. (Hereafter referred to as *Yellow Woman*.)
- ¹⁰² Pynchon 725, Silko, *Almanac*, 700.
- ¹⁰³ Huhndorf 160.
- ¹⁰⁴ Arnold 221.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986) 259-268.
- ¹⁰⁷ LisaAnn Slappey, "Writing off the Map: The Postcolonial Landscapes of Pynchon, Marshall, Silko, and Veá" (PhD dissertation, Rice University, 2001) 68-9.
- ¹⁰⁸ Frederic Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History* 7, no.1 (1975) 140. See also Shawn Smith, *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 174.
- ¹⁰⁹ Huhndorf 156.
- ¹¹⁰ Silko, *Almanac* 763, and Pynchon 773.
- ¹¹¹ Silko, *Almanac* 135 and Pynchon 655.
- ¹¹² Silko qtd. in Vizenor xii.
- ¹¹³ Smith 8.
- ¹¹⁴ Silko, *Yellow Woman* 59.
- ¹¹⁵ Morrison 125.
- ¹¹⁶ Interview with Linda Trinh Moser, in Moser and West, eds. 33.

EPILOGUE

“WATCHING HER STORIES”: *MAD MEN* AFTER POSTMODERNITY

How television-starved would someone have to be to find it shocking that ideologies contradict themselves, that simulacra don't have originals, or that gender representations are artificial?
– Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick¹

I began this book by asserting that the postmodern period, while it has ended, deserves both an aesthetic and a political rereading, particularly through the lens of feminist theory, which was not a separate entity, but a strain of thought that both shaped and was shaped by postmodernism. Two decades into the twenty-first century, we have enough distance to engage with postmodernism critically, to assemble its facets for ourselves anew. Feminism offers an irreducible set of affordances through which we can examine postmodernism's aesthetics and politics, in part because it acknowledges, retains, and builds beyond essential binaries, rather than ignoring or abandoning them altogether. In this chapter, I want to consider the survival of the postmodern aesthetic in one facet of twenty-first century culture: serial television. If, as Jeffrey T. Nealon writes in *Post-Postmodernism*, “postmodernism has seemingly been lingering at death's door, refusing to pass definitively, for quite some time,” Mary K. Holland holds in *Succeeding Postmodernism* that “unlike the proliferation of ‘after postmodernism’ criticism of recent years... we are seeing not the end of

postmodernism, but its belated success.”² In Holland’s view, some portion of contemporary artistic production “remains postmodern in its assumptions about the culture and world from which it arises... and yet still uses this postmodernism... to humanist ends of generating empathy.... and [asking] political questions.”³

Through moving-image culture, and particularly the recent ‘golden age of television,’ so named, even while it was unfolding, to recall the 1950s, I argue that serial T.V. picks up on the motility of postmodern storytelling and uses its aesthetic against the suturing effects of nostalgia. Perhaps unsurprisingly, my main text is *Mad Men*, a show that aired in a moment of significant cultural upheaval itself, a minor repeat of the period of cultural revolution that it depicts, in which Americans looked back upon the ‘short American century,’ comparing the relative quiet of its final years with the events of September 11, the Great Recession, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, the fight to legalize gay marriage, and the tumultuous approach to the 2016 election. Our growing distance from postmodernism, and particularly from its earliest iterations in the late 1950s, finally puts us in a potentially nostalgic relationship with the stuff of postmodern culture. If, as Fredric Jameson claims, the postmodern is an aesthetic that is inherently susceptible to nostalgia, what happens when we feel nostalgia *for the postmodern*? Mark Sandberg makes the case for the confluence of period drama and post-9/11 America without drawing a direct relationship of causation, writing:

The argument here will thus *not* be that the form serial television has taken in recent years is determined by the social context of 9/11 and its aftermath; rather, it will be argued that long-form serial storytelling was an available cultural form that gained special resonance during the time of widespread cultural ‘seriality’ that followed in the wake of the terrorist attacks: an extended period of stagnation, repetition, and nonrecovery.⁴

Mad Men seems to jell perfectly with Jameson’s description of the nostalgia film, with its “stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image... by the attributes of fashion,” and, in its first few episodes at least, with an image of the 1950s as “the privileged lost object of desire.”⁵ In the nostalgia film, “the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation,” so that “the history of aesthetic styles displaces ‘real’ history.”⁶ It is in just such simplifying terms that *Mad Men* has been described, both by its fans and its detractors. As Daniel Mendelsohn harps in a review of its fourth season, *Mad Men* is merely “a soap opera decked out in high-end clothes (and concepts).”⁷ Yet, as Jameson himself observes, “it is by way of so-called nostalgia films that some properly allegorical processing of the past becomes possible,” giving rise to “new and complex ‘postnostalgia’ statements and forms become possible.” In his analysis of Jonathan Demme’s *Something Wild* and David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, for instance, Jameson glimpses a potential critique of the fifties: “What is dangerous, in other words... is not the sixties and its countercultures and ‘life-styles’ but the fifties and its revolts... what was being revolted *against*.”⁸ In these films, Jameson locates “dual symptoms: they show a collective unconscious in the process of trying to identify its own present at the same time that they illuminate the failure of this attempt.”⁹ Indeed, as Mark Sandberg insists of *Mad Men*, “simple nostalgia is not the main motor for the show’s cultural resonance; the show’s deconstruction of surface appearances in the 1960s and its embrace of antihero dynamics are far too relentless for that.”¹⁰

When Toni Morrison emphasizes the distortive lens with which we are wont to look upon our own past in “The Future of Time,” she focuses on a treacherous nostalgia for midcentury American life: “The fifties, a favorite, has acquired a gloss of voluntary orderliness, of ethnic harmony, although it was a decade of outrageous political and ethnic persecution.”¹¹ By contrast, Morrison notes, “We are being persuaded that all current problems are the fault of the sixties.”¹² The very period of cultural revolution and upheaval during which marginalized groups voiced their dissent, then, has become, in popular narrative, the ‘beginning of the end’ for the stability and success of American culture. To denigrate the period is to denigrate the revolutions that it promised: “Killing the sixties, turning that decade into an aberration... is designed to bury its central features.”¹³ The late twentieth-century cynicism towards the future that Morrison details in her lecture is tied to the cynicism of capitalism itself, for “other than products... and more resources in the form of leisure and money to consume these products... the future has nothing to recommend itself.”¹⁴ In rewriting the many possible narratives of the past, we give voice to marginal stories, but we also short-circuit nostalgia in favor of a truer vision of the past, one which, in turn, might give us a blueprint for a better future. I contend that television in general and – as a feminist revision of American history – *Mad Men* in particular, realizes some of the potential of ‘postnostalgia.’ In a narrative explicitly concerned with the sale of those consumer products that render future time unimaginable to Morrison, *Mad Men*’s glossy surfaces enchant us. They invite us not into a postmodern nostalgia, but a nostalgia *for the postmodern*, only to multiply and disrupt that affective tendency through a shifting, metonymic retelling of women’s stories that forces us to confront the sexism of the past and the persistence of sexism in the present. *Mad Men* compensates for the loss of the material world that it depicts with a rigorous critique of that world’s ideologies, changing the story of how the sixties – and women’s liberation – were made. Though serial television provides the clearest revival of faceting’s reappearance as ‘postnostalgia,’ there are traces of the same narrative technique in recent films like *The Master* (2012), *Her* (2013), *Carol* (2015), and *Blade Runner: 2049* (2017), to name a few.

I begin with a scene from the third season of *Mad Men*. In a dark room, the young actress Ann-Margret belts the title tune of *Bye Bye, Birdie* in a beige sundress against a sky-blue background, swirling for the camera and running forward for her breathless close-up. A click sounds and the screen freezes. “Well, it’s not going to be *her*,” says Ken Cosgrove to the group of spellbound men and the lone woman sitting in a strategy meeting with him. “But they want that scene. ‘Frame for frame,’ as they say.”¹⁵ In this moment, the employees of Sterling Cooper are brainstorming a made-to-order television commercial for Pepsi, which wants to lend Ann-Margret Olsson’s allure to its new diet cola beverage, Patio. The camera cuts to the tense face of Peggy Olson, at that point the firm’s only female copywriter, who attempts a studied placidity as she says, “I understand why you like this, but it’s not *for* you. I’m the one who’d be buying Patio.” Ken Cosgrove advises her not to be “such a prude,” while Harry Crane chimes in to assure her, “You’re not fat anymore.”

Mad Men ostensibly centers on Don Draper and a group of other white, male middle- and upper-middle- class ad agents at the fictional Madison Avenue firm of Sterling Cooper. Yet as its six seasons proceed forward from 1960 to 1969, *Mad Men* focuses insistently on the lives of its female characters and the rise of women in the American workforce. *Mad Men* engages television fictionally, historically, and metatextually, using the serial form to rewrite

women's history *as story* – that is, as a narrative told through the medium of TV and its advertising. Characters like Peggy exist within a show that critiques advertising and is largely written for and by women, but also in a televisual form that is itself funded partly by advertising revenue. As Peggy is a woman writing copy for an agency that also capitalizes on the insecurities of other women, *Mad Men* explores the visual façade of advertising as both a means of occluding women's history and a potential site of historical revision. *Mad Men* is quite plainly a show comprised of surfaces, and the camera pays conspicuous attention to the clothes, furniture, makeup, décor, and advertisements that make up its diegetic world. From the pilot episode's twist ending revealing Don's double life to the words Nancy Sinatra wails during the Season 5 finale's credit sequence ("You only live twice, or so it seems"), *Mad Men* maintains a studied interest in the multiplicity of appearances – what seems at first to be an insistence on peeling back veneers. And yet it is also very much a show *about* those veneers – about the possible meaning not behind, but in and of the surfaces that make up visual experience. This is particularly true of its female characters, whose aesthetic presentation is particularly lush, and who often lack the rich backstories of their male counterparts. The complex patterning of multiples across its seven seasons does not reveal the truth behind a fictive appearance, but rather proffers a growing expanse of interconnected surfaces as the source of multiple legible meanings, and as the means of redressing women's history.



Stills from "Love Among the Ruins" (3.2)

Later in the same episode, Peggy shows the clip of Ann Margret to creative director Don Draper, who, to her disbelief, has never seen the film. Having bitterly located the actress' appeal in her "ability to be 25 and act 14," Peggy asks him, "Don't you find her voice shrill?" Don, however, is almost as charmed as the rest of the men in the office by the way the actress is "throwing herself at the camera" in the clip – "It's pure," he says. "It makes your heart hurt." Fuming, Peggy retorts, "No one seems to care that it speaks to men, not the people that drink diet drinks...I don't mind fantasies. But – shouldn't it be a *female* one?" In the darkly lit frame, both actors face the screen, Don sitting in the foreground and Peggy standing behind him in an azure blouse and tan skirt that artfully mirror the colors in the *Birdie* clip. Though only the right sides of their faces are illuminated, Peggy's eyes glitter with frustration.

DON: Peggy, I know you understand how this works. Men want her, women want to *be* her.
PEGGY: Even if that's true –
DON: It is. I'm sorry if that makes you uncomfortable.
PEGGY: Well, you know if we were making a movie or a play, we'd be embarrassed to do this. It's phony.

The scene taps into the richness of its own surfaces, as Peggy's clothes reflect the colors of the "phony" ad, paused mid-action on the screen before her, which itself apes and reproduces an artifact of pop culture. What *Mad Men* demonstrates through its relentless superficiality is not so much the falsity or worthlessness of the feminized, consumerist surfaces of American capitalism as the rich tessellations of meaning that might exist between them. In this light, Pete Campbell's bitter gripe that "It's all about what it looks like, isn't it?" becomes just one more way in which his character fails to read his own surroundings; indeed, the series is precisely all about what it looks like (6.2).

At times, the surfaces of *Mad Men*'s diegetic world linger over the flattening of women's history and the troubling silence of female voices. Peggy's exasperation in the *Birdie* scene at having to (re)produce a knock-off girl for Patio to cater to men's desires is still richer because the viewer knows she has spent the previous evening twirling in front of her own mirror, trying to look coy and singing "Bye, Bye Birdie" aloud. Peggy's meaningful look at herself at the end of the mirror scene is one in a long line of suggestions that she places so much emphasis on her job at least in part because she receives less attention for her appearance than the other office girls. Though she does not verbalize this, the camera's long hold on a close-up of her reflected gaze, both fallen and determined, invites the viewer to consider Peggy's anxieties and to imagine her interiority in the space of the silent bedroom. It is the arrangement of the show's faces and surfaces over time to dramatic and melodramatic effect that I wish to examine here. *Mad Men*'s increasing array of surfaces is performed in televisual representation, but the show also deploys the rise of television itself as a moving surface within its storyworld with the potential to retell history. In *Technology and Cultural Form*, Raymond Williams lists various types of advertisements, including those that utilize "entertainment techniques, current styles of singing and dancing, which are reshaped to product recommendations and associations."¹⁶ Williams' description fits Sterling Cooper's *Bye, Bye Birdie* ad for Pepsi's Patio cola to a tee, and *Mad Men* is indeed a study of television as an emergent technology and its advertising as an exponential market. The firm's desperation

to appeal to the two largest sales demographics – young single girls and housewives – means that they ultimately allow Peggy, a secretary and “the first woman to do any writing in this office since the war,” to try her hand at copywriting (the temporal labor gap that *Mad Men* describes, from 1945 to 1960, is the same interval Betty Friedan terms the “feminine mystique”) (1.9). Paul Kinsey initially suggests the idea to Peggy offhandedly: “You know, there *are* women copy writers.... I mean, you can always tell when a woman’s writing copy, but sometimes she might just be the right man for the job” (1.2).

Peggy’s first break comes after a focus group for Bel Jolie lipstick that uses the office secretaries as guinea pigs while the male agents watch predatorily through a two-way mirror. When asked why she has declined to apply any lipstick like the other girls, Peggy tells Freddy Rumsen, “Someone took my color... I’m very particular... I don’t think anyone wants to be one of a hundred colors in a box” (1.6). Based on this idea, the office men gradually permit her to aid them in copywriting, finally becoming a junior, and then a full, copywriter herself. In Season 2, she devises an engaging campaign for Clearasil, in which a young couple gets ready to go on a date. “We could do multiple panels of print,” she says, “but it would really *translate* to TV.” The language of translation, as well as the single shots on each of the characters in this scene, contrast Peggy’s distinctively narrativizing creative process with that of Pete and Sal, who, in a series of reaction shots, look utterly confused by her idea. She says:

It’s a story. Anticipation as they get ready, fixing their hair to look perfect, their skin – it’s not even on their mind. They’re two kids who *used* to have a problem... It’s prom night, and it ends with him at the door handing her a corsage. The first moment they see each other.

Peggy’s assertion that “it’s a story” highlights the show’s interest in women as narrators, poised to become the arrangers and animators of static visual and verbal information, especially in the burgeoning field of television advertising, where they can attempt (though, as we already know, fail) to rewrite cultural scripts from within. By the final three seasons, the TV department has virtually replaced the art department; there is no longer a division between print and TV ads because the onscreen pitches are almost exclusively for TV spots, performed for the clients with Sterling Cooper’s employees bringing in a few key images or logos and then focusing on a lively rendition of the planned commercials. In the Season 6 finale, even Cutler’s articulation of the firm’s strength channels Peggy’s “It’s a story” line from Season 2: “Our company excels in television. And we’ll tell you exactly when and where to tell those stories” (6.13).

The repetition of the word “stories” links *Mad Men*’s own fictional status to the fictions that appear within it, but also connects its aesthetic to the tradition of radio and television soap operas, originally designed to mesh advertising and content. As early as 1958, elegantly expanding Oudart’s concept of suture to encompass paratextual material, Clark Agnew writes of how to “‘integrate’ commercials – that is, weave them into the fabric of the show so there is no clear dividing line between commercial and noncommercial content.”¹⁷ This manipulative blending of images, sutured together to elide division, is opposed to the show’s own assembly of jagged or arresting juxtapositions of individually dense scenes. Agnew holds that television thus builds on former modes of advertising by combining the visual (formerly print) and aural (formerly radio) aspects of consumption into one medium, emphasizing that this hybrid “is *sui generis*, a new medium of its own kind.”¹⁸ Within this balance, Agnew

maintains throughout his text the importance of emphasizing the image: “the visual must always take precedence over the verbal.”¹⁹ According to Agnew’s statistical data, viewers recalled 86% of information from television commercials immediately after viewing them and 65% after 3 days, as opposed to a drop from 72% to 20% for print ads and a decline from 71% to 10% for radio spots.²⁰ David Ogilvy, founder of Ogilvy and Mather, whose name and 1963 *Confessions of an Advertising Man* are mentioned several times in *Mad Men*, concurs with Agnew on the importance of the visual; he repeatedly refers to the viewer as “she” and the “poor dear” and stresses that she will respond only to “extreme close-ups,” for “in television you must make your *pictures* tell the story.”²¹ High consumer retention statistics such as those cited by Agnew encouraged the early and rapid growth of television commercials alongside television content, so that, as Raymond Williams contends, “it is possible to see television of this kind as a sequence in which the advertisements are integral rather than as a program interrupted by advertisements.”²² Indeed, Sterling Cooper offers to “build a Saturday morning TV show around the whole Quaker Oats family” of cereals, and Don even quips, “You could call it *The Quaker Oats Family*” (4.6). As another high-level executive puts it even more pointedly in trying to woo Don over to his firm, “You wanna sell corn, we do a show about Indians” (1.9).

The mesmerizing aesthetic effects of *Mad Men*’s surfaces are analogous to those of television commercials; they are an integral part of the show’s meaning, rather than a distraction from it. In the Patio ad session, the multiple paused screenshots of the Birdie screen, as well as Ken’s description of the ad as “frame for frame,” stress the nature of the advertisement as a *moving image* – a series of still images set in motion. One of the most common articulations of the show’s sumptuous visual style is that it is “photographic,” the sense that each of its shots is like a photograph. The angles, lighting, costumes, and composition of *Mad Men* are such that the show can be paused at almost any moment to capture a perfectly arranged still image. But it is the very movement of these images, as well as the attention the show pays to their animation, that makes for the textured interaction of its surfaces. While this “animation” recalls the nature of all pre-digital film from the perspective of the digital era, it also emphasizes the transition from static print advertising to television commercials as one of narrative and change. Extradiegetically, *Mad Men*’s unchanging opening credits sequence depicts this with a falling man’s silhouette tumbling past sky-high planes of subtly moving advertisements and into a depthless, shifting series of other ads below, finally landing in a flat, eye-level shot of a man seated on a sofa and smoking. Though the images in the ads move slightly, they appear drawn or painted, creating the eerie effect of a handmade print ad aping the movement of a filmed TV commercial. Thus the credits play up the gender dynamic of the show as well; *Mad Men*’s title highlights men, as does the faceless, illegible mystery of the falling man in black and white, but the world of shifting, brightly colored surfaces is that of women.

One of the first clear instances of the tension between stasis and movement within the show is the scene of Betty modeling for the Coca-Cola print ad (1.9). The camera pans back from her frozen, smiling face to include the five figures in the ad (Betty, a man, two children, and a dog), as well as the edges of the printed screen and fake trees representing the “park” behind them. The weird stillness of the figures as they are photographed, punctuated by slight movements and adjustments, (especially noticeable in close-ups of Betty’s face), underscores the status of the image we see as one that is uncomfortably changing and *in*

motion. In 1.13, the show reinforces this as Don pitches the Kodak Carousel slide projector, looping back in time through a variety of static images of his own family, calling the product “not a spaceship” but “a time machine.” Notably, though Don’s “story” framework and the use of his own personal photos for the pitch echo Peggy’s early efforts, the images he presents are jarringly *out of order*; they neither progress forward nor backward in time, placing a recent family Christmas snapshot beside a wedding photo. In this, Don enacts Christian Metz’s concept of the “bracket syntagma,” or “brief scenes given as typical examples of a certain order of reality but without temporal sequence, often organized around a concept.”²³ In this achronic placement, Don plays up the affective dimensions of arrangement, which functions, through memory, by contiguity. The show ‘lays bare the device’ of advertising here, displaying how nostalgia works on us (several men in the audience tear up at the presentation). But the frozen images, animated by the carousel, also highlight the rich, collocated surfaces on the larger scale of *Mad Men*, a critical invitation to ‘postnostalgia.’ It is this hint of movement, narrative, and change which is the *punctum* in the crisp visual frieze of the first season, and it is through moving image culture and its ‘female’ narratives that the show speeds up to meet social change over the following five seasons.

Far from a mere sensual indulgence, television in *Mad Men* evidences a concern with reading surface for content; even the word “tube,” with its connotation of dimension, falls out of use as the series continues, and by Season 5, Megan and Don’s double-screened TV (one screen in the living room and one in the bedroom) is built into a console, flush with the apartment wall, eliding its depth and mimicking the flat-screen technologies of the century to come/in which the show was produced. The rows of square print boards Peggy makes for her early “narrative” commercials yield to more sophisticated storyboards with rounded corners to suggest the visual frame of the TV. In the last episode to date, Peggy sits in Ted’s office, “where everything is,” and as she swivels in the chair, the camera holds on her hair and the chair’s back, shaped like a TV screen with rounded corners (6.13). Beyond its inclusion of TV clips in times of national tragedy or political upheaval, *Mad Men* posits TV as an important community-building technology. In Season 2, when Jackie O. gives her Valentine’s Day 1962 tour of the White House, the viewer also receives a tour of several of the characters’ homes, as they are all glued to the same program that evening. The gradual close-up and pullback shots on the various TV screens in a hotel room and several homes allow for a continuous movement of the viewer through these spaces, even as Jackie’s narrative continues uninterrupted (2.1). As the familiar glow of the TV lights up the Drapers’ hotel room, a point-of-view shot displays the television screen framed by a view of the actual set device, reminding us that we are watching TV on TV, but also placing us in the imaginary space of a first-hand engagement with the program. Most of all, the sequence illustrates the place, voice, and stake that women have in television as a unique communal public space made available to them – Betty tells Don to “leave that,” and an authoritative tone enters her voice as she then decides what to order for dinner on the phone. Kitty Romano watches at home while eating pie (her closeted husband Sal is mesmerized, too), and Joan Holloway disengages from necking her fiancé to gaze at what is, for both the characters and the viewer of the show, the transformation of the White House into a domestic space held together by a woman, in which the face of the US government is, as Jackie says, “presented to the world.”

Women are both sheltered and privileged in their relation to television, for they hold the consumer power, but are often addressed – in both TV content and advertising – by condescending male writers. Don tells Peggy at one point that her Aqua Net commercial has “too much story – every time I hear ‘and then’ it’s another chance for the ladies at home to misunderstand” (3.10). The evidence that it was the “ladies at home” who were not only watching daytime television but doing most of the shopping yokes advertising and content in a fundamental way. While the figure of the “TV-addict housewife” who was incapable of concentrating on her chores didactically haunted daytime shows themselves, Spigel argues that ultimately both the “lady of leisure” and the “domestic servant” in the home provided “a fantasy solution to the conflict between work and television” through their power as consumers.²⁴ The show plays with this in Season 3, when Betty herself is lured into Don’s “European” campaign for Heineken, becoming the butt of the firm’s dinner party joke in her own home. By Season 5, however, Megan sarcastically excuses the amount of time she spends laying on the couch watching TV by smirking to Don, “I’m following your advice – being bathed in commercials” (5.3).

The feminization of the shift to narrative copywriting in the show uses the presence of women in the office to reclaim televisual fictions and advertising as spaces of female agency in American history. Instead of the static single image of print culture, the images in a television commercial are aided by their sequencing and narrative. In *Mighty Minutes*, Jim Hall credits the historical shift in advertising style as being largely due to the entry of women like Shirley Polykoff, “one of the first women to break into the creative ranks of advertising,” because “their influence in the advertising profession changed the content of commercials...the values and fantasies of women were captured for the first time with fidelity.”²⁵ Hall delineates a movement towards commercials he terms “feminist vignettes” with embedded “plots,” describing how Polykoff strove to create a “person-to-person bond” in her ads by using real memories from her own life.²⁶ Like the dumbfounded Pete and Sal during Peggy’s Clearasil pitch, men in the corporate realm were at first skeptical of and confused by Polykoff’s distinctive style, as in her now-famous campaign for Clairol: “broadcasters and magazine editors were leery of the sexual innuendo they perceived in the line ‘Does she or doesn’t she?’ Surveys showed this to be a male bias only, and so the ads were run.”²⁷ Peggy’s other successful campaigns, including Popsicles – “Take it, Break it, Share it, Love it,” inspired by a memory of her mother, and that for the “Relaxicizer” – a weight-loss product with the added benefit of sexual stimulation, require that she create a coded narrative legible to women, not because it is simplified by men who think women are stupid, but because it taps into modes of reading that the show’s male characters do not anticipate.

Later in the series, it becomes clear that Peggy naively believes in copywriting as a means of self-expression. When she first meets Abe and tells him she’s a writer, he and Joyce wonder why she’s “not working on anything else,” but Peggy responds, “I’m a copywriter... That *is* writing!” (4.4). In drawing on personal experience for her copy, Peggy transforms her life into a kind of art, albeit a superficial one. The day after she first makes love to Abe, she dreamily presents a campaign for Playtex to Stan and Joey in which the latex gloves “protect a woman’s hands so they’re soft enough to touch *all* the things she wants to touch... The exciting things she wants to *feel* with her fingertips – his lips, the tuft of hair on his chest, the small of his back...” (4.11). Stan and Joey just stare at her, openmouthed. Abe will later villainize her for her work and dump her (“Your activities are offensive to my every waking

moment... You'll always be the enemy"), but it is this knack for the link between experience and representation that makes Peggy's work continuously valuable to the men around her (6.9). Peggy leaves Sterling Cooper to become Cutler, Gleason, & Chaough's Copy Chief at \$19,000 a year before Season 5 ends. As Ted Chaough woos her, he alludes to the "transparent eyeball" of Emerson's "Nature" in praising the originality of her work:

I am tired of people who treat this like math. I looked at your book, and I saw someone who was writing like every product was for them. No clichés, no homilies, no formula.... What do you wanna get paid? (5.11)

On the one hand, Chaough's assertions (perhaps an echo of Peggy's musings earlier in the season: "Why must pantyhose be transparent?") flatten Emerson's lofty ideals, reducing them to a convenient metaphor for flattery (5.4). And yet, the show seems to suggest, the space between the consumptive visual delights of Emerson's Nature and the addictive facades of television are not as far apart as they might seem. Ted praises Peggy's aesthetics as conveying the same invigorating sense of self through the engagement with pure surface, perfectly arranged. When the firms merge in Season 6, Don and Ted specifically ask her to write the press release: "We don't have a name yet, but make it sound like the agency you want to work for" (6.6).

Jennifer Hayward acknowledges the importance of feminist writings that privilege "decentered narratives and refusal of closure as reflecting essential differences between male and female ways of knowing and experience of temporality," warning, however, that it is "equally crucial to avoid easy and essentializing relations between gender and narrative form."²⁸ Like so many aspects of the show, *Mad Men's* interest in gendered copywriting is a double-edged sword, as it both reproduces the essentialism that men and women think in fundamentally different ways, but also represents the way in which this very belief opens up a space for women in the professional world of advertising. In many instances, this opportunity involves perpetrating the same consumerist myths that men have always sold in order to achieve success. Though some of the female characters evolve in their treatment of other women, one of the show's most intriguing qualities is its sustained interest in the complexity and fallibility of its many powerful female characters. Consider Amanda D. Lotz's claim in *Redesigning Women* that the complex and multifaceted "new woman" who emerged in TV beginning with Mary Tyler Moore could "embody a curious mix of success and vulnerability" and was "imperfection idealized."²⁹ Once again, *Mad Men* addresses this sideways, as it considers the way such figures were originally developed for television, but it is also in the business of developing such characters: Peggy, Megan, Faye, Joan, Carla, Midge, Rachel, Joyce, Sheila, Sylvia, Dawn, Betty and Sally, among others.

It is worth pausing to note that *Mad Men* seems to maintain an almost studied disinterest in its characters of color, whitewashing the history of the women's movement in the workplace. To be sure, *Mad Men* depicts an America that was, at the time, almost ninety percent white, not to mention a rarefied work environment and social world in which Don's assiduous concealment of his working-class origins is an ongoing plot point. In many ways, its effectiveness as social critique depends upon its whitewashing similitude: its lovely but suffocating interiors, its beautiful but restrictive fashions, and its soothing but cloying images of Americana. Nonetheless, in pushing black characters off-screen, particularly in the first five seasons, the show reproduces the same erasure of women of color that its patriarchs do of

women more widely. While *Mad Men* unflinchingly shows us the casual racism of its white characters (the infamous scene of Roger Sterling belting “My Old Kentucky Home” in full blackface at a party comes to mind), it rarely gives us insight into their characters through meaningful interiority. Rather, it brings them onscreen, only to literalize their marginalization soon after by removing them from the most dynamic storylines of the show. *Mad Men* does this so frequently and so persistently that it might almost be read as an aesthetic and narrative choice. Even as it engages and builds beyond the binary of gender, *Mad Men* seems aware of its contrasting, tepid flirtation with the issue of race.

The show opens, after all, with Don’s conversation with a black server, whom he tries to mine for perspective on an ad he is writing. Instead, the racist restaurant manager comes over to ask, “Is Sam here bothering you? He can be a little *chatty*,” after which the interaction necessarily peters out (1.1). The show mocks Paul Kinsey’s white savior complex when he fearfully follows his black girlfriend, Sheila White, down south to prove his liberal credentials by participating in a protest in Season 2. Lane Pryce carries on his affair with a black Playboy bunny partly out of genuine affection, but partly to infuriate his ex-wife and his father. Through the figure of Pete Campbell, *Mad Men* demonstrates capitalism’s mercenary consideration of the Civil Rights Movement – if it can sell more televisions, improve brand awareness, or avoid an investigation by the New York City Commission on Human Rights, then Sterling Cooper is interested in race. It is this investigation that leads SCDP to finally hire Dawn Chambers, a black secretary whose name offers a direct foil to Don Draper’s own. Bearing witness to the aggressions Dawn faces in the workplace draws important distinctions between her experience and that of the white women in the office, gesturing towards an intersectionality that the show nevertheless leaves unfinished. When Peggy hires Shirley, another African-American woman, as her secretary, we get a rare glimpse of the two women outside the office, speaking to one another without their white colleagues around. In this conversation, Dawn describes to Shirley the exhausting emotional tenor of the job, rehearsing the stories of endless drinking, depressed men, and the many women who routinely cry in the bathroom. This last is an emotional outlet Dawn seems to find understandable, but which is totally inaccessible from her own subject position (6.4).

Though the show’s creator and producer is a man (Matt Weiner), three-quarters of the show’s full-time writers have been women, a fact that writer Lisa Albert notes changes the tone of the creative environment: “If you’re the only woman you feel special; if you’re one of two women you feel competitive and if you’re one of three or more women you feel like a writer (who happens to be a woman).”³⁰ Albert’s acknowledgement of competitiveness, even in the contemporary workplace, accesses the dynamic metatextuality of the show, whereby *Mad Men* depicts feminist issues in history as a means of suggesting their continued relevance. In a hideous example of misogyny that results in friction between two women, Joan tries to reprimand the young freelancer Joey for his slovenliness, to which he replies, “What do you do around here besides walking around like you’re trying to get raped?” (4.8). Joan tells Peggy about the incident only later, when Joey draws a pornographic cartoon of her “on her knees” and tapes it to her office door. Outraged and acting with the best of intentions, Peggy fires him, but Joan is cold as she tells Peggy, “No matter how powerful we get around here, they can still just draw a cartoon. So all you’ve done is prove to them that I’m another meaningless secretary and you’re another humorless bitch.” In the end, as Mimi White observes in “Mad Women,” Joan “has to pay a price for her *active* sexuality, just as Peggy, it

seems, pays a price for her *passive* sexuality.”³¹ Peggy’s own frustrated, intermittent connection to her sexuality may even be what allows her to supersede Joan’s achievements in the workplace. Indeed, Kim Akass and Janet McCabe corroborate this reading, claiming that “Peggy tries to keep her distance from these circuits of looking and (erotic) desire, wanting to behave differently and change the script.”³² She also achieves this by keeping her distance from other women in the office.

For the first few seasons, the ranking women in *Mad Men* seem to exert a conscientious effort to avoid intimacy with one another and with the lowly secretaries, as if, as Akass and McCabe claim, only “men bond while women remain isolated – forced to go it alone.”³³ From Joan prizing her role of head secretary by wearing the master key prominently around her neck to Peggy’s routine snubbing of secretaries during Season 2, the few successful women in *Mad Men* wield their limited authority over other female characters in order to reinforce the distance they have climbed from the bottom. In Season 3, Dr. Faye Miller, a representative from the Motivational Research Group, elevates herself so carefully above the women in her own focus group and “their” obsession with marriage that she urges Don to run a highly retrograde wedding fantasy campaign, which she promises will make money, but which even he refuses: “Hello, 1925. I’m not gonna do that.” (4.4). These facets of the show become more complex in Season 5, as the linear progress of women at the firm lapses. Stan begins to view being female as a career advantage at SCDP, telling Peggy, “Well, it’s not fair that just because you’re a boob-carrying consumer, your opinion means more” (5.7). Roger tells Peggy to “hire someone with a penis,” and in the interview, Peggy has to remind Michael Ginsberg to stop asking about Don: “No, I’m interviewing you. I’m a copywriter. I’m the person you need to impress right now. You thought I was a secretary” (5.3). Joan’s attempt to “change the script” reaches its apex in Season 5, when, now a single mother in the midst of an ugly divorce, she negotiates a 5% partnership in the firm in exchange for sleeping with a powerful client who picks her out during a visit to the office, a deal the male partners vote on while she is not even in the room (5.10). Tellingly, Ginsberg’s winning catchphrase for the resultant Jaguar campaign is “At last. Something beautiful you can truly own” (5.11). Don later fires Jaguar due to a personality conflict, and Joan tells him coldly, “Honestly, Don, if I could deal with him, you could deal with him.... I went through all of that for nothing?... We’re all rooting for you from the sidelines, hoping that you’ll decide whatever you think is right for all of our lives” (6.7). Though Don was not present for the vote either and opposed the idea, he still fails to comprehend the gravity of Joan’s decision.

In step with their rising numbers and perhaps to combat a growing pushback from their male colleagues, a pattern of cooperations and sympathies begins to emerge among the office women in Season 4. When Faye feeds Don information for a pitch and is both betrayed and fired soon after, Peggy mourns her departure: “I love working with you.... You do your job so well, and I respect you, and you don’t have to play any games. I didn’t know that was possible” (4.12). In the season finale, Don reveals his sudden proposal to Megan, his 25 year-old secretary, with whom he has recently cheated on Faye and whom he brings along on a vacation to Los Angeles as a nanny before suddenly “falling in love” and impulsively proposing to her (4.13). “She’s very – beautiful,” Peggy manages, clearly bemused. Don looks at her intently and says, “She reminds me of you. She’s got the same spark. I know she admires you just as much as I do.” This comparison reads as a painful incongruity; as we know her in Season 4, Megan’s only ‘spark’ is her youthful giggle, and she appears to exhibit

a nauseatingly blind admiration of Don's every rash act that is a far cry from the perspicacity Peggy has offered on so many occasions over the course of their four-year friendship. "Whatever could be on your mind?" asks Joan sarcastically, handing Peggy a cigarette as she charges into Joan's office. The two women look older, more sophisticated, and somewhat hardened in comparison to their first-season selves, and their costuming here – Joan in a black sheath and Peggy in a slate gray dress – plays down their bodies and focuses on them as professionals as they adjudicate the men in the office:

- JOAN: Happens all the time. They're all just between marriages, you know that. Probably make her a copywriter. He's not going to want to be married to his secretary.
- PEGGY: Really? Is that what he meant? "She admires you?" Jesus... You know, I just saved this company. I signed the first new business since Lucky Strike left. But it's not as important as getting married.
- JOAN: Well, I was just made Director of Agency Operations. A title, no money of course. And if they poured champagne, it must've been while I was pushing the mail cart.
- PEGGY: A pretty face comes along and everything goes out the window.

In this moment, despite differences in age and personality, Joan and Peggy come together in solidarity. "Well, I learned a long time ago to not get all my satisfaction from this job," Joan rejoins. "That's bullshit," replies Peggy, knowing that for both of them, success at Sterling Cooper has become a kind of cathexis for the failures of their personal lives. The camera cuts to smoke flowing from Joan's nose and mouth as she bursts into laughter, and the scene closes with a long shot of the two women laughing together. The intensity of Joan and Peggy's relationship, oscillating between competition and support, continues through the following seasons. Trying to climb out of her nominal partner position and into real power in Season 6, Joan tricks Pete out of a client meeting in Season 6, Peggy scolds her, and Joan fights back (6.10). "Are you trying to intimidate me?" Peggy says. "No," replies Joan, "that's always impossible, because that would require respect for me or what I do."

Most of the time, efforts at progress are slow, as when Peggy, having been made a copywriter, reads about "equal pay for equal work" in the newspaper, requests a raise, and is turned down because "it's a bad time" (3.5). In Season 4, too, Don appropriates Peggy's narrative of the GloCoat ad and goes on to take full credit for the award the commercial receives. The ad depicts a young cowboy imprisoned behind what we eventually realize are the bars of an overturned chair, shouting "Let me outta here!" as his mother waxes the kitchen floor (4.8). It is a domestic nightmare, the ad promises, from which GloCoat can free its customers – "Footprints on a wet floor are no longer a hanging offense!" Though it is a positive development in the show that Peggy's narrative style is catching on, there is a difference between Don borrowing narrative as a form (as he arguably attempts to do with the Kodak carousel ad) and stealing Peggy's copy altogether, twisting it around, and calling the resulting commercial, which is all about feminized space, his own. "It was basically the whole commercial," Peggy complains, "which you changed *just* enough so that it was yours... And you *never* say thank you" (4.7). "That's what the money's for!" retorts Don. "You're young, you will get your recognition." Though the viewer sympathizes with Peggy's struggle, the tone of this encounter is somewhat complicated by the fact that Don has a point – Peggy

is not the only young writer at the firm whose ideas have been scooped. Indeed, when a drunk Don comes up with “The cure for the common breakfast” as the tagline for Life Cereal, only Peggy notices that he’s taken it from the untalented Danny, and it is she who forces Don to offer him a job because of it (4.6). Nevertheless, it is Peggy’s birthday, she has just ended her relationship in order to stay late at work with Don, and the viewer feels the poignancy of her prioritizing her career above all else. The narrative of *Mad Men*, then, is not only one of the new culture of advertising that women have helped to create, but also, in Akass and McCabe’s words, “how women like Peggy struggle for identity *in* and *through* those representations.”³⁴ The scene ends with her sobbing in the ladies’ room like all the sensitive secretaries of whom she has been so disdainful in the past.

Mimi White’s examination of the hysterical presence of “mad women” in the series reveals a tacit gap in expectations about male and female characters: “In what is almost a running joke, sobbing women regularly appear in the ladies’ room.... These women never speak, they only bawl... their weepy presence is a sufficient sign of female fury, rage and defeat.”³⁵ Such tears, presented as unexplained affective displays for the viewer, are hidden completely from the space of the office by being contained to the bathroom. They are the only “madness” allowed for women in this world, for while “the ‘Mad Men’ appellation... directly affiliates the advantages of gender, profession and class status with the right to be angry, crazy, zany, creative, manipulative, and excessive... women are denied claims to this same territory, even as they are fully implicated – if not trapped – within it.”³⁶ The persistence of nonverbal emoting through acts such as weeping also relates closely to those psychically silent close-up shots of so many of *Mad Men*’s women, which are not only signatures of melodramatic tone, but a means of elliptically narrating that which seemingly cannot be uttered. When Peggy gives birth to Pete Campbell’s illegitimate child at the end of Season 1, the show only addresses it through close-ups of her melancholy face accompanied by music, as if to invite the viewer to narrate the silent spaces of her unrepresentable interiority. Unlike Don, the only character whose interiority is fleshed out by flashbacks (though they are arguably the least convincing part of the show), Peggy *is* her face. She is also her weight, her hair, and her clothing, and these surfaces are not only the means by which other characters read her, but also the only available means for the viewer to do so as well. White notes that while we receive the moving visual information of the child’s birth, “Peggy herself never speaks about these events,” returning so immediately and so fully to a concern with her career that “one is tempted to take her silence as a proto-feminist refusal to speak.”³⁷ In this way, the musical, melodramatic reaction and hold shots of the show are, contrary to their trivialization by critics, a vital part of *Mad Men*’s diegesis. They serve as a space of audience engagement, through which women’s “history” is “told” as viewers “watch their stories,” read the characters’ emotions, and project their own readings onto the text. This kind of self-reflexivity in *Mad Men* collapses what Andrea Press has termed the “prefeminist, feminist, and postfeminist” categories of televisual history.³⁸ In using the serial form to examine and re-experience historical time, *Mad Men* explores the potential of postmodern formal invention *as* women’s narrative, which Lyn C. Spangler claims as key to women’s postfeminist television: its “celebration of fragmentation, surface texture, and the [examination of the] breaking down of old boundaries.”³⁹ This description not only epitomizes *Mad Men*, but also challenges simplifying critiques of the show, such as those of its obsession with surface.

In his review of Season 4 for *The New York Times Book Review*, Daniel Mendelsohn criticizes *Mad Men*'s "self-indulgent" and surface-heavy play with nostalgia for the sixties.⁴⁰ Mendelsohn is baffled that, in his view, the series' "appeal goes far beyond what dramatic satisfactions it might afford," concluding that this "appeal seems to have a lot to do with the show's much-discussed visual style – the crisp midcentury coolness of dress and décor." While there are many "standouts" in contemporary TV, such as *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, with their "darkly glinting, almost Aeschylean moral textures... *Mad Men* shares virtually no significant qualities [with them] except its design." It is, for Mendelsohn, an overrated *trompe l'oeil* of midcentury costumes and narrative "overkill":

Worst of all – in a drama with aspirations to treating social and historical 'issues' – the show is melodramatic rather than dramatic. By this I mean that it proceeds, for the most part, like a soap opera, serially (and often unbelievably)... the actual stuff of *Mad Men*'s action is, essentially, the stuff of soap opera: abortions, secret pregnancies, extramarital affairs, office romances, and of course dire family secrets; what is supposed to give it its higher cultural resonance is the historical element.

This "glib" stylization of history troubles Mendelsohn because it is "simultaneously contemptuous and pandering." His conclusion is that Matt Weiner has produced a show about the complicated nostalgia a man who was a child in the 1960s has for the adult world of that era: "In its glossy, semaphoric style, its tendency to invoke rather than unravel this or that issue, the way it uses a certain visual allure to blind rather than to enlighten, *Mad Men* is much like a successful advertisement itself." The link between gloss and melodrama, for Mendelsohn, is implicitly superficiality; it is the delicious visual excess of the show that permits it to get away with exploiting what he sees as a contentless genre. Abortion, pregnancy, and the social struggles of women are relegated to 'the stuff of soap opera,' rather than the vital 'social and historical issues' they actually are.

Linda Williams has argued for the preponderance and legitimacy of melodrama in American cinema, despite attempts to institute a "rigid polarity between, on the one hand, bourgeois, classical realist (often masculine) 'norms' and, on the other hand, anti-realist, melodramatic (often feminine) 'excesses.'"⁴¹ The give-and-take of pathos and action in melodrama, Williams argues, typically involves such motifs as "the patriarchal double standard that permits men to sow wild oats and then punishes women for the consequences," and she paraphrases Christine Glehill's argument that "melodrama's search for something lost, inadmissible and repressed, ties it to the past."⁴² *Mad Men*'s constant tonal tension, then, which shifts subtly between retro and retrograde, is not so much a form of "pandering" to nostalgia, as Mendelsohn would have it, as it is a means of toying with that ideal "home" or "locus of virtue" upon which the melodramatic mode depends.⁴³ By presenting viewers with sumptuous surface representations of a period in American history routinely deployed for nostalgic purposes and then working to rewrite it, *Mad Men* questions the validity, even the existence, of a "locus of virtue" in our shared history and presents, among those very surfaces, the possibility of new meaning-making as well.

Mad Men's melodramatic tone is decidedly milder than the tradition of "stories" from which it derives, but it does celebrate its own place in a tradition of women's narrativity in television, as exhibited by both the writing and the reading of television by female characters within the show. In the second season, Harry gets in trouble for airing a TV spot that

describes a Russian spy as an “agitator” and is directly followed by a Maytag spot for a washing machine called “the amazing agitator” (2.8). He asks Joan, the head secretary, to step in and read scripts for him to avoid such mistakes in the future. Joan is uniquely equipped for the job. In the first place, she has insider knowledge of “women’s shows” and the women (her coworkers) who watch them. Furthermore, reading for conflicts between advertising and content requires ‘covering’ for clients with the same level of “discretion” that she uses to navigate the male workplace every day. In a boardroom meeting later in the episode, Harry and the client can only relate tidbits about women “watching their stories,” because to them the shows are “all the same,” but Joan understands the rise and fall of the soaps’ narratives over entire seasons and the opportunities that inhere in the upcoming “summer specials,” which include special promotions and particular kinds of cliffhangers to draw viewers in. At home with her fiancé Greg Harris, a doctor, Joan asks him with a smile whether the implausible plot twists of *As the World Turns* (including characters who experience comas and memory loss) are realistic. Though she seems already to know that they are, Joan clearly relishes the fanciful, soap-style narratives that Haywood claims are largely the purview of female audiences and writers. “You should be watching that stuff, not reading it,” says Greg, “with a box of bon-bons in your lap to soothe your cravings.” What Greg means is the literal reading of scripts for work, since he clearly expects that after they get married she will have the privilege of leaving her job. Yet his comment is also legible as a means of discouraging “reading,” or female critical engagement with the televisual text, instead suggesting that Joanie should relax and consume her show vacantly, as he expects her to consume the products advertised between its segments. At the end of the scene, Joan still hops up, ever the good wife, to get Greg a glass of water, but her presence in the boardroom as she commands the attention of the client is unforgettable. While on the one hand, Joan has seemingly bought into the very melodramatic form of the soaps she is reading, she nevertheless uses that knowledge and interest toward the firm’s gain, and the “simpleminded” face of her performance in the meeting makes her control of the situation more palatable to the men around her.

Mendelsohn is right that *Mad Men*’s own storyline, while not as ridiculous as Joanie’s description of *As the World Turns*, is very much a melodrama, with its cycling subplots, continuing secrets and “reveals,” and its studied emphasis on pathos carried out in long serial form. The almost parodically suspenseful music that plays during the “previously on *Mad Men*” recaps at the start of each episode helps to emphasize this melodramatic feature: a montage of highly emotive, psychically charged reaction shots accompanied by only semi-relevant voice-overs for plot recapitulation.⁴⁴ However, Weiner plays with this by revealing almost no useful information in the analeptic “previously on *Mad Men*” and proleptic “next time on *Mad Men*” sequences; it is entirely up to the viewer to keep track of the plot, as characters never perform a soap-style “recap” of information useful to the viewer, such as names, ages, or past events. As Sandberg writes, *Mad Men* “departs from the ‘moral legibility’ project typical of melodrama by showing more interest in what its characters know (and when), whether than knowledge makes a difference for that future, and ultimately whether it is better to know or not to know – all questions that are typical of trauma narrative.”⁴⁵ In this sense, *Mad Men* renders melodrama as much a question of feminist epistemology as ethics.

Don’s erstwhile secretary (then wife) Megan proves a particularly rich source of melodramatic material. While in Season 4, Megan appears hapless, even dimwitted, she

emerges over Seasons 5 and 6 as one of the most textured characters the show has created. It is her serialized portrayal in flat, accumulating images that allow us to read her differently over the 30 or so episodes in which she has appeared, a development which truly only “world enough and time” could allow. Season 5 intensely develops her character, whose inscrutable and willing vacillations between working girl, maternal figure, sex object, aspiring actress, and goofball disrupt the narrative of pure feminist progress set by Peggy. As Emily Nussbaum writes, although “the whole office is still shaken by her presence, which triggers lust, disdain, envy, amusement, and fear, in individualized combinations... Megan is no dope; she’s at once absurd and genuinely powerful, with an interesting case to make for her philosophy.”⁴⁶ In one episode, Megan teaches Sally to cry artificially like an actress, but in the finale, she’s the one genuinely crying alone in a bathroom (5.9, 5.13). Megan’s character addresses sexual politics by consistently morphing and manipulating her self-presentation at a superficial level, which is swiftly effective with a man like Don. In the first episode, we see her on all fours, cleaning the house in her underwear and telling Don “how he likes it,” but not long after, feeling particularly degraded by his control issues, she boldly and sarcastically answers him with a “Yes, master” in a public restaurant (5.1, 5.4). Like Peggy, Megan’s narrative TV commercial for Heinz Beans is inspired by her own mother:

Last night when I was feeding the kids spaghetti, I realized that my mother had made it for me, and her mother had made it for her. And I got this picture in my head of her becoming me, like with one of those movie dissolves... you could take it all the way back to cave men... the Middle Ages, the Renaissance... the future, like a colony on the moon and you see earth out the window. (5.7)

Don, amazed, suggests the tagline, “Kids want beans, and they have forever.” Megan bashfully replies, “Oh. I had something like, ‘Heinz Beans. Some things never change.’” “Jesus,” says Don, mouth agape. “I think that’s better.” Unlike Peggy, however, Megan does not fight Don’s tendency to appropriate her ideas. Instead, actress that she is, Megan actively engages Don in a fantasy reenactment of the pitch at dinner with the clients, only in this performance, most of the genius is Don’s, and he takes center stage. When Peggy congratulates Megan on signing Heinz, she replies, “Oh, I don’t want to take all the credit.” Peggy is incredulous: “I know what you did, and it’s a big deal. And when it happened to me they acted like it happens all the time. It doesn’t. I tried to crack that nut. If anything, I should be jealous. But I look at you and I feel like, I don’t know, I’m getting to experience my first day again. It’s a good day for me.” As she supports Megan in her success and expresses regret at her departure to pursue acting, Peggy repeats the process of mourning Faye upon *her* departure in Season 4, when Faye sacrifices herself for Don only to find out that he is leaving her for the bubbly young Megan. It is in fact Megan’s almost illegible superficiality that makes her such a compelling figure in *Mad Men*: her myriad surface poses, like interlocking affective masks, force viewers to consider the complexity of potential modes of resistance to dominant ideology. As Nussbaum argues, “In Weiner’s world, this is how progress is made: one sleek, phony-baloney stage act at a time.” Indeed, Megan’s motility stands in for the many serialized and feminized surfaces of the show.

In the Season 5 finale, Megan stars in the very “transparent pantyhose” ad for Topaz that Peggy brainstormed earlier in the season, and in this role, she seems to find an imperfect compromise between the artistic acting career she yearns for and the successful job in

advertising she was so desperate to leave behind. Don helps her get the audition because, as he says, “I don’t want to see her end up like Betty, or her mother” (5.8). The season ends as he walks off the flimsy set of her commercial and into a bar, where he starts chatting up another woman as the song “You Only Live Twice” plays. Don’s discomfort with Megan’s acting career only worsens when she secures a small but regular part as a maid on *To Have and to Hold*, a daily soap opera on a network channel. She is ecstatic when her character pushes someone down a flight of stairs, since it means her part is almost certainly poised to expand. “So you’ll still love me if I’m a lying, cheating whore?” she grins at Don (6.2). When her character blossoms into a pair of twins (good and evil, naturally), her pathetic struggle to be duplicitous, both onscreen and off, serves as a poignant rejoinder to Don’s easy betrayals: “I feel like an idiot because they keep telling me they can’t tell the twins apart. I think I’m playing them very differently,” she says (6.9). “Tomorrow’s another day,” responds Don, with cool, forgetting nonchalance.

Megan’s fame peaks when a set of teenage girls asks her for her autograph in an elevator, screeching, “We love your show!” (6.6). Don’s son Bobby buttresses this flattering equation of the show with Megan, turning from the TV to remind her when she’s nervous about getting a theatre audition, “But you’re on TV every day. Don’t they know that?” (6.8). Megan’s delight fades as she feels Don become distant, however, and without telling him, she complains to her mother that he is “so far away that when we’re alone I feel like I’m making conversation” (6.6). In response, her mother glibly tells her, “Darling, you have confounded everyone’s expectations, and it is very hard to stand next to someone giving an autograph” (6.6). When we see Don confront the issue, it is not with Megan herself, but with her image. In a moment of pure performative melodrama, Don watches Megan within the frame of the TV set as she looks at the camera and says, in a heavy French accent, “I suppose I’m supposed to believe that you didn’t know that she wasn’t me when you took her to the boathouse and you had your way? I’m talking to you! Don’t you dare ignore me!” (6.12). Don flips the channel to a rerun in black and white, as if to use the TV as a time machine akin to the slide carousel. The meta-melodrama of Megan’s soap celebrates the link between the fictive status of the show and the tradition of the soap opera within it, foregrounding the melodramatic effects the series has carefully built up through its surfaces. When Megan eventually quits her spot on *To Have and to Hold* to follow Don to California in the season finale, he gives the position to Ted Chaough, completely ignoring his own wife’s career. “Something came up,” he tells her (6.13). “I’m sorry, but we can’t go to California right now.” Fuming, she retorts, “No, Don, that’s not possible, because I already told Mel... The train is leaving the station!” The last we see of Don in Season 6 is Megan leaving him.

The opening credits, which hint at the show’s own serial arrangement of surfaces, also exhibit a kind of cool, ironized “nick-of-time” logic, ending with the falling man sitting safely on a couch. The rescue of the faceless, indecipherable character from the shifting planes of ads hints at the rich level of drama that the show does not literalize, but presents instead as the ambiguous interiority of its characters. In echoing the widely circulated image of the ‘falling man,’ who jumped from the World Trade Center during the September 11 attacks, Mark Sandberg notes that in the opening credits, *Mad Men* almost painfully “investigat[es] its characters’ encounter with a historical future known to us but not to them.”⁴⁷ Unlike almost all other “high quality” dramas of the era (*The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Homeland*, to name a few), *Mad Men*’s brand of drama is melodrama, and recognizably so – a feminized,

emotional drama that takes place in the interior spaces of the home, the office, and the restaurant, rather than the open-air, high-octane sequences of adventure and violence so typical of other, more “masculinized” high-quality serials. This melodramatic interiority is achieved through a mode similar to the soap, in which, as Hayward argues, freeze shots offer close-ups that are “intense but neutral: projecting strong, concentrated, impenetrable emotion.”⁴⁸ Like the multitude of other surfaces in the show, these close-ups make up a portion of the narrative tension in *Mad Men*. In presenting reaction shots fraught with ambiguous interiority, *Mad Men* uses an established technique that “fosters doubt and suspense” and makes its viewers active “readers” by asking them to partake in the establishment of a particular character’s emotional state.⁴⁹ Peggy’s long look in the mirror in 3.2 is one example of this, but there are countless others, including when Joan congratulates her husband on joining the army and when she ends her long-term affair with Roger (3.11, 4.11). In both scenes, we see Joan in an over-the-shoulder shot as she presents a face of fortitude to the man with whom she is speaking, but as she embraces him and her face leaves his sight, sentimental music starts up and the camera holds on her distraught face, whose highly emotive expression is a separate mask altogether than the look of calm she allows the men to see.

In Jameson’s terminology of the simulacrum, Tom Scocca lambasts *Mad Men*’s Season 5 run in a review, lamenting that the show’s style has come to stand in for the historical period it represents: “In the collision between the actual and the simulacrum, the simulacrum is winning.”⁵⁰ *Mad Men*’s “historical” references are all the worse for how “universally, completely meaningless” they are, since the show’s main character is, for him, a mere amalgamation of surfaces: “Don Draper – this conceptual handsome man, moving suavely through the culture – is *generic*. He is a collection of received ideas about America in the mid-20th century... and about New York City, and clothing, and the advertising industry, and sex.” By his own admission, Scocca has come to this conclusion “without ever watching a single episode of *Mad Men*.” Still, his assertion once again that the problem of *Mad Men* lies in its superficiality echoes the claims of Mendehlson. By contrast, for Mimi White, *Mad Men* “produces an astute, dense visual and narrative palimpsest offering multiple historical and intertextual trajectories into and out of the show.”⁵¹ Like Scocca, White does take issue with she sees as *Mad Men*’s tendency to represent its fiction as history, as evidenced by the inclusion in the Season 2 DVD package of a documentary by Cicely Gilkey in entitled *Birth of an Independent Woman*, produced by Lionsgate, *Mad Men*’s production house.⁵² When images from the show itself “are seamlessly inserted” into documentary footage “as if they had the same status,” they “come to serve as examples of the historical issues,” White argues.⁵³ For Mary Celeste Kearney, on the other hand, Gilkey’s “success as a DVD content producer says much about the potential for women’s agency in the television industry today,” and there is also “the prospect that feminist content will reach... thousands, if not millions, more viewers than if it had been distributed via the traditional channels of feminist cinema.”⁵⁴ This is particularly true because the show’s main source of revenue is actually its DVD sales, though AMC continues to pursue further advertising.⁵⁵

As the editors of the volume *Mad Men, Mad World* write in their introduction, “Like the best historical fiction, the show adopts resonant material from the past to speak audibly to the present.”⁵⁶ That Scocca’s “received ideas” and surfaces might interact, especially through the female characters he ignores, to create greater meaning, seems beyond the scope of his

reading. Scocca hopes we might “stop treating *Mad Men* as history,” since “*Mad Men* has gone from borrowing the image of the mid-20th century to lending it... someone who worked in advertising could probably say something about that.” In fact, the characters of the show do say something about it. One of Don’s first memorable lines in the series is when he tells Rachel, “What you call love was invented by guys like me... to sell nylons” (1.1). *Mad Men* highlights advertising as a tension between the generic and the personal, making consumers feel like they are both part of a collective dream and that they are individuals electing to pursue that dream. *Mad Men*’s serial surfaces forge the same effect – characters like Megan appear as flat, two-dimensional façades or “types” from an imagined historical past, but they nevertheless develop in the multiplication of legible surfaces and impressions as *Mad Men* both aestheticizes and rewrites women’s history. This “simulacrum” is another *representation* among others, one that is as true and as false, as empty and as full, as the cultural artifacts it describes. The important thing is not that the show is “fake history,” but that, like the many fictional worlds we inhabit, advertising included, we know it to be fake, but we are invested in believing it anyway.

The necessary reality of advertising revenue for AMC operates as another dimension of surfaces glossing *Mad Men*’s content. Each of *Mad Men*’s episodes is broken into segments for regularly interspersed commercial breaks, and in the first four seasons, AMC averaged 46 minutes of content and 14 minutes of advertising per hour for *Mad Men*.⁵⁷ To increase ad space and revenue, Season 5 included more product placement and slightly shorter episodes.⁵⁸ As a “spot,” *Mad Men* initially struggled with advertising revenue, perhaps because securing sponsors for a show that reveals the ruses of advertising is tricky – the meta-equivalent of Harry Crane’s exemplary line, “If there’s a kid pushing away his dinner in disgust, let’s make sure it’s not Gordon’s Fish Sticks” (2.8).⁵⁹ Indeed, the concern of the show’s characters that the content of their clients’ commercials be tacitly, if not explicitly, endorsed by the segments of the show they are sponsoring calls attention to advertising as a sort of metatextual concern on AMC’s part as a vital part of keeping *Mad Men* afloat. Of course, the fact that *Mad Men* can explicitly discuss and develop brands within its very diegesis makes it a dream show for product placement. Clients of Sterling Cooper get long-term intratextual attention, and include a number of enduring brands such as Maytag, Heineken, Gillette, American Airlines, Clearasil, Fleischmann’s, Pepsi, Jaguar, and Chevrolet. Incidental product placement is also in place for Coca-Cola, Cadillac, Pride, Lysol, Jack Daniels, and many others. The serial form creates a narrative around the history of such brands, marketing their durability and product quality for viewers to remember and giving airtime to a discussion of the products that a commercial could never offer (2.2). To fill ad spaces *between* segments of content, however, AMC began striking deals with advertisers interested in specifically targeting the audience of *Mad Men*.

In 2010, Unilever hired the advertising agency Mindshare to design a series of advertisements to air only during *Mad Men*, which blend in with the show’s production aesthetic and which allegedly improved viewer response to featured brands by as much as 7 percent.⁶⁰ None of the advertised products – Vaseline, Breyer’s, Hellman’s, Dove, Suave, and Klondike – is represented diegetically by Sterling Cooper; instead, the six commercials, one minute each in length, take place at the fictional firm of Smith Winter Mitchell, which mimics *Mad Men*’s costumes, lighting, and set design. Placed on either side of *Mad Men* segments, the Unilever commercials attempted to follow the show’s cue in developing an

advertising *narrative*, perhaps even compelling viewers to watch all six commercials on the sponsored YouTube page. The warm lighting and lush costuming of the ads also served to trick viewers into stopping the fast-forward on their DVRs or on-demand channels, directing their attention to this extratextual content. Though all six ads exhibit troubling gender politics (the Hellman's ad, for example, features an ad man aroused by a young girl licking mayonnaise from her fingers), those for products geared specifically towards women – the Dove and Suave ads – are particularly unsettling.⁶¹ In employing a campy, deliberately ironic 'retro' style, in which one man says "all we have to do is tap into a woman's innermost thoughts and feelings" and the other says, "I happen to be an expert on women – maybe not their thoughts or feelings," the ads deliberately use the sexist humor of *Mad Men* to give, more than information, what Jason Mittel terms "brand awareness" – to the products.⁶² In the Dove ad, Nancy the secretary steps in to offer her opinion, saying it "may not be [her] place," but then delivering a slogan that the men snatch up before leaving for a wet lunch. The tone of the ads implicitly suggests that feminism is now so firmly a part of history that it can be reduced to parody in the interest of sales. Whereas the show seems to strive to draw subtle attention to lingering issues in feminism, these ads tend to rehearse Wendy Kaminer's disturbing claim that "we've managed to enter a postfeminist world without ever knowing a feminist one."⁶³

In *The Sponsored Life*, Leslie Savan writes that even now, "Women and advertising are ensnarled...because women still do most of the nation's shopping, advertising still aims primarily at them."⁶⁴ In another controversial campaign for *Mad Men*, Clorox seems to have whitewashed feminism as well.⁶⁵ "Your mother, your grandmother, her mother – they all did the laundry," proclaims a woman's voice as images of women interacting with different retro machines pass across the screen – "maybe even a man or two," the ad throws in risibly at the end, concluding that the best product after all these years is "still Clorox bleach." To add insult to injury, a second Clorox spot for *Mad Men* consists simply of a gradual, rotating pullback shot of a lipstick-stained white collar as a typed caption appears word by word at the bottom of the screen: "Getting ad guys out of hot water for generations. Clorox." Kelsey Wallace of *Bitch* magazine writes that this "bizarre sexism" means the Clorox people have really not been "following Peggy Olsen's rise to the top all that closely."⁶⁶ If this is a case of advertisers "missing the context" of *Mad Men*'s "outdated sexism," she argues, "shouldn't they be a little more on top of their game in realizing that this is a television show about a (thankfully) bygone era and that the men-are-men-and-women-are-property attitude is not one we're yearning to bring back?" The ads, in fact, resonate eerily with a scene from Season 1 of *Mad Men*, in which Don watches TV in the living room while Betty works in the kitchen and a commercial for Lysol plays in the background: "Even careful mothers can't completely protect their families from household germs just by cleaning alone. That's why you need Lysol..." (1.9) As Leslie Savan writes, "Fear has been used to sell to women for years – did she leave spots on the dishes, rings on the collar?"⁶⁷

In contrast to such retrograde advertising, a retro-style Bullet train ad called "Mad Fast Trains" exhibits an altogether more innovative, Peggy-Olson-worthy form of advertising (although this narratively complex commercial focuses only on two of the show's male stars). Released as a collaboration between the US PIRG and Funny or Die, it stars *Mad Men*'s own Rich Sommer (Harry Crane) and Vincent Kartheiser (Pete Campbell).⁶⁸ Though the writing is a little over-the-top, playing up Pete's obsession with the death drive and Harry's sweet but

plodding conventionalism, the ad takes meta-advertising to a higher level, using a show about corporate advertising to make a public advertisement that ironizes America's stale and outdated view of train travel (e.g., its humorous inclusion of a wistful 'future' projection of gasoline prices that is actually far less than what we pay today). The commercial's anachronisms, such as drinking while driving and smoking on the train ("smoking car or smoking *car*?"), as well as its enumeration of all of the benefits of train travel that other nations enjoy, work together to play off of Americans' pride in being 'progressive' and to suggest that we are somehow benighted if we cannot get on board with a better model of public transport. Furthermore, the PIRG ad lengthens the commercial to suit internet viewership, demonstrating once again that advertising, like the (melodramatic) content it interrupts, constantly reinvents itself at the technological frontier. This disparity between the Bullet ad and the hackneyed, gender-conforming Unilever commercials highlights *Mad Men*'s calculated response to television both past and present – its incisive ability to treat not only the historical period it depicts, but to transcend its own historicity and draw subtle attention to the contemporary culture as well.

For the characters of *Mad Men* discern such qualitative differences among ads as well. Ultimately, the *Bye Bye, Birdie* knockoff ad for Patio falls flat. Sterling Cooper's creation features "an Ann-Margret type" wearing the same outfit on the same blue background as the film and singing new lyrics to its theme song: "Bye, Bye, sugar, it's great to see you go, Bye, Bye, sugar, Hello Patio! When the cake is on the plate, I'm afraid to gain the weight, but now I have some extra room, Patio, make me swoon..." (3.4). Although Don insists, "I don't think there's *any* ambiguity about this being exactly, and I mean *exactly* what you asked for," the Pepsi rep responds by saying, "I know, but there's something not right about it...it is a failure." Harry, too, is baffled, although he agrees: "Doesn't make any sense. Looks right, sounds right, smells right. Something's not right. What is it?" Peggy, complacent, says nothing – but then, she does not *have* to. In ignoring her desire to create a unique narrative to sell to women, Sterling Cooper has effectively missed a major market. Roger Sterling comes to the conclusion that it's because "[i]t's not Ann Margret." While Roger is mostly individualizing the actress' ineffable and irreproducible sexuality, rather than her personality, the moment at least marks a point in the series in which male agents recognize the particularity of a woman's presence, and, indeed, the value of Peggy's opinion in the workplace. It is only one moment in a long series, however, and such blind spots highlight a continued myopia in TV ads today.

Indeed, the recent Unilever and Clorox ads fail precisely where the Patio ad fails; in attempting to mimic the aesthetic of a pop-culture phenomenon to which female audiences have responded, the process of "reproduction" blights the very surfaces it seeks to duplicate. Writer Lisa Albert reflects on the show's advertising, "Those faux *Mad Men*-y ads were just an annoyance as far as I was concerned.... Frankly, I think most of the writers prefer to think that people will watch the shows on DVD and not see the ads at all."⁶⁹ Coming from a self-described "dyed-in-the-wool feminist" who writes for a TV show about women who write (TV) ad campaigns, this is yet another indication of *Mad Men*'s unique placement at the nexus of textuality and metatextuality in cultural history. It is worth noting that these ads were all pulled during Season 5, though a seemingly corrective vintage Clorox plays in the background of episode 5.3: "Clorox: for life's bleachable moments." Season 5's ads were contemporary in style and targeted a wider range of consumers, and the only advertised link

to *Mad Men* was for a new reality show to air on AMC called *The Pitch*, which followed CEOs of contemporary advertising firms as they reviewed sales pitches from competing agents. In Season 6, John Hamm (Don) was featured in ads for American Airlines – or rather, his voice was, while Christina Hendricks (Joan) appeared in contemporary dress for very short Johnnie Walker spots. These more recent ads seem designed for *Mad Men*'s target audience, but less invested in an attempt to mimic the show itself. As Don muses, "Advertising is... a bargain... they're given the entertainment for free, all they have to do is listen to the message. But what if they don't take the bargain at all... how do I capture her imagination?" (6.8).

In the last scene of the now iconic series finale, the camera fades from Don, who is meditating outdoors at a retreat on the edge of the Pacific ocean, directly into Coca-Cola's actual 1971 ad, "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke." The costumes and setting of the ad directly echo the visual markings of the retreat, demonstrating Don's ability, once again, to transform his lived experience into a saleable aesthetic, the sole vessel for what is left of his authentic self. As it spans the many faces of the young singers, the camera never stops moving, ending in a birds-eye shot of the whole multicultural group from above, and drawing sharp contrast to the stilted images of Betty as a still life for the Coca-Cola print ad in Season 1. Unlike the syntagma of the Kodak carousel, which is space-less and time-oriented, the Coke commercial is timeless and space-oriented, reproducing precisely the mode of smooth, ahistorical nostalgia with which Jameson takes such issue in his articulation of the postmodern. Rather than go back in time, Don erases it altogether. If and when he goes back to New York, it will not be for the family projected in that carousel of slides, but to pitch the Coke ad. By contrast, *Mad Men* leaves its women in conversation with history. In its contrast of Peggy's happy relationship and calm "I don't think of you" in Season 7 and Don's own cruel "I don't think of you at all," *Mad Men* narrowly saves Peggy from becoming her mentor. Don has twice told women of their unwanted pregnancies, "Put this behind you" – once to Peggy in Season 1, and again to Stephanie in Season 7. Stephanie's pitying glance and refusal to submerge her pain is a refutation not only of Don's own unhappy existence, but of the misleading 'depth' and 'mystery' he has projected across the seven seasons of the show. In the end, *Mad Men* is really a show about women, foregrounding the multifaceted development of its female characters.

Mad Men retrieves the surfaces of the postmodern era – its advertisements and staged photographs and outfits of women, and highlights their seams and cracks. Inviting readerly assemblage through the process of faceting, *Mad Men* engages a mode of 'postnostalgia' that critiques a privileged moment in American history and invites viewers to lay its injustices, like a 'backwards-looking prophecy,' over the various forms of sexism that persist in the twenty-first century. As *Mad Men* attempts to reread American televisual history through feminism, it gives alternately ludic and sincere treatment to a medium that appears to be both a site of great artistic liberation and one of corporate submission. Through the arrangement of its glossy, feminized, consumerist surfaces in the long serial form, *Mad Men* fictionalizes women's history to melodramatic effect and celebrates itself as television, an indispensable form of women's narrative, whose content, including its advertising, can either serve to dull minds or incite them to cultural evolution.

NOTES:

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- ¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 141.
- ² Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012) x and Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) 17.
- ³ Holland 17.
- ⁴ Mark Sandberg, "Mad Men's Serially Falling Man," *The Velvet Light Trap* 79 (2017) 3.
- ⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1991) 19.
- ⁶ Jameson 19, 20.
- ⁷ Daniel Mendehlson, "The *Mad Men* Account," *The New York Times Book Review* (February 24, 2011).
- ⁸ Jameson 292.
- ⁹ *Ibid.* 296.
- ¹⁰ Sandberg 4.
- ¹¹ Morrison 117.
- ¹² *Ibid.* 118.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* 118.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* 116.
- ¹⁵ Matt Weiner, prod., *Mad Men* (AMC and Lionsgate: 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) 3.2.
- ¹⁶ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 1973) 67.
- ¹⁷ Clark M. Agnew, *Television Advertising* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958) 5.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* 4.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.* 96.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.* 7.
- ²¹ David Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man* (London: Norton, 2004) 161, 163, 159.
- ²² Raymond Williams 67.
- ²³ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, transl. Michael Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 179.
- ²⁴ Lyn Spiegel, *Make Room for TV* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 87, 89.
- ²⁵ Jim Hall, *Mighty Minutes: An Illustrated History of Television's Best Commercials* (New York: Harmony Books, 1984) 51.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* 54, 53.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.* 53.
- ²⁸ Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997) 141.
- ²⁹ Amanda Lotz, *Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006) 1.
- ³⁰ Lisa Albert, email message to Kathryn Fleishman (April 25, 2011).
- ³¹ Mimi White, "Mad Women," in *Mad Men: Dream Come True TV*, Gary R. Edgerton, ed. (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011) 152.
- ³² Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, "The Best of Everything: The Limits of Being a Working Girl in *Mad Men*," in Edgerton, ed. 187.
- ³³ *Ibid.* 190.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.* 187.
- ³⁵ White 149.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.* 152.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.* 158.
- ³⁸ Andrea Press, paraphrased in Lynn C. Spangler, ed., *Television Women from Lucy to Friends: Fifty Years of Sitcoms and Feminism* (New York: Praeger, 2003) 5. See also Andrea L. Press, *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).
- ³⁹ Lynn C. Spangler, *Television Women from Lucy to Friends: Fifty Years of Sitcoms and Feminism* (New York: Praeger, 2003) 15.
- ⁴⁰ Mendehlson.

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- ⁴¹ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002) 16.
- ⁴² Ibid. 39.
- ⁴³ Ibid. 35.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid. 41.
- ⁴⁵ Sandberg 4.
- ⁴⁶ Emily Nussbaum, “‘Mad Men’ Returns,” *The New Yorker* (March 25, 2012).
- ⁴⁷ Sandberg 4.
- ⁴⁸ Hayward 156.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Tom Scocca, “He Doesn’t Exist: Why do *Mad Men* fans and the *New York Times* mistake the show for reality?” *Slate* (June 8, 2012).
- ⁵¹ White 155.
- ⁵² White 155-6.
- ⁵³ White 156.
- ⁵⁴ Mary Celeste Kearney, “‘Honey, Look What I Found in the Special Features!’ or, When *Mad Men* Pitches Women’s Lib,” *Flow TV* 10, no. 8 (2009).
- ⁵⁵ Brian Steinberg, “Why ‘Mad Men’ Has So Little to Do with Advertising,” *Ad Age* (August 2, 2010).
- ⁵⁶ Lauren Goodlad, Lilya Kaganovsky, and Robert A. Rushing, eds. *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, & The 1960s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013) 11.
- ⁵⁷ Brian Steinberg, “Clever Show Needs to Consider its Business Plan,” *Ad Age* (March 30, 2011).
- ⁵⁸ Brian Stelter, “‘Mad Men’ Creator Says 7 Seasons Will Be Enough,” *New York Times* (April 1, 2011).
- ⁵⁹ Steinberg.
- ⁶⁰ Stuart Elliot, “Unilever’s ‘Mad Men’ Spots Worked, Study Says,” *The New York Times* (September 24, 2010).
- ⁶¹ Elliot, “Unilever’s ‘Mad Men’ Spots Worked, Study Says.”
- ⁶² Jason Mittel, *Television and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 67.
- ⁶³ Wendy Kaminer, *A Fearful Freedom* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1990) 1. Nancy’s helpful blurb in the Dove commercial (“When I bathe with Dove, my skin feels soft and smooth and clean, because that’s what Dove does better than soap. And trust me, *women* know the difference”) echoes the original ads for Dove designed by David Ogilvy five decades ago, as he describes in *Confessions of an Advertising Man*. Ogilvy signed Dove as part of Lever Brothers (now Unilever), which was one of the first 5 major companies he decided to pursue after founding his agency. He describes the development of the Dove campaign in *Confessions*: “Another technique is to run pairs of advertisements in the same position in the same issue of a newspaper, with an offer of a sample buried in the copy. We used this artful dodge to select the strongest promise for Dove toilet bar. ‘Creams Your Skin While You Wash’ pulled 63 percent more orders than the next best promise, and it has been the fulcrum of every Dove advertisement that has ever run.” Though Ogilvy claims in his 1988 revised introduction that “Chapter 8 on television commercials is inadequate,” it seems that his main idea for selling Dove has persisted after his death, even being projected ‘back in time’ into Unilever’s new ‘retro’ advertising campaign. This revision of his text also features a facile dismissal of the continuing need for feminism similar to that which appears in the Unilever ads, where Ogilvy makes a series of offhand revisions to his 1963 text such as, “Don’t let men write advertising for products which are bought by women” and adds a syrupy apology “for referring to the people who work in advertising as *men*. Please remember that I was writing...when the large majority were *men*. Today the large majority are *women*. Thank heaven” (26, 16).
- ⁶⁴ Leslie Savan, *The Sponsored Life: Ads, TV, and American Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994) 12.
- ⁶⁵ Stuart Elliot, “A Blitz That Has Don Draper Written All Over It,” *The New York Times* (July 9, 2009).
- ⁶⁶ Kelsey Wallace, “*Mad Men*’s Portrayal of Sexism Seeps Unironically into its Commercial Breaks,” *Bitch* (August 31 2009).
- ⁶⁷ Savan 85.
- ⁶⁸ Travis Walter Donovan, “‘Mad Men’ Stars Vincent Kartheiser, Rich Sommer Sell High-Speed Rail,” *The Huffington Post* (March 9, 2011).
- ⁶⁹ Albert.

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